

# Finding the Relational Image

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## Abstract

Found photographs sit at the crux between radically subjective and contextually contingent acts of noticing. As such, they serve as relational prompts from which to question the influence that their contexts of discovery exert on their creators and finders. Through interviews with local creative practitioners, links emerge between their ability to be noticed and the role technology plays to enable reflection through them.

## Noticing the need to reflect

This project adopts a stance that the nature of the photographic image in the digital era is yet to be found. With the ubiquity of image-taking in daily life, users are invited to visualize and utilize the photograph in ways that confuse long-held distinctions between the photo-taker and noticed object to be photographed. This blurring of boundaries locates the photographic image within shifting relations between its material support, the context of encounter, and those who deem it worth noticing (Flusser 2000, 26).

## Relational Potential

What brings forth the contemporary photographic image increasingly implicates relations between an embodied, subjective act of noticing and contextually specific significations (Tagg 1988, 101). This complex relationship allows the medium to be understood through a linking of the human intention to visually represent the world with the technological means to influence the output of visually and contextually predictable images (Flusser 2000, 9).

This inquiry was sparked by chance discoveries of found photos on Apple Store

iPads in Hong Kong and the United States. The first photograph discovered can be seen below.



Fig. 1. *Found By [context 1-a]*, 2019. Marty Miller Year, photographic print/found photograph, Copyright, Marty Miller.

From it, questions are raised regarding the mediation of attention through the machine which ended up capturing the likenesses above on its screen. When investigating the history of the photo's creation, this found photo allowed its disputed ontological status to be revealed (Mauer 2003, 4). However, opacities appeared when discovering others afterwards.



Fig. 2. *Found By [collage]*, 2020, Marty Miller, photographic print/found photograph, Copyright, Marty Miller.

The photo above shows a mixture of many different found photos from Hong Kong and Florida in the United States. They are similar in their construction yet often hide the intent of their creators (Verbeek 2005, 109). While exposing patterns of use, the photos invite questions into the creation of systemic relations; those which act upon the users' actions with such machines, and their ability to reflect on such experiences (Favaro 2017, 8).

### Setting the technological stage

From this initial finding, several other found photo portfolios were developed from specific locations in Hong Kong. Each of these four contexts of finding found photos were then analysed for their relation to a perceived intent to be found, and the role of technology to enable this (Crary 2013, 88-89). These images tell their finders not only about their own creation, they also reveal the potential to notice the overlooked gestures, thoughts, and even emotions of their creators. When deeming their actions to be in casual relation to the installation of the machines in their context-of-finding, the found photo reveals its reflective potential by foregrounding influences which facilitate this relationship (Mitchell 2006, 115).

The next stage of this project involved interviewing primarily local creative practitioners who used either found photos or their affective qualities in their work. Questions targeted a locative reflection on the experience of finding media in Hong Kong, and how these were experienced as embodied within the medium itself (Pink 2011, 4). Relational attributes accompanying the experience of chance were coded from these encounters. These framed found photos were situated within a complex web of relations which impact not only the act of finding, but also the act of visually noticing.

To ontologically position found photos is therefore to implicate the act of noticing as a mediated act in day-to-day life. While targeted advertising and ambient media have long claimed such roles, the use of found photos allows for a slight noticing of the impact of the relational, yet mediated engagement with photographs in unexpected encounters (Mauer

2003, 13). Such images also implore the artist and researcher to view technology as a means to both enable contact with the world, but also to condition this contact to the detriment of other, as yet overlooked relations (Verbeek 2005, 102).

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### Biography

**Marty Miller** engages the changing nature of the image in East-Asian visual culture from a interdisciplinary background. To be in sync with its shifting ontological status, I note reciprocal influences between creative practice and scholarly inquiry. Finding found photos only furthers this relation.