Three photographers and an anthropologist:

thoughts on collaboration

Visual Ethnography

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Caterina Borelli, *Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, University of Ca' Foscari, Venezia, Italia**

Camilla de Maffei, *Independent photographer*

Felipe Romero Beltrán, *Independent photographer*

Lorenzo Vitturi, *Independent photographer*

Abstract
This eight-handed article delves into the interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology and photography, showcasing how these two fields can mutually enrich each other. The authors are one anthropologist who gradually recognises the potential of photography as an epistemological tool that can enhance anthropological research and three photographers who here illustrate the integration of anthropological insights – theoretical and methodological - into their photographic work. By exploring the dynamic relationship between visual and anthropological practices, we argue that such interdisciplinary collaborations can lead to innovative methodologies and deeper understandings of cultural phenomena. This synergy challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and opens new avenues for research and artistic expression, ultimately fostering a more holistic approach to understanding and representing complex social realities.

Keywords: Anthropology; Collaboration; Interdisciplinarity; Ethnography; Methodology; Photography.

The authors

Caterina Borelli (Venice, 1980) holds a BA in Intercultural Studies from the University of Trieste (Italy) and an MA and a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Barcelona (Spain). Currently, she is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global fellow at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice (Italy), in partnership with The New School for Social Research in New York (USA), with the research project *BeCAMP – Beyond the camp: border regimes, enduring liminality and everyday geopolitics of migration in Italy and Spain.*

Contact: caterina.borelli@unive.it. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6273-3942

Camilla de Maffei (Cles, 1981) is a photographer and teacher who works between Milan and Barcelona, where she founded the photography school El Observatorio. Specialised in the Balkan area, she has concentrated her personal production in Bosnia Herzegovina, Romania and Albania, where, using the exploration of a specific place as a starting point, she has explored and questioned the relationship between territory and landscape (geopolitical, cultural, social). Her projects have been exhibited in galleries and festivals such as Fotografia Europea (Reggio Emilia), Les Boutographies Festival (Montpellier), Manuel Rive-

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ra Ortiz Foundation (Arles), Sa Nostra Foundation (Palma de Mallorca), Palazzo Massari (Ferrara), The Half King Gallery (New York).

Contact: cdemaffei@gmail.com. Website: camillademaffei.com/

Felipe Romero Beltrán (Bogotá, 1992) is a Colombian photographer currently based in Paris. His artistic endeavours are deeply rooted in exploring social issues, with a particular focus on the tension that arises from the introduction of new narratives within the realm of documentary photography. Beltrán's practice is characterised by its commitment to long-term projects, accompanied by meticulous research that enriches the depth and context of his work. Beltrán has a PhD in Photography from the Complutense University of Madrid. His academic pursuits reflect his commitment to the craft and serve as a foundation for the conceptual approach that permeates his photographic projects.

Contact: feliperomerostudio@gmail.com. Website: feliperomerobeltran.com/

Lorenzo Vitturi (Venice, 1980) works in photography, sculpture, installation and performance. His work starts from specific geographical locations and encounters with local communities and explores informal economies and the merging of different cultures, focusing on the movement of objects and people through temporary sets and ephemeral sculptures in the studio and on location, using both organic and fabricated materials. Lorenzo Vitturi has exhibited widely in solo and group shows at MAST Foundation (Bologna), Centre Photographique Rouen Normandie, FOAM Museum (Amsterdam), The Photographers' Gallery and Barbican Centre (London), MAXXI (Rome), Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), Palazzo Reale and La Triennale (Milan), BOZAR Brussels, and K11 Art Museum (Shanghai).

Contact: hello@lorenzovitturi.com. Website: www.lorenzovitturi.com/

Abstract

This article delves into the interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology and photography, showcasing how these two fields can mutually enrich each other. The authors are one anthropologist who gradually recognises the potential of photography as an epistemological tool that can enhance anthropological research and three photographers who here illustrate the integration of anthropological insights – theoretical and methodological - into their photographic work. By exploring the dynamic relationship between visual and anthropological practices, we argue that such interdisciplinary collaborations can lead to innovative methodologies and deeper understandings of cultural phenomena. This synergy challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and opens new avenues for research and artistic expression, ultimately fostering a more holistic approach to understanding and representing complex social realities.

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Introduction, by Caterina Borelli

In light of this journal's focus, I believe it is important to begin by clarifying that I do not identify as a visual anthropologist. While I have occasionally used photographs as visual notes during fieldwork or included images in my writings – a common practice in anthropology - the visual has never been central to my work. It has not served as a primary object of ethnographic inquiry, a method for gathering information from participants, or a final research outcome. At least, this was the case until my recent collaborations with the artists whose work is presented in the following pages began to reshape my relationship with visual media.

Looking back, I may have harboured a certain degree of envy toward visual anthropology. Compared to my solitary, text-based ethnographic work, it seemed more interactive, dynamic, and, in a sense, more fun. That was part of my motivation for undertaking *The Visible Mountain* project (2010-2011)[1] in Sarajevo with Camilla de Maffei, a talented photographer and my best friend. We approached the project as equals - neither me as *her* anthropologist nor her as *my* photographer[2] - each contributing to the work with our distinct perspectives. Yet, after that, and despite the success of the project, I continued to treat my interest in the arts and photography as a personal passion, separate from my academic work.

The following two collaborations came about more serendipitously. A few years ago, my old school friend, Lorenzo Vitturi, reached out for advice and bibliographical suggestions for his ongoing project *Caminantes* (2017-present)[3]. Shortly thereafter, I met Felipe Romero through Camilla, and following a brief conversation, I was invited to contribute a text for his forthcoming book *Dialect* (2023)[4]. These interactions gradually shifted my perspective on photography—not merely as something to be looked at (though, as Stuart Hall taught us, cultural consumption is never entirely passive)[5] but as a tool - epistemological rather than expressive - that I could employ in my research, some new nourishment to my own way of thinking and doing, a practice that could disclose new avenues of anthropological inquiry for me[6].

This article is not strictly about visual anthropology – meaning the visual *in* anthropology - but rather about the broader relationship between the visual *and* anthropology, which seems somewhat different: the focus is not on the role of visual materials within anthropological research but on the interaction and cross-fertilisation between the two disciplines.

In recent months, this collaboration process has accelerated. I have published an article analysing my friends' work from an anthropological perspective (Borelli 2024), we have presented our work together at academic lectures and workshops, and I am currently involved in separate projects with Camilla and Lorenzo (see Vitturi et al. 2025). The invitation to contribute to this special issue has solidified these collaborations, uniting us into a cohesive working group.

What follows are the photographers' takes on our ongoing conversation and interdisciplinary mash-up. Their contributions reflect how anthropology and ethnography have integrated into their artistic processes. These texts are personal in tone and perhaps less academic in structure, offering records of research practices from individuals with different intellectual backgrounds. Despite this stylistic variation, they serve as valuable examples of the productive merging of the arts and anthropology. We invite you to embrace the narrative freedom within these pages as part of this ongoing exploration.

Delta, by Camilla De Maffei

Since 2009, my work has focused on the Balkan region. My projects begin by exploring a specific place, from which I delve into the relationship between territory and landscape. Here, I define "territory" as a geographic space with distinct characteristics and "landscape" as the social and relational constructions that emerge from it. In Bosnia Herzegovina, in collaboration with

1 For information on *The Visible Mountain* project, please refer to <https://camillademaffei.com/portfolio_page/the-visible-mountain/>.

2 A more detailed description of our work together can be found in the catalogue for the Allers-Retours Festival, which took place at the Albert Kahn Musée et Jardin Départementaux in Paris in 2013; see Borelli (2014).

3 See <http://www.lorenzovitturi.com/caminantes/>.

4 See <https://feliperomerobeltran.com/Dialect>.

5 For his theory on encoding and decoding in mass communication, where decoding refers to the process by which audiences interpret or decode the messages embedded in media texts, an activity that requires active engagement and interpretation, see Hall (1980).

6 It is not the purpose of this article to delve into how photographic practice can influence anthropological thought. That is a subject matter that I just started approaching myself, and I am still looking for a structured insight to offer. Nonetheless, I got some precious hints at the recent EASA conference in Barcelona, where I co-organised with Amanda Bernal a panel titled *Undoing and Redoing Anthropology with Photography: Dialogues, collaborations, hybridisations* (see https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2024/p/14728#). Among the many inspiring contributions we received, Clara Beccaro's work on analogue photography as an analytical method to study state violence and Alice Cazenave's film-developing practice as an ethnography of polluted areas instantiated the kind of reflection we wished to stimulate pretty well.

the anthropologist Caterina Borelli, we explored the woods of Mount Trebević, a symbol of the city of Sarajevo, observing the landscape through the lenses of memory and trauma. In Romania, examining the Danube Delta - a complex natural and human geography - allowed me to analyse how the landscape shapes identity. Meanwhile, my work in Albania investigated the connection between architecture, power, and memory, depicted through a detailed portrayal of the rural and urban landscape.

From 2014 to 2021, I worked on *Delta*, a project that involved five years of fieldwork in the Danube Delta, the largest river estuary in Europe. This expanse of reeds, sand, and marshes covers about 3500 square kilometres along the Romanian-Ukrainian border at the easternmost point of the European Union. This region, inhabited by around 12,000 people, is both monumental and isolated. The few villages in the area are connected only by waterways, with no roads linking them. With virtually no basic infrastructure, they plunge into darkness as soon as the sun sets. Whoever manages to leave does not return. Those who remain live among abandoned houses in a symbiotic relationship with the labyrinthine landscape, where the maze-like network of channels and lakes restricts movement. Attracted by the intensity of the delta's geography, I undertook my first trip there in 2014.

Whenever I embark on a new project, I aim to discard the methods I used previously, letting the specific needs of each narrative guide my visual approach. Although it is impossible to start completely fresh, I allow the story to determine the type of images I create, the intention behind them, and how they should be composed. I like to force my relationship with photographic language to build new ways of expressing myself, telling stories and representing different things each time. That is why I never set time limits for myself. Long-term involvement has become a key ingredient in my practice because I firmly believe that time educates the eyes. Even in Delta's case, I started working without knowing when I would finish. Between 2014 and 2018, I made nine trips, basing myself in the two largest villages in the region, Sulina and Chilia Veche. These villages are only accessible by boat, and I reached them by taking public transport from Tulcea, the last Romanian city before the delta.

My initial two-week trip in October 2014 was filled with a strong sense of loss. I had set myself the task of exploring a vast and challenging natural territory to navigate without a boat, a precise itinerary and practically any contact in the area. To impose a structure on my daily explorations, I, therefore, resorted to the technique of drifting: I took long solitary walks, moving randomly between the vegetation and the mangy clearings of land around the village and, as I moved from one place to another, I photographed what I found (see fig. 1), writing down my observations in a notebook. As I faced the challenges of fieldwork alone, I instinctively adopted certain elements of ethnographic practice[7]. From the outset, I maintained a diary where I recorded my observations, descriptive notes, excerpts from interviews, and personal reflections. However, my interactions with the locals were sporadic, and my few conversations with them led nowhere. The questions about Europe and its borders, which had initially sparked my interest in the area, seemed irrelevant or misunderstood by the people I spoke with. The entire delta felt dormant to me, its inhabitants sunk into the void of the landscape.

Analysing the wealth of images and notes accumulated in that first exploration helped to dispel my initial disappointment. While the photographs did not reveal what I had hoped, they brought something more significant to light: the psychological weight of the landscape, that is, the strong physical and emotional conditioning that the immense natural ecosystem of the delta exerts on those who inhabit it, even if only temporarily - like me. This idea — captured in my fieldnotes on some key concepts, such as the dichotomy between the mainland and Balta (a local nickname for the delta, which means swamp, quicksand), between a sense of direction and bewilderment, full and empty, remoteness and proximity — prompted me to reformulate the initial

7 My previous collaboration with the anthropologist Caterina Borelli (project *The Visible Mountain*) has contaminated my methodology. Her notebook provided me with important references to develop the photographic language underlying the project. Today, the free appropriation of ethnographic practice has become a fundamental ingredient of my creative process.

questions, which were too open and abstract. What does it mean to inhabit an area with the geographical characteristics of the delta? What kind of relationship do the inhabitants form with their environment? How does this affect their moods and habits, their desires, and the physical and mental boundaries they navigate daily?

These more focused questions helped me establish meaningful dialogues with the inhabitants during my subsequent trips. To build more contacts, I sought help from Christi, a local man in Sulina who worked as a painter and occasional tour guide. Christi became my fixer for the rest of my trips, translating conversations, introducing me to people and facilitating my movements through the area. To better understand the inhabitants' relationship with their surroundings, I asked people from different backgrounds and age groups to draw a map of the delta from memory. The results were extraordinarily diverse and varied according to the level of interaction each person had with the labyrinth of waterways. For instance, the fishermen, who moved around a lot due to their work, drew elaborate maps with precise routes, lakes, and creeks, while women, who were often confined to the mainland, sketched only their short daily routes—leaving the rest of the page blank. This emptiness was a key revelation: despite the delta's vastness, many inhabitants' lived space was minimal, and their lives revolved around those tiny spaces of meaning.

Translating these new insights into images required me to immerse myself fully in the delta's natural depths. Every day, I ventured deeper into the canals and marshes, drawing my own maps to trace my daily itineraries and writing notes to document my struggle to visually represent the immense labyrinth that surrounded me. These obsessive efforts to capture the landscape's complexity led me to new, fundamental questions: How do you represent a labyrinth? And what does it mean to live within one? Mythology offered me a useful framework. Theoretical inspiration such as Borges' *The House of Asterion*[8] and the hero's journey, as analysed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*[9], added another narrative layer to my ethnographic accounts and guided me in developing the final aesthetics of the project and its narrative structure. Reflecting on the mythological labyrinth, I began to see the partial, fragmented view that had obsessed me as the correct way to represent this space. Vision is necessarily limited, crushed, and never complete in a labyrinth. This realisation shaped the final aesthetic of the project. I decided to discard the open, horizontal landscapes I had taken earlier in favour of vertical, repetitive, suffocating images that conveyed the dense, claustrophobic vegetation of the delta. (see fig. 2). During my final year of fieldwork (2018/2019), I focused on creating a comprehensive portrait of the vegetation in all seasons based on these coordinates. The delta's geography transformed into a psychological and archetypal territory, a space that transcended its physicality and became a symbol of universal human experiences. In this narrative, the delta's inhabitants took on mythological roles—Minotaurs and oracles guarding the secrets of endurance and survival (see fig. 3). Ultimately, I was left with the existential question: Will we, like Theseus, escape the labyrinth? Or shall we dwell within it? Is it even possible to escape from oneself?

In *Delta*, I resorted to ethnographic notes for the first time without knowing exactly how to use them. Their potential gradually revealed itself to me along the way. Every time I faced the extensive visual archive produced during my explorations, I used the notes to orient myself, initially in a spontaneous way, and then with increasing awareness. The reading of these writings, in fact, provided me with valuable criteria to rework the lived experience, identify key concepts, formulate new questions, and recognize the narrative threads that slowly emerged from the relationships woven with the territory and its inhabitants. On a photographic level, the notes directly influenced the editing process, helping me decide which images to include and which to discard. This experience has undoubtedly had a profound impact on my creative practice, which now places central importance on the relationship between image and

8 Contained in *The Aleph* (1949), which I read in Italian as *L'Aleph* (1998). Milano: Adelphi.

9 First published in 1949, I own the Italian translation *L'eroe dai mille volti* (2016), which was published by Lindau in Torino.

10 By modular perspective, we mean an approach to the case study organised in different blocks, each associated with a different language, such as here text, dance, photography, and video.

text. The final photographic narration, consisting of around 200 images, is in constant dialogue with the text, including excerpts from my field notes and the hand-drawn maps (see de Maffei 2022). Photography and notes operate on an equal footing, weaving a story based on their relationship. Where photography is too opaque, the word steps in—not as a simple caption but as a means of adding new layers of meaning and filling the narrative gaps.

Figure 1 *Delta*. © Camilla de Maffei, 2022.

Figure 2 *Delta*. © Camilla de Maffei, 2022.

Figure 3 *Delta*. © Camilla de Maffei, 2022.

Dialect, by Felipe Romero Beltrán

Any attempt to enunciate documentary practice must inevitably contend with photography's influence on the social sphere. In that sense, and with the aim of expanding a possible spectrum of photography, I will outline the main issues that shaped the creation of the *Dialect* project (2020-2023), which investigates, from a modular perspective[10], the experiences of a group of young migrants from Morocco living in the city of Seville, Spain.

Before discussing the project itself, it's important to understand the context of the so-called "migration crisis," which has, over recent decades, led to the mass movement of population from the Global South to Western Europe through different routes outside legal statutes. Each European state enforces its own immigration laws regulating and controlling people's entry into its territory. Spain, due to its geographical proximity to Africa, experiences particular tensions with the irregularised migration of unaccompanied minors through the Strait of Gibraltar. The state implements custody and control in reception centres, which are semi-detention facilities for minor migrants in this condition. *Dialect* is a work that addresses the time - up to three years - that young migrants must wait to obtain official documentation.

That said, the construction of the project framework grew from my personal involvement - given my own status as a migrant - in a social integration workshop, where I shared my experience as a Colombian in Spain. It was in this context that I met a group of Moroccan boys who came by boat from Tangier without documentation and looking to build a life[11]. My presence, mediated at the same time by a photographic camera, seemed to be a good excuse to start a conversation, mainly non-verbal (the boys did not speak Spanish at that time), in which photography became a space of exchange. Over time, this turned into a regular engagement with the boys in both the workshops and the reception centre where they lived (see fig. 4).

The photographs in *Dialect* were taken over three years, the same amount of time the boys spent waiting for their documentation to legally reside in Spain. The dynamic was established as the months went by, mainly around what happened in their daily lives, marked by a wait that at times seemed endless, and in that interlude, the photographic practice was a hobby. The first part of the project was more of an accompaniment, with me op-

11 Abdoulaye Ndgue, Monir El Komairi, Hamza Gharnili, Zakaria Mourachid, Habib Houari, Mohamed Reda, Mohamed El Azzaoui, Simo Rifi, Younes Braiki, Abdel Mounaim, Hamza Chabouni, Youssef Elhafidi, Bilal Siasse, Aziz Chinni, Soufiane Nafge, Bader Zbira.

erating the camera for them and letting them take control of how they saw themselves, how they wanted to present themselves in the image, and, above all, what the role of each one was in the group. In a second moment, my work as a photographer began to take on more relevance in the constitution of the project, asking them to recount their journey to Seville. Those recollections, when verbalised, produced mental images that the boys later staged in a kind of re-enactment, blending documentary photography with an element of performance (see fig. 5).

The dynamics of the project started diversifying, not only at the level of taking photographs but also when it came to the expanding spectrum of photographic possibilities. On the one hand, there are images of everyday life, portraits agreed upon with the boys, and staging of memories of the trip to Seville. On the other hand, we took on exercises in reading the immigration law, conversations about my own identity as a Colombian in Spain, and the creation of trap music as a springboard of ideas to imagine a future. This cultivation of hybrid practices made the project possible in its entirety, in which the photographic fact was never isolated but, on the contrary, was an active part of the logic already mentioned.

It is important to point out that every artistic exercise, or at least its attempt, exerts a type of tear on reality that produces a wound. That wound is almost always uncomfortable but, in my opinion, necessary for the project to come alive; otherwise, it would be a perfectly manufactured but inert product. In *Dialect*, the wound is the inherent imbalance between what I photograph and what the boys want to do in front of the camera. For this reason, the tension is always insurmountable, which is evident in the images themselves, where, at times, the boys seem to have control, to impose themselves while, at other times, my photographic gesture imposes itself. On a personal note, if the project has succeeded in something, it would be in finding a possible space in that tension, a closeness from an apparently simple relationship, and within that wound, in constituting a visuality far from the avalanche of images of those bodies, which, like mine, have been presented countless times in photographic images. Hence, the effort, perhaps exacerbated, to bring different perspectives to the work.

The book that resulted from the project (Romero Beltrán 2023) is conceived as a response: it is the device that has enabled the global materialisation of the project, an answer to the concerns generated by the work. It is divided into several chapters. It opens up with stills from *Recital* (2020), an audio-visual exercise where three of the boys read the first pages of the Spanish immigration law, followed then by the photographic series composed of 54 images, and concludes with *Instruction* (2022-2024), another audio-visual work about the movements involved in crossing the border. Finally, six essays accompany the visual material, each offering a different perspective on the project: in *Dead-Alive*, Youssef Elhafidi tells his experience from Tangier to Seville; Juan Bockamp's *Stepanov Notation for the piece Instruction* contains a possible dance notation for the audio-visual piece; Ricardo Quesada's *Notes for the calculation the thrust force of a vessel* provides a hypothesis that attempts to determine how much weight a boat can support without collapsing (see fig. 6); in *Dialect and interlude,* Albert Corbí offers a reflection on the conceptual logic that overlies the project; Zakaria Mourachid's *Story of Boy X* is a fiction about a Moroccan boy in Seville; finally, Caterina Borelli, in *Admission Test in Three Acts*, with a reflection from the anthropological field, offers a perspective of the bureaucratic concepts that enable, and at the same time, sentence the lives of migrants in this condition of waithood. This last text, central to understanding the complexity of the political and social situation of the case, lingers on what the image cannot articulate in an attempt, by different means, to make the law - cause and consequence of this framework - speak or at least explain itself in its complexity.

In conclusion, and insisting on this last text, a contribution from anthropology became necessary, not only to expose the conditions in the law-body relationship of the case but also to try to arrive where the image does not get or better, where it is not helpful for the image to get, since photographic practice becomes increasingly necessary in its silence, in its lack of communication, ultimately, in the effort to exceed any verbal categorisation that would make it sterile.

Figure 4 The making of *Dialect*, © Felipe Romero Beltrán, 2023

Figure 5 *Dialect*, © Felipe Romero Beltrán, 2023

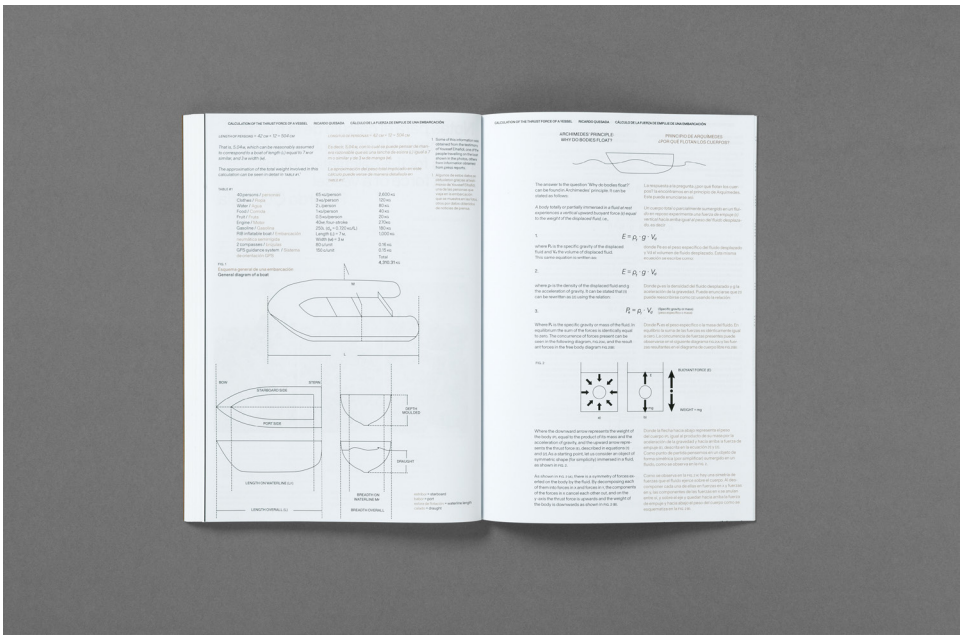

Figure 6 Ricardo Quesada's text in *Dialect*, © Felipe Romero Beltrán, 2023

Road to *Caminantes*, Lorenzo Vitturi

I first became interested in anthropology when I was nineteen, in 1999, and eager to pursue a degree in visual anthropology at the University of Perugia. At the time, I was already interested in the interaction between photographic storytelling and anthropology. Unfortunately, the professor I had hoped to study with left for a four-year field research project in Nepal, and I found myself in the communication sciences program instead. My university career was short-lived, as I decided to dedicate myself mainly to studying and practising the visual arts, but that youthful interest in anthropology remained.

Over the years, I have developed a multidisciplinary artistic language that merges the visual dimension of photography with the material dimension of sculpture and installation in a single creative process. My work often takes the form of visual-material narratives presented to the public in the form of books or travelling exhibitions. These exhibitions display photographs - both editions and one-offs - and incorporate interventions in the space with installations of different scales, both ephemeral and permanent.

My primary themes of interest are the transformation of urban settings and phenomena of cultural hybridisation. Concerning research in the urban dimension, I am particularly interested in those urban micro-realities in which there is a conflict between economic development and local communities. I am interested in describing the effects of gentrification and touristification processes on historic centres. I think this interest originates from my Venetian roots and having experienced first-hand the erosion of local communities negatively conditioned by the effects of short-sighted economic development that fails to see beyond mere profit. Similarly, the issue of the encounter of different cultures, which has led me to explore various forms of syncretism, is motivated by my Italian-Peruvian-German origins. My family background has always pushed me, by personal inclination, to be interested in stories of mixing, hybridisation and conflicts triggered by the meeting/clash of different cultures. Over time, both themes have become the main subjects of my research.

In terms of methodology, rather than opting for photojournalism or documentary photography, I decided to combine photographic language - also used in all its liquidity and variety - with other artistic disciplines such as sculpture, collage and installation (see fig. 7). This choice was influenced by my previous work experience in film set design, a field that naturally combines

different art forms, and by my belief that conveying the complexity of the contemporary world and its continuous transformations requires a more layered language to scan the stratification of meanings in the urban landscape as a sort of "surgical scalpel", capable of selecting the most significant fragments and then recomposing them in a multisensory and synesthetic mosaic.

The "fragments" are simultaneously material and visual; their selection is crucial to the entire process. It can happen fortuitously during my pilgrimages: I choose these fragments – objects and images - for their aesthetic appeal, cultural significance, or even for their symbolic meaning as witnesses to a particular story. I am particularly drawn to all those objects carrying the memory of encounters between different worlds. I tend to prefer ordinary objects that, while often overlooked, carry hidden, unexpected meanings when examined closely.

In my most recent works, collaboration with local communities has become increasingly important. The process often begins with the collection of materials, which I do alone, but later evolves into a collaborative relationship through the creation of what I call "four-handed" artefacts (see fig. 8). These relational moments allow me not only to learn about the artisanal traditions of the place and to discover the stories of that particular community but also to build a personal rapport with the subject over time.

From a theoretical standpoint, I felt the need for intellectual tools to engage more consciously with my subjects and the cultures I encounter to support artistic action. And this is where anthropology reappears. I remember the reading of Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* as enlightening, confirming my aversion to the concept of cultural purity. From this book, whose title is interestingly translated in Italian as "Pure fruits go crazy"[12], I understood the importance of questioning authenticity in my work. Edward Said's *Orientalism*[13] helped me recognise the potential dangers of the photographic gaze and its tendency to distort the representation of other cultures through a dominant, external lens. These readings have sustained my practice and reinforced my desire to approach my subjects with an animistic, non-hierarchical view, uninterested in logical classification but attentive to the stories behind everything.

My projects usually require several years of gestation, research and development, and the artist's book format is the one that has allowed me to translate these long processes - which potentially tend towards a continuous and endless transformation - into a finished, shareable form, accessible to a broader audience beyond the contemporary art world. My first two publications, *Dalston Anatomy* (Vitturi 2014) and Money *Must be Made* (Vitturi 2017), reflect this approach. The *Caminantes* project, still ongoing, represents a further integration of anthropology into my practice, but this time in a more deliberate, less unconscious way. This shift is mainly due to my collaboration with Caterina Borelli, who has provided theoretical tools and reading suggestions to address some of the issues that emerged in the project. Notably, even if dealing with a strictly personal story, *Caminantes* touches on the problematic relationship between the "old continent" and the "new world", involving instances of (neo)colonialism, ethnic and racial tensions, power imbalances, and land exploitation.

The project draws on my family history. In the 1960s, my Venetian father crossed the Atlantic to Peru, where he established a Murano glass factory and met my mother. That trip made possible not only the meeting between my parents but also the bringing together of two very distant worlds, culturally and socially. Fifty years later, I decided to retrace my father's journey: I crossed the Atlantic carrying 100 kg of raw glass (*cotisso*), went from Lima to the Amazon across the Peruvian coastal desert, the Andes, and the Selva (Amazon rainforest), before returning to Venice to complete the route. The transformation of the matter and elements collected and assembled along the way, the ephemeral interventions in the environment and on my body, the activation of collaborations with local artisans, and the play of continuous mixing of the materials have allowed a process of "interweaving of the

12 *I frutti puri impazziscono. Etnografia, letteratura e arte nel secolo XX* (1999). Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

13 I read its Italian translation *Orientalismo. L'immagine europea dell'Oriente* (2013). Milano: Feltrinelli.

incompatible". Through this project, I have created a sort of "internal map" that brings together seemingly irreconcilable times and places (see fig. 9). In *Caminantes*, I combine purely artistic processes with methodologies and themes from anthropology, including the extensive use of interviews, field research, and a focus on the ritualistic dimension.

The point of arrival of my work is not anthropological research itself; I have no academic ambitions nor intend to reach conclusions on a theoretical level. My goal always remains to create visual art projects that communicate with the viewer on both an emotional and narrative level. In this sense, anthropology serves as a tool that allows me, as an author, to move more intentionally, giving greater depth and context to my poetic research. It functions as a sort of travel lantern, illuminating my path while allowing me to maintain a free but focused gaze.

Figure 7 *Dalston Anatomy,* © Lorenzo Vitturi, 2013

Figure 8 *Aventurine, transformations and other stories,* © Lorenzo Vitturi, 2022

Figure 8 *Caminantes*, © Lorenzo Vitturi, ongoing

Conclusions, by Caterina Borelli

Drawing definitive conclusions from a process that, for us, is still unfolding is a challenging task. As Tim Ingold (2018) suggests, research – true to its original meaning of *searching again* - is a continually evolving path, always open-ended and potentially never fully concluded. That is especially true in interdisciplinary collaborations. Objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and ethical concerns from different fields may sometimes overlap, as discussed in the previous pages, but seldom align perfectly. New possibilities

for researching otherwise may grow and branch out in those gaps. However, conflicts may arise, too, and balancing the specific needs of each discipline while maintaining their autonomy can be challenging. I mean that when I speak of the visual *and* anthropology as distinct from (not opposed to) the visual *in* anthropology: in the former, dialogues unfold between equals, with neither placed in an ancillary position, in line with what Pink (2003:185) advocated for when referring to a potential broader field of interdisciplinary visual research. With these premises, such dialogues are not always smooth, as each field constantly takes a chance of being questioned by the other in its tenets and ways of doing. Soliloquy is more straightforward but also risks becoming more sterile in the long run.

In this article, we have attempted to offer a glimpse into the transformative potential of interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly between photography and anthropology. These partnerships have enabled a deeper exploration of cultural and social landscapes, offering perspectives that would have been unattainable through a single-disciplinary approach. Our first claim is that interdisciplinary work reveals the potential of cross-fertilisation between visual and anthropological practices, leading to innovative ways of understanding and representing complex cultural phenomena. This synergy transcends the boundaries of both fields, creating space for new methodologies and perspectives.

Anthropology has undoubtedly enriched photographic practice by providing depth and contextual understanding that might otherwise be lacking. However, the reverse - how photography contributes to anthropology - is a question of significant importance that requires further exploration. While it's clear that the exchange of ideas, methods, and tools can boost any discipline, how does photography specifically impact anthropological practice? Through the case studies presented here, it becomes evident that beyond its ability to express what cannot be said in words, photography offers an embodied, sensory perspective that complements text-based, rational analysis. It captures textures, emotions, and atmospheres that are often difficult to convey through words alone. For example, in the *Delta* project, photography immerses the viewer in the psychological weight of the landscape, deepening our understanding of how the environment shapes identities and world visions. In *Dialect,* the tension of waiting, stuckedness, and frustration, but also hope and pride is conveyed through a few powerful gestures and gazes, amplified by the stark backdrop of bare walls. Meanwhile, *Caminantes* builds a new syncretic universe of meanings that fuses personal and historical dimensions, weaving the artist's story into real scenarios.

Photographic practices bring a heightened responsiveness to the senses, affording a new centrality to the aesthetic qualities of social phenomena. However, this contribution must be reframed in terms of both "the senses" and "aesthetic" (Bull et al., 2006). As understood here, the former are social and historical constructs, while the latter refers to 'the *disposition to sense acutely*' (ibid: 6), not a mere judgment of beauty. In the projects we examined, the way images are staged and built and materials juxtaposed demonstrates that photography is not just about surface perception but about culturally and politically shaped processes of knowing. In *Delta*, photography's engagement with the intricate landscape and its inhabitants reveals the hidden psychological dimensions of isolation, offering anthropology a method to explore emotional responses to geography. In *Dialect*, photography re-enacts personal memories and creates a performative space where the subjects' lived experiences of migration and waiting are visualised, vocalised and embodied, adding layers to theoretical discussions on displacement. In *Caminantes*, the merging of photography, sculpture and installation captures the complex historical and postcolonial relationships between land, identity, and migration, reframing theoretical debates on cultural hybridity.

If we move beyond logocentrism (Bargna 2012), we will discover how these works bring habitat (as in *Delta*), body (*Dialect*) and materiality (*Caminantes*) to the thought. They capture the nuanced interactions between people and their surroundings, offering a more holistic and textured understanding of the subjects. In this context, photography becomes an epistemological instrument for exploring and understanding the world, though not as in a documentary action that provides visual evidence. What is at stake has more to do with the realm of affect and the dynamic relation between objectivity and subjectivity (Edwards 2015). It is about how sensory experiences – not limited to sight – are crucial to grasping the rich textures of social worlds (Stoller 1989).

Through the lens of anthropology, photography gains a new contextual dimension, offering what, paraphrasing Geertz (1973), we could name *thick depictions* of cultural and social dynamics. These depictions materialise in gestures, objects, and landscapes, filled with meaning and symbolism – sometimes inherent to the reality portrayed (*Delta, Dialect*), and sometimes created by the artist's hand, as in *Caminantes*. By capturing fragments of lived spaces, photography introduces new sensory layers to anthropological research. It allows for an exploration of how subjects experience their environments - whether through the oppressive geography of the delta, the liminal spaces inhabited by migrant youth, or the syncretic blending of cultures in postcolonial contexts. The density of meaning reached by these images and the emotional and psychological insights they convey could hardly be obtained through text alone. At the same time, the thickness of these insights requires words to decode them, which explains why these projects still rely on text at some point.

The three works discussed here were initially conceived as independent endeavours, with anthropology playing only a peripheral role. Yet, they provide fertile ground for anthropological analysis. One can easily envision the depth of insight that could emerge if the two disciplines collaborated from the outset, united by shared research goals. The interplay between anthropology and photography holds tremendous potential, creating a feedback loop that can mutually enrich both fields. By working together, these disciplines have the capacity to generate a virtuous cycle of innovation and understanding. However, developing a fully integrated methodology remains an important challenge to address.

While we may have raised more questions than answers, our aim was never to provide closure but to suggest the possibilities of these interdisciplinary collaborations. Our efforts – methodological in *Delta*, argumentative in *Dialect*, and theoretical in *Caminantes* – demonstrate that when photography and anthropology are combined, they can produce new methodologies and ways of understanding cultural and social phenomena. These projects show how photography can serve as a critical epistemological instrument that engages with the social and emotional layers of human experience, offering anthropology symbolically thick, emotionally rich depictions that challenge traditional text-based representations. This synergy opens new avenues for both fields, suggesting exciting possibilities for future research and artistic expression.

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