

# 11. Dispersal and Denial: Photographic Ubiquity and the Microbial Analogy

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“Pictures succumb to uniformity as they flow ceaselessly across our screens, going viral and generating an omnipresent sense that we are being submerged or surveilled. Photography is everywhere.”

— from the introductory wall text for *Snap + Share: Transmitting Photographs from Mail Art to Social Networks* (2019)

“Everything is everywhere: but the environment selects.”

— Lourens Baas-Becking, *Geobiologie of Inleiding Tot de Milieukunde* (1934)

Is photography really everywhere now? What drives so many observers to insist that it is? Why do so few resist the notion? What advantages might there be in nuancing received wisdom around the supposed pervasiveness of cameras and photographs? For whom could a better grasp on forms of digital photographic *dispersal*—and their inevitable corollary, forms of digital photographic *denial*—matter most?

That critics, curators, and scholars increasingly portray photography as ubiquitous is far from surprising: there isn't just more photography with each passing year—millions more cameras, trillions more images, ever faster and more frequent photo sharing—there are also ever more occasions through which to see, talk about, visualize, and sell photography. With the rise of digital cameras, smartphones, and social media, seemingly everyone is a shareholder in what Susan Sontag called the “photographic enterprise,” and seemingly no situation is immune to the possibility of a photograph being taken. (Sontag, 1977: 3) Images can travel with incredible speed from one corner of the globe to the other. To use your computer or smartphone is to have a lens staring at you. On certain apps, you don't just post photos as a form of expression; you rapidly exchange photos as a means of conversation, or you regularly share photos as a matter of social survival. The institution of photography is now as much about representing the world as it is about being in all places and for everyone who would want to speak and show and remember. Even when actual cameras are not physically present, there

are still effects from the awareness of the possibility of being photographed (Azoulay, 2015: 19). In short, ubiquity claims persist because photography is hypercommon, hyperabundant, and hyperinfluential.

Still, it remains curious that there is so little critical questioning around the manifestly dramatic proposition that photography is now *everywhere*. Indeed, at least as far as I am aware, only a handful of writers have voiced alternatives, and only briefly at that, effectively referring to differences of degree.<sup>1</sup> None of this would be much cause for concern were it not for the ubiquity claim's considerable vulnerability to critique. For one thing, there are plenty of meaningful gaps in the map. There are, for instance, many locations across the globe that photography either barely reaches or does not reach at all, such as places beset by poverty or war, or contexts in which cameras cannot physically operate, such as the Earth's interior. There are also numerous social, political, and cultural restrictions around photography across the planet: who can use cameras and social media (by age or gender or economic access); what types of photographs can be taken and distributed (whether because of censorship, copyright, or other barriers); what kinds of subjects or genres will receive attention and endorsement (based on prevailing norms or what type of person presents what). If anything, the sheer abundance and availability of photography makes it all the more plain that many types of events and circumstances continue to *not* receive photographic treatment, whether because of active restrictions (archival materials, museum holdings, secret prisons, secret wars) or because of forbidding conditions (such as events of slow and structural violence, the dispersed natures of which make them difficult to photograph).<sup>2</sup> In other words, it doesn't take much to see that the proposition that photography is everywhere is an exaggeration in the extreme. Although photography is in many, many places, it is by no means in all places.

The ubiquity claim is also vulnerable along critical and conceptual lines. This is the potential that ubiquity claims are fantasies of imagined, final circumstances rather than politically and philosophically nuanced interpretations of actual, unfolding ones. Such flights of analysis do not necessarily warrant approval, as though they were basically forgivable instances of hyperbolizing through the frame of everywhere (of the kind one might know from when something spills in the kitchen, and a family member heartily exclaims that the offending substance has gotten *everywhere*). Indeed, to say, without qualification, that photography is ubiquitous risks reinforcing an implicit premise that the only worlds that truly matter are those in which this appears to be the case, those worlds in which selfies, espresso snaps, sunsets, or other seemingly hallmark digital photographic forms are frequent and pervasive. Everything else (and everyone else) falls outside the everywhere that matters to apprehend and interpret.

The point here is that, even if one were to accept the hyperbolic nature of ubiquity claims as necessary or forgivable, one would still have to answer for what Ulrik Ekman, speaking of ubiquitous computing, has characterized as the ubiquity concept's silent freight (Ekman, 2011: 7).<sup>3</sup> Whether applied to computing, photography, or still other institutions, ubiquity is not, in this rendering, an empty and neutral conceptual vessel. Instead, it is an insidious vehicle for premises and orientations that serve to warp and limit perceptions and interpretations of culture, people, and place. Unqualified ubiquity endorses a false sense of universality (such and such is everywhere, as in everywhere that matters to me to think about). It produces a sense of finality (reaching the status of everywhere means reaching an effectively uncontestable, total presence). And it undermines the essential question of *differential* distribution—the actual variation and inequality in the reach of photography or, in the opposite sense, the legitimate desire among certain publics to avoid or contest some or all aspects of that reach. So often couched in terms of democratization, unqualified ubiquity claims work against that very ambition.

The problem at hand, then, is how to respond to a persistent paradox within the world of contemporary photography: the simultaneous abundance of digital ubiquity claims and the dearth of critical questions thereby. The first and most obvious way to respond would be to refuse the above lines of critique and simply fall in line. One would accept as given the real-world applicability and necessity of the notion of ubiquity, and one would proceed to invoke that notion as necessary, either ignoring or dismissing the supposed problems of silent freight. A second option would be to do the opposite and refuse all ubiquity claims tout court. One could argue, for example, that it is absurd to claim that anything—apart from, say, gravity—is everywhere. Alternatively, one could elaborate the critique I have only just sketched, linking the problem of ubiquity with long histories of racialized, ethnocentric, neoliberal, and imperialist discourses. As books like *Provincializing Europe* attest (Chakrabarty, 2000), such discourses take contingent particulars as essential givens. In so doing, they undermine and forestall more vibrant, democratic, and liberatory conceptions and conversations.

As sympathetic as I am to both takes on ubiquity, I nevertheless favor a more uncertain, middle path. Rather than accepting or rejecting ubiquity claims outright, we find ways to critically reconceptualize them. We do so on the idea that there must be some reason that the concept of ubiquity has had its way, yet this needn't mean that the concept ought to continue to have its way in exactly the same way. Other approaches to this essential matter of radically wide distribution must be possible. The question is how we ought to construct those alternative approaches, and what we ought to do with them in turn. Somehow, these approaches must do justice to the manifest abundance and influence of digital (and

nondigital) photographic forms while also negotiating the inaccuracies and harms—universalization, naturalization, erasure—in exactly such an enterprise. Such newly vivified theories of ubiquity will not, it seems to me, emerge through strict adherence to available modes of analysis and debate. Rather, they demand rethinking the terms through which we conceive questions of hypersaturation and hypercommonality in the first place. What is needed, in short, is direct, unorthodox, critical, transversal, and pragmatic thinking capable of reframing ubiquity without failing to recognize the undeniable attraction, actual real-world responsiveness, and critical and intellectual advantages of the concept.

Strange as it feels to write, I find crucial means for such thinking by shifting away from the most obvious *dramatis personae*—cameras and photographs—and instead moving toward the creatures that tend to dwell within and upon these and countless other objects: microbes. (fig. 11.1) Also called microorganisms, microbes are organisms (and organism-like entities) that defy human vision. Among the earliest life forms to have evolved, they include familiar entities like bacteria, fungi, and viruses as well as less familiar ones like archaea and protists. Microbes can be single-celled, multicellular, or acellular, and there are interesting cases of microbes that form colonies of many different organisms unified into a living whole that is, nevertheless, not considered an individual organism. Microbes serve all manner of critical ecological functions, from the recycling of nutrients to the removal of

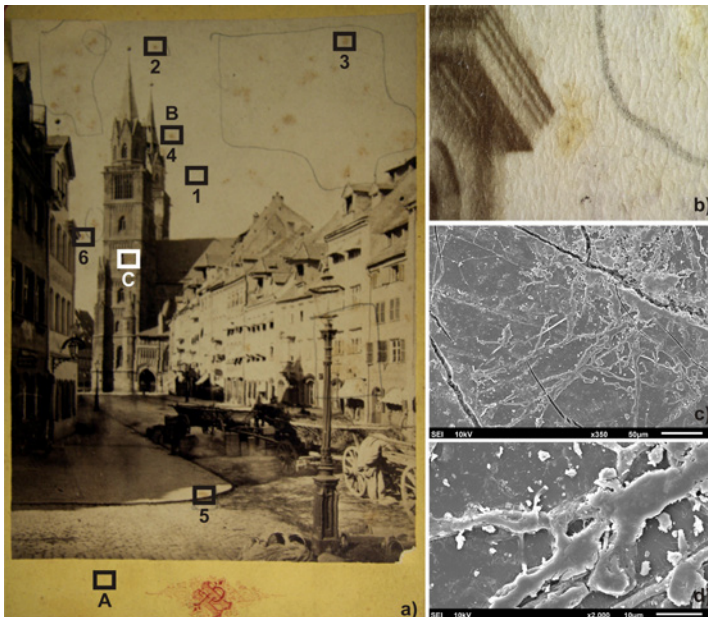


Figure 11.1  
Puškárová et al.,  
Documentation of the  
presence of fungal  
hyphae on albumen  
print from "Microbial  
communities affecting  
albumen photography  
heritage: a metho-  
dological survey,"  
February 11, 2016.  
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contaminants. As the COVID-19 pandemic made tragically plain, however, certain microbial forms can radically undermine or even destroy bodies, communities, and economies.<sup>4</sup> (Of course, the pandemic also made plain that there are factors other than the pathogen, many of them preventable and many of them unevenly distributed across race, gender, and class, among other categories.) Estimates of the number of species of microbes vary widely, from hundreds of millions to perhaps even one trillion species in total, with hundreds of thousands of these being viruses in the oceans and something on the order of five million species of fungi (Bakalar, 2016; de Jesus, 2019; Hawksworth and Lücking, 2017). The distribution of these hyperabundant life forms is nothing short of astonishing. Where there is water—and this includes mineral veins deep beneath the ocean floor—there is microbial life.<sup>5</sup>

As things stand, the intellectual association between photography and microbes is both rich and restricted. On the one hand, there is the problem of material decay; certain microbes eat pictures (Puškárová et al., 2016). On the other hand, there is the microbial analogy of *virality*: certain images (or events or ideas) manage to become extremely widespread in a manner reminiscent of both computer viruses and actual viruses.<sup>6</sup> First used in 1999 in relation to marketing, the viral analogy provides a crucial frame through which to understand aspects of contemporary photography and indeed digital photographic ubiquity. Among other things, virality speaks to the events of spread that further entrench the presence of not just certain images but of images in general. Not only that, the metaphor of virality serves as a waypoint for a host of important lines of inquiry around *contagion* in which, as Tony D. Sampson summarizes, “financial crisis, social influence, innovations, fashions and fads, and even human emotion are understood to spread universally like viruses across networks.” (Sampson, 2012: 2)<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, metaphors of virality and contagion are not themselves sufficient for a direct inquiry into the conceptual foundations of digital photographic ubiquity. This is because those metaphors tend to emphasize networks, events, and transmission (key for understanding digital visual culture) rather than geographies, conditions, and densities (key for understanding questions of pervasiveness). Indeed, rather than explicitly address the broad “sea of content” (or what I prefer to call the dispersal and denial of photographic forms), virality tends to emphasize (Sampson’s book notwithstanding) the remarkable “exception” that manages to achieve visibility and spread (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013).<sup>8</sup> By contrast, my own current notion of a valuable microbial intervention into debates around photography turns on precisely this question of what is—and isn’t—“everywhere.”

By way of a chance encounter amid research for this book, the alternative I have in mind is a nearly century-old concept in microbiology.

Commonly called the “ubiquity hypothesis,” the concept first took root in 1934, when the Dutch scientist Lourens Baas-Becking sought to expand upon ideas first promulgated by his predecessor, Martinus Beijerinck.<sup>9</sup> “Everything is everywhere,” Baas-Becking writes, “but the environment selects.” (Baas-Becking, 1934) The gnostic statement became something of a mantra for microbial biogeography, the field of scientific study that explores the distribution of microbial life across the planet. This statement indicates a key difference between the distribution of macroorganisms, which includes creatures such as crows and redwood trees, and what Baas-Becking is here calling “everything,” which means any microbial “taxon”—any group of one or more populations seen by biologists to form a unit—from bacteria and fungi to viruses and protists. For *macroorganisms*, history and geography play crucial roles in which taxa are found where. For instance, although crows can travel many places (at times seemingly “anywhere”), they cannot necessarily get to or sustain themselves in all places; both how they evolved and where they evolved continually condition where members of the species can and cannot arrive and reside. With *microorganisms*, the situation is far different. Microbes can travel by wind, water, and other means throughout all manner of planetary habitats, from clouds and forest canopies to mammals’ guts and the bottom of the ocean. (One of the more striking examples of the dispersal capacity of microbes I have come across is a form of bacteria that thrives near deep sea vents lodged in a person’s belly button.<sup>10</sup>) In other words, microbes confront little to no dispersal constraints. And thus, according to the Baas-Becking hypothesis, microbial taxa should be understood as fundamentally and characteristically *ubiquitous*. (This term is indeed specifically employed by microbiologists.)

What is crucial here is the generative double move: the simultaneous assertion and qualification of the proposition of ubiquity. Everything, as in every microbial taxa, can disperse anywhere, but this does not mean that there are no observable differences in local and global distributions of particular types of microbes. It’s just that the key determining factor in which taxa endure where is neither history nor geography (as is the case with macroorganisms). Rather, it is what is here called “environment.” Particular taxa persist where they persist due to the features of particular habitats, which is to say because of distinct, local, life-sustaining conditions, such as temperature, availability of water and nutrients, or levels of sunlight.<sup>11</sup> Certain conditions support certain microbial taxa and not others. In a phrase, *microbial taxa can arrive anywhere, but they don’t necessarily endure everywhere*.<sup>12</sup>

Over the nearly one hundred years since its introduction, the ubiquity hypothesis has occasioned both perennial citation and increasing skepticism within its field of origin. Some microbiologists see the hypothesis as



accurate at best or necessary at worst, as though microbial biogeography would not now enjoy the legitimacy or productivity it now does without this core principle. Others, calling attention to strong evidence of at least a few instances in which geographical factors affect the distribution patterns of particular microbes and microbial communities, portray the proposition as imprecise and misleading, with one scientist going so far as to argue that “everything is everywhere” is a “siren song” that “gets us nowhere” (Fierer, 2015) and several others using their studies, such as one on the distinct makeup of microbial life in Antarctica (Vyerman et al., 2010), as occasions to assert the unreliability and false allure of the aphoristic claim.

From the position of concern I have laid out—that is, this concern to respond through critical reconceptualization to the paradoxical abundance of and lack of criticality around digital ubiquity claims—a turn to the Baas-Becking hypothesis could seem both odd and precarious, not only because I risk converting a scientific concept into mere metaphor but also because, as I have just indicated, the concept itself is (according to some at least) outdated and unreliable. However, there is good precedent for exactly this kind of exercise. Among the most thoroughgoing is found across the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, the apparent trouble with a given scientific proposition might be a sign of its conceptual potential.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, there are what Deleuze describes as “inexact yet completely rigorous” scientific notions that “scientists can’t do without” but “which belong equally to scientists, philosophers, and artists.” (Deleuze, 1995: 29) These notions are marked by an “excess of sense” that “can be mobilised in contexts that are distinct from the one in which they are usually (and justifiably) used.” (Voss, 2013: 201) Although this practice of conceptual transplantation does come with “dangers”—for instance, the scientific concept might be uncritically applied, or it might simply function as a fruitless metaphor—careful use can yield considerable philosophical and pragmatic reward.<sup>14</sup> The key thing to do is to take from these inexact concepts “a particular conceptualizable character which itself refers to non-scientific areas.” (Deleuze, 1986: 129)<sup>15</sup> That “conceptualizable character”—that quantum of insight or provocation, that useful reframing, whatever it might be—can then take on new life. As a result of such transference, inexact scientific concepts come to generate, as Daniela Voss puts it, “a movement of thought that transcends their usual sphere of application and arouses a synthesis with new conceptual components in another sphere.” (Voss, 2013: 201)

Following on Deleuze and others’ precedents, my contention isn’t that this enduring aphorism from the world of microbial biogeography holds some magical solution to the silent freight of photographic and other ubiquity claims. Nor am I saying that the time has come to finally

recognize that photography equals microbes (however willing to pursue this analogy I remain). Rather, I look to the Baas-Becking hypothesis for what it can imperfectly afford. This is an “inexact” concept that can lead to better thinking and conceptualizing than has heretofore been possible. It is an unsteady means toward useful “movements of thought” that have otherwise proved elusive.

*Dispersal* is one key, microbe-inspired starting point for a new movement of thought around ubiquity. By and large, when writers or curators say that photography is ubiquitous or “everywhere” (such as in the statement I’ve used as the first epigraph to this chapter), they leave the central term unspecified. “Photography” is a kind of conceptual mass or critical abstraction without much if anything in the way of qualities, components, or tensions. It is as though photography were some univocal thing à la God or seawater, the same in every place, not differing in what it is, just a perpetually reproduced and continuous entity that stretches across the entire globe with only the most minor variation. The notion of “everything is everywhere” does not provide some readymade rejoinder to that blunt casting of a complex, internally contradictory, and still evolving medium, institution, practice, and enterprise. But it does point to a viable, interesting, and indeed necessary alternative. It does this because “everything” refers to all manner of different species, subspecies, and species assemblages, in other words, to *taxa*. These taxa are everywhere not because they are actually everywhere, but because there is a constant, remarkable, and powerful “dispersal capacity” at work among them. Microbes disperse with spectacular speed and ease across all manner of habitats, spaces, climates, and times.

Such an emphasis pays off when “inexactly” translated into the context of photography. To speak of photographic ubiquity in a more precise and productive fashion is not to speak of photography in its pervasive and continuous presence; it is to speak of *the stunning and proven dispersal capacity of photographic forms*, a capacity that is not strictly limited to the digital era, but, which, as this collection shows, has manifested throughout histories of photography and undergone a recent, massive intensification. Early on, it is the remarkable, border-crossing dispersal of the fervor to fix a lens-based image. Soon, it is the slow but steady (and frequently destructive and exploitative) distribution of cameras to ever more places across industrial and imperial worlds. Then it is the flying fast of snapshot photographs, not absolutely widely saturated but present in an increasing number of homes and hands. And yet further on, reaching into the digital era, when smartphone cameras are readily snatched out of pockets and into situations, there emerges the apparent lack of immunity of any time or place or event from photography, with seemingly all places touched with at least one or the other photographic form that is, in turn, ready to assert and even reproduce itself.





Figure 11.2  
Mariam Soliman,  
“We Want It Peacefull!,”  
February 9, 2011.  
Licensed under  
CC BY-SA 2.0.  
See also [Plate 14](#).

Although the concept and metaphor of virality to some degree alludes to photography in this fashion, at the end of the day it is a metaphor dedicated to single, sudden, fast, and exceptional dispersal. What really needs emphasis is the constant spreading and distribution of many different types of photographic forms. *That* constancy, that way in which not some but effectively all hours of the day, one can bear witness to the dispersal and perpetuation of one after the other photographic “taxa”—that is what deserves to occasion the otherwise risky and freighted frame of everywhere. Without such a dispersal-centered vision of photographic ubiquity, we fall short in our vision of abundance and saturation, stuck with the beginnings of a hyperbole, not actually attending to the sprawling and multifaceted force that we imperfectly gather under the banner of “ubiquitous photography.” *With* a dispersal-centered vision, on the other hand, both the history and the theory of photographic hyperabundance open to more possibilities for description and questioning. Like (but not exactly like) a strain of bacteria in people’s guts, the habit of making a “peace” or “V” sign for the camera, once largely concentrated in certain regions in East Asia has become a physical commonplace. (fig. 11.2)<sup>16</sup> Like (but not exactly like) a virus that mutates into more transmissible variants, the smartphone camera comes to variously mimic, supplement, and kill off forms of personal memory across increasingly many cultural settings. Like (but not exactly like) an invasive fungus, technologies for the surveillance of communications, locations, and faces (including one that creates a “temporary

surveillance scene”) ride the winds of profit and power from one country to another.<sup>17</sup> Time and again, that is, photographic forms (as well as their cognates in other media) find ways to spread and to perpetuate, sometimes causing surprise and consternation for the extent to which they now reach, other times functioning all too quietly and successfully to yield much in the way of attention or fear, much less countermeasure. Extraordinary dispersal, effectively ignorant of social and cultural borders, persists with such speed, reach, and variegation as to *seem* to add up to an uninterrupted “everything is everywhere.”

And yet dispersal isn’t everything. Once again, the Baas-Becking hypothesis provides an imperfect but necessary resource for conceiving of why this is so. In the first half of the aphorism, one gets a powerful notion of the incredible and effectively ubiquitous dispersal capacities of microbial species and of particular species assemblages, a notion which can then translate into a transformed vision of photographic forms circulating and reproducing with remarkable global reach. In the second half of the hypothesis, however, is a more agonistic picture: a fact of any habitat across the planet is the simultaneous receiving and *repulsion* of microbial taxa. That is to say, the members of certain taxa will *not* be welcomed into the fold; they will not persist and reproduce in this habitat, because that habitat does not provide sufficiently conducive conditions. These microbes stop short, they die, they go dormant. As much is happening all the time and “everywhere.” And this leads to an important, alternative movement of thought. Zooming out to the widest possible perspective, working to consolidate something of a potentially “conceptualizable character,” one comes to the proposition that *the inevitable other side of widespread dispersal is widespread denial*. Microbial taxa are constantly and pervasively spreading; microbial taxa are also constantly and pervasively failing to take hold.

In this observation about the microbial world is a valuable excess of sense. That excess can be directed toward an alternative and extended vision of photographic abundance in which *the facts of sheer quantity, speedy dispersal, and widespread presence are also the reality of all manner of negative processes: spurning, refusing, blocking, losing*. Something as simple as a selfie stick provides an immediate entrance into this way of thinking. For a long time, the selfie stick was a quite limited form, restricted to a few inventive people extending the reach of their cameras through improvised means, or, in the case of Hiroshi Ueda, through a “telescopic extender” for a “compact camera,” invented in the early 1980s, that never took off.<sup>18</sup> (fig. 11.3) Soon after the smartphone became “ubiquitous,” however, the now mass-produced selfie stick (unfortunately for Ueda, not his patented version) found its most appropriate vector; the practice of extending an appendage outward to produce a photograph of one’s self, one’s background, and potentially some fellow travelers became a

FIG.17a

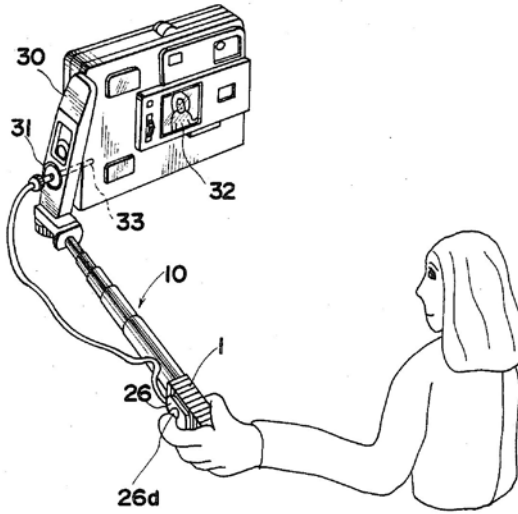


Figure 11.3  
From Hiroshi Ueda  
et al., "Telescopic  
Extender for Supporting  
Compact Camera."  
Patent US4530580A,  
filed January 17, 1984.

widely dispersed (if also often derided) presence on the photographic scene. While critics spoke of seeing selfie sticks “selling out everywhere,” the apparatus only further incited the general mockery launched at self-imaging. Of course, it didn’t take long for this fervor to subside. A telescopic apparatus for self-imaging became less common, necessary, or desirable. A period of considerable spread—the participation of an evanescent photographic form (a tool and a practice) in digital photographic ubiquity qua dispersal—gave way to a period of denial and decay. Not only did fewer people find themselves wanting to carry selfie sticks around, but numerous museum and tourist sites saw fit to ban their use.<sup>19</sup> The selfie stick continued to “arrive” in various contexts of social life, from the solemn memorial to the rowdy sporting event, and it also continued to be useful for certain bodies at certain times. But the selfie stick did not endure in the numbers it once did. Instead, an alternative suite of photographic forms remained dominant in these and other places (including long-tested forms like simply extending one’s arm to take a self-image or even the habit of partaking in a social experience without self-imaging at all). Meanwhile, adjacent and competing forms, such as Snap’s “selfie drone,” lay in wait, preparing themselves for both dispersal and (presumably) eventual denial.

If one way to observe the interplay of dispersal and denial is to focus on a formerly widespread photographic form, another is to dwell on a particular site at which ubiquitous (as in ever and widely dispersing) forms intersect and interact. Serving to frame *Snap + Share*, a rich



Figure 11.4

Eva Mattes and Franco Mattes, *Ceiling Cat*, 2016. Taxidermy cat, polyurethane resin, hole, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, photograph by Katherine Du Tiel, CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication.

See also [Plate 15](#).

(though markedly apolitical) exhibition led by Clément Chéroux on the history of photography through the lens of sharing, the chapter's first epigraph emerged at one such site, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (commonly called SFMOMA).<sup>20</sup> (Selfie sticks were banned there, too.) Sure enough, until the uncontrollable spread of a virus called SARS-CoV-2 made it impossible, to look around this museum on any given day was to see the workings of hyperabundant photography, with photos as likely to be taken and shared across the galleries as out in the courtyards or even within the colorful bathrooms.<sup>21</sup> Watched by both official surveillance cameras and the photography-ready eyes of smartphone users (and, during *Snap + Share*, those of Eva and Franco Mattes's taxidermy version of the internet's viral ceiling cat), the museum space was effectively pervaded by the consciousness of the possibility of being seen and photographed, or what the exhibition refers to as "an omnipresent sense that we are being submerged or surveilled." (fig. 11.4) (One could also ask whether certain artists represented in this museum and others have tended to negotiate ubiquity by creating works that lend themselves to visual travel by way of official and unofficial documentation.)

Nevertheless, like any other "environment," SFMOMA was also shot through with various kinds of actual and consequential photographic denial. Visitors' desires aside, photos could be taken but only at particular times and at particular distances. Certain kinds of photos did not fit the general habit. Certain kinds of photographers, whether due to socioeconomic or other factors, rarely arrived to take photographs. For all the availability of photography, certain artworks received little to no photographic attention, or, if they did, those photographs did not see much in

the way of public circulation. At the same time, certain artworks within SFMOMA also spoke to forms of rejection and selectivity that take place beyond the walls of the museum, including differential access to place and image, which is to say the photographic selection (or deselection) enforced by violent restrictions on citizenship, movement, and agency. In *Where We Come From*, for instance, Emily Jacir undertakes actions that her work's immediate protagonists, Palestinians exiled from their homeland, cannot, from watering a tree in one person's village to playing soccer with the first Palestinian boy the artist encounters.<sup>22</sup> (fig. 11.5) As Jacir documents these actions through individual photographs yoked to the protagonists' requests, she propels these images across borders to share and reshare them, initially through museum display alone but eventually also through the digital reproduction of excerpts from the artwork and, in the vein of ubiquity, through the ongoing documentation and social media sharing undertaken by museum visitors. Although it is not Jacir's intention per se, as her work assembles the profoundly uneven distribution of citizenship and agency, it also testifies to a persistence of photographic negation that SFMOMA, like many other agents of photographic discourse, has heretofore tended to overwrite through its more normative framing of photography as a "fundamentally democratic" and universally available medium.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 11.5

Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From (lyad)* (detail), 2001–2003. American passport, 30 texts, 32 c-prints, and 1 video, dimensions variable. © Emily Jacir. Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

See also [Plate 16](#).



Beyond following a form and contemplating sites lie several other means of mapping and analyzing the dynamics of dispersal and denial that constitute digital ubiquity, including comparing distributions across cultural and geographic contexts. Alternatively, one could shift from an empirical to a prescriptive mode, considering both what photographic forms *ought* to ubiquitously disperse *and* what photographic forms ought to be resisted, refused, drawn down, denied. Of course, certain projects within photographic theory already do something to this effect. In Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History*, for instance, there is a general proposition of photography as having been ubiquitously destructive throughout its history, with this destruction justified by the assumption of "imperial rights," including a "right to take" photographs and to do so in "worlds that were 'opened up'" by "imperial agents." (Azoulay, 2019: 282–283) Part of the prescriptive counter to this is an argument for both alternative dispersals (photography in the mode of "worldly sovereignty") and actively chosen denials (a call for a "general photographic strike") (Azoulay, 2019: 388, 285).

As a different example, for Kaja Silverman, the widely dispersed habit of framing photography as a kind of "taking" is challenged by a call to foster alternative language and thinking around photography as *receiving* (Silverman, 2015: 14–15, 24–26). Active and important and named as such in the early days of the medium, the mode of photography as receiving has, in the eyes of Silverman, long been spurned in favor of an approach to photography that seeks to command and control the world's light—and the beings who dwell within that light—by extracting and fixing views. At the same time, the effectively dormant vision of photography qua welcoming and waiting—evident in projects such as Abelardo Morell's camera obscura compositions—has the potential to spread and proliferate. While photographic postures marked by humility, openness, and what Silverman calls "the miracle of analogy" might not, as it were, outcompete those centered in taking and extracting, they might nevertheless find harbor and influence in more contexts than before.

My point is not that Azoulay, Silverman, or others addressing photography in its planetary reach are somehow secretly dependent on a microbial analogy. Rather, in reconceiving the terms of their writing through the notions of dispersal and denial, and in seeing the possibility that prescriptive (and political) work is possible through such repatterning, I elaborate what this chapter has sought to offer by way of an inexact analogy: revived visions of photographic surfeit that retain the best aspects of ubiquity claims—including the attention they bring to the reality and import of astonishingly widespread photographic distribution—but that also work to avoid the forms of critical and conceptual harm that have so far been their silent freight.



## Notes

1. Martin Hand, for instance, says photography is everywhere, but it is not everywhere “in the same way” (Hand, 2012: 12). Ariella Aisha Azoulay says there are places, like disaster zones, where “the subjects of disaster are sentenced to be photographed rather than to photograph themselves.” (Azoulay, 2015: 19)
2. See, for instance, Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Nixon, 2011).
3. Ekman writes, “Whether in cultural theoretical or technical discourses, the terms of ‘ubiquity,’ ‘pervasiveness,’ and ‘ambience’ come silently freighted with a notion of totalizing universality or even certain ontological and metaphysical remainders (altogether abstract idealizations and/or excessively essential or substantial extensions). Both the editors and the authors contributing to this special issue approach this as a call for ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction, not least in the sense that remainders and implications of onto-theological and sovereign ideological notions must be questioned reasonably so as to be put under critical erasure in one or more ways.” (Ekman, 2011: 7)
4. On the often-overlooked ecological functions of viruses, see Rachel Nuwer, “Why the World Needs Viruses to Function,” *BBC Future*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200617-what-if-all-virus-es-disappeared>.
5. The oceanographer Brian Glazer puts it this way: “When we find water here on Earth—whether it be ice-covered lakes, whether it be deep-sea hydrothermal vents, whether it be arid deserts—if there’s any water, we’ve found microbes that have found a way to make a living there.” (Ghose, 2015)
6. There are multiple other instances in which media and viruses have been linked. One example is Jean Baudrillard’s concern that television had become a “viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence.” (Baudrillard, 1981: 30) Another is Douglas Rushkoff’s notion of a “media virus” that circulates hidden agendas under the veneer of enrapturing content (Rushkoff, 1994). For further reading along these lines, see the recent interdisciplinary volume *Endemic: Essays in Contagion Theory* (Nixon and Servitje, 2016).
7. While Sampson engages these microbial and epidemiological terms, he joins Deleuze in refusing to frame this engagement as metaphorical or analogical (see footnote on Deleuze below). On the one hand, Sampson parallels existing discourses on contagion, as when he writes, “This is a world awash with hormones and consumer goods, making people happy or sad, sympathetic or apathetic, and a space in which affects are significantly passed on, via suggestions made by others, more and more through networks.” (5) On the other hand, in dialogue with the sociologist Gabriel Tarde, Sampson seeks to develop a nonrepresentation-al approach that can “disentangle contagion theory from the mechanistic limitations” that he perceives in memetics and theories of the crowd (87). Drawing on concepts from Deleuze and others, Sampson argues that the “universality of contagion needs to be understood [...] as independent of unifying mechanisms and analyzed accordingly through the relationalities and associations established between singularities.” (89) His account departs from others on virality and contagion by emphasizing “forces of relational encounter in the social field.” (4)
8. For the authors of these words, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, “viral events” are ubiquitous, but they are also the “exception.” “[E]ven in their ubiquity,” they write, “viral events are the exception while the vast majority of content remains obscure. Viral content is what stands out as *remarkable* in a sea of content.” (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 2)
9. Maureen A. O’Malley provides an excellent summary of the history of the microbial ubiquity hypothesis in a 2008 article (O’Malley, 2008).
10. According to the documentary *Life on Us: A Microscopic Safari* (2014), a swab of a subject’s navel for the Belly Button Biodiversity project at North Carolina State University revealed the presence of a bacteria typically seen at deep ocean vents called *Desulfococcus abyssi*.
11. Tom Fenchel and Bland J. Finlay put it this way: “habitat properties alone are needed to explain the presence of a given microbe, and historical factors are irrelevant.” (Fenchel and Finlay, 2004: 777)
12. Although this is not a statement found in microbiology contexts, I find it a fruitful way to sum up the point for present purposes. I am grateful to microbiologist Karen Ottemann for her feedback on my outsider attempts at summarization.
13. Another key precedent (unrelated to and of a different order and kind than that of Deleuze) is found in Christina Sharpe’s 2016 book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe finds in the scientific concept of “residence time” the means to articulate otherwise elusive perspectives on historical repetition and saturation. Sharpe also speaks of residence time in literal

- (and haunting) terms when she discusses the continued presence in the ocean of elements (like sodium in the blood) from the bodies of enslaved people who were thrown—or who jumped—overboard during the Middle Passage (Sharpe, 2016: 41).
14. It is important to note that Deleuze and his frequent collaborator Félix Guattari do not see such a practice as the use of science as metaphor. Rather, for these two thinkers, “there are no metaphors only concepts and occasions of their use which can involve either the unexpected extension, transformation or variation of an existing concept or, in extreme cases, the coining of new words to express novel concepts.” (Patton, 2006: 32) According to Daniel Smith and John Protevi, “Deleuze and Guattari’s refusal to recognize that their work contains metaphors is due to their struggle against the ‘imperialism’ of the signifying regime, a major theme in both *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*: not every relation between different intellectual fields can be grasped by the most common notions of ‘metaphor,’ reliant as they are on the notion of a transfer of sense from primary to secondary signification.” (Smith and Protevi, 2020) For present purposes, I refer to my use of the Baas-Becking hypothesis as analogical.
  15. One observer described this practice in microbial terms, referring to “the need to think through other fields, to reconfigure a body of discourse—or an antibody like Deleuze’s for that matter—by infecting it with viruses from other locales, because thinking through different disciplinary terrain produces decisive differences.” (Harris, 2000: 27) For an example of work in this vein, see *Narrating the Catastrophe* (Saorisa, 2011).
  16. For a helpful account of the history and appeal of this gesture, see Dhvani Solani, “Why Does Basically Everyone Do This V-Finger Peace Thing in Photos?,” *Vice*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7a4za/v-sign-fingers-peace-vagina-pose-photo>.
  17. According to Ryan Gallagher, technology for building mass dragnets has been “increasingly finding its way into the hands of security forces in undemocratic countries where dissidents are jailed, tortured, and in some cases executed.” A related technology called HawkEye serves as a “temporary surveillance scene.” It “scans people as they walk past the camera and compares images of their faces to photographs contained in ‘multi-million-level databases’ in real time, triggering an alert if a particular suspect is identified.” See Ryan Gallagher, “Middle East Dictators Buy Spy Tech from Company Linked to IBM and Google,” *The Intercept*, July 12, 2019.
  18. See Vibeka Venema, “How the Selfie Stick Was Invented Twice,” *BBC World Service*, April 19, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32336808> and United States patent number US4530580A, “Telescopic extender for supporting compact camera.”
  19. See Sasha Lekach and Suzanne Ciechalski, “Don’t Even Think About Bringing Your Selfie Stick to These Tourist Destinations,” *Mashable*, July 29, 2017, <https://mashable.com/2017/07/29/selfie-sticks-banned-travel-tourist-destinations>.
  20. Situated on the unceded ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples, visited by over a million people per year, as of 2020, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art held over seventeen thousand photographic works from 1839 to the present. On the role of European-caused infection—including “gastrointestinal disease, measles, influenza, syphilis, tuberculosis, typhus, and diphtheria”—in the devastation of Indigenous peoples via Mission San Francisco and other mission sites, see *Our Better Nature: Environment and the Making of San Francisco* (Dreyfus, 2008: 27–28).
  21. As I write these words, SFMOMA is closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The museum is also confronting demands for structural reconfiguration. On the movements against inequality and structural racism at SFMOMA, including those in support of Taylor Brandon, a former employee whose critical comment was removed from an Instagram post by the museum, see Hakim Bishara, “SFMOMA Accused of Censoring Black Voices After Removing Comment by Former Employee,” *Hyperallergic*, June 2, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/568331/sfmoma-george-floyd-instagram-comments-disabled> and Hakim Bishara, “SFMOMA Workers Call for Major Reform During Public Board Meeting,” *Hyperallergic*, September, 4, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/586207/sfmoma-workers-call-for-major-reform-during-public-board-meeting>.
  22. Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From, 2001–2003*, Collection SFMOMA, Accessions Committee Fund purchase.
  23. As of 2020, the SFMOMA web page on photography states: “Photography is everywhere. It is in the museum, but it’s also on city walls, in magazine pages, and on our phones. Practiced by all—amateurs, professionals, and artists, no matter their geographic, social, or ethnic backgrounds—photography is fundamentally democratic.” See <https://www.sfmoma.org/artists-works/photography>.

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