

## Talking to Strangers

How a reappraisal of the affordances of digital circulation can help photographers to develop conscious publication strategies expanding or refining the communicative potential of their work.

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The Networked Audience research group investigates ways in which the photographic encounter is changed by the interconnection of sites of audiencing, particularly small screens, and explores ways in which photography can engage fruitfully with recursively-linked audiences. This paper will outline the basis and process of a recent thematic seminar focusing on the relationship between audience and image and exploring ways of sharing work across digital spaces, and will discuss the conclusions, questions and limitations revealed along the way.

Most 'formal' photographs (here describing images produced as the considered outcome of an artistic or investigative process) are produced with the eventual intention of physical display – an exhibition, a book, publication in a magazine etc. Digital circulation, meanwhile, is not regarded by most photographers as a prestigious or desirable form of publication. Therefore, despite being the places in which a photographer's work is most likely to be encountered, (small) internet-connected screens are treated as inferior due to their perceived ephemerality and the lack of value associated with them. However as I argued in my MA thesis (Boase, 2022), photography would benefit from reconsidering screens and their communicative potential. As highlighted by Gomez Cruz (2016), this form permits a recursive relationship between the maker and viewer in which the image serves as an interface. This gives rise to a range of affordances unavailable in physical forms, affordances which can fundamentally reconfigure the lives of images, yet which are commonly overlooked in planning photographic projects.

In order to understand photographers' treatment of emerging forms of circulation, a thematic seminar proposed to investigate how photographers relate to new digital affordances to ensure their work travels effectively and clearly in digital spaces, and how those spaces might enable images to reach audiences excluded or overlooked by conventional distribution techniques. The class spent four working days together, beginning with readings, then following with discussions, and finally cooperating on an act of collaborative making. They worked with three bodies of work, each facing a distinct challenge in terms of circulation which could specifically be solved through creative approaches to digital circulation. Participants also offered observations on the ways in which platforms themselves shape content and meaning, and strategies for protecting work against unsolicited decontextualisation.

Class discussions drew on critical texts to explore both formal and vernacular treatments of digital spaces, and the resulting conversations were then documented by students in a series of maps and a digital handbook offering several new observations for photographers and educators navigating digital circulation. The maps attempted to visualise potential networks for recursive circulation, demonstrating the specificity of each project's circulatory needs. The digital handbook presented the seminar's key lessons in a format designed to be shareable and accessible to external viewers. Students worked collaboratively to collect and design this handbook using a shared online space, and the result is as much a reflection of the space of its creation as the intention of its makers. A key understanding gained from the discussion was about the intersectional nature of artistic production in digital spaces, in which considerations grow more complex as the maker's ambitions also grow. The process of circulation was divided into several

separate elements and each was initially discussed as discrete topics, but it became clear that each consideration was contingent on others. It was not possible, for example, to consider the interface design without also considering the audience it hopes to serve, while both required the maker to understand their desired impact. Students also observed at various points that the intention of artistic production is traditionally held distinct from communication design, which leads to tensions in situating these considerations within an artistic practice.

As this paper will demonstrate, the workshop highlighted the need for an expanded consideration of these themes in photographic education and the need for makers to reframe their treatment of these spaces. It also revealed a surprisingly rich set of vernacular conventions and embodied knowledge surrounding the use, avoidance and perception of a range of social media tools, which could form a useful point of departure for any educator interested in working with students to further explore the affordances of digital spaces or incorporate these concerns into their teaching practice. Even though the class was an elective whose conversation focused on expanding digital circulation, many students demonstrated a skepticism about using advertising-led spaces as publishing avenues for sensitive work. At several points the discussion returned to the need to treat digital spaces as an additional form of publication rather than one which replaces traditional forms of circulation, particularly in the absence of economic structures which support the production of such work.