

## **Lost and Found**

In my paper, photographs of lost and found items function as placeholders to open an inquiry into human agency within photography and different contemporary image making systems. Images circulate through time and space, across contexts, via digital networks and between people. What is lost and what is found in the hybrid world consisting of material, concrete reality as well as ephemeral representations and algorithm-directed image flows?

A few years ago, I received an e-mail with an attachment of a collection photographs of lost and found items from a school that my child briefly attended. The array of photographs of mittens, hoodies, woolly hats and umbrellas put together form a series of images reminiscent of a conceptual artwork, or alternatively an instrumental dataset used to train artificial intelligence. The images were aesthetically pleasing. The photographs were taken in a precise, determined way: to clearly show what kind of item was to be collected from the school. And the items were categorised: hoodies on their own, a regimented row of gloves in one frame, a constellation of scarves. Nevertheless, the seemingly rigid visual system had flaws: some photographs were too tightly cropped, or the same clothes could be seen in more than one image. There was a sense of a hasty, human touch.

In their objective to show a specific item in a clear manner these photographs are not meant in any way to create an illusion, to emulate an experience nor do they aim to be artistic. In that sense, they are very similar to image data that can be used to train AI object recognition (Wasielowski, 2024). Yet, beyond mere object recognition, the lost and found photographs are more than pictures. They point to material reality, present acts between people and take part in maintenance by mending gaps: bringing people together with their belongings. These photographs attest to the crucial link between the material and the virtual. We can give AI prompts about creating images, but we cannot provide it with embodied experience.

My research objective is to place lost and found photography in the contexts of maintenance, repair and care work (Dekker, 2022; Graham & Thrift, 2007; Mattern, 2018). Like maintenance work, lost and found photography seems to exist under the radar of critical attention, as it, being instrumental and mundane, is not a subject for aesthetic consideration, and on the other hand its effects are not grand or spectacular. Lost and found items are superfluous, they are the debris of someone being in one place and then moving to another site. Photographing them does not produce anything new or noteworthy. However, this kind of photography has significance in people's lives and to an extent in the industrial world and circular economy. As it turns out, there exists applications and websites such as *bounte.net*, *Troov*, or *eOmistaja* that address the need for businesses and institutions like hotels to make their lost and found services more efficient. However, these apps only make the work easier but can't remove the human labour of actually finding and recording the lost item. This works as a reminder of how many imaging technologies that seem automated rely on human labour (Burbridge, 2022; Crawford, 2021).

This line of inquiry relies on what could be called the pointing effect of photographs. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes wrote that "a photograph --- is never distinguished from its referent"

(Barthes, 1981, p. 5). The evidentiary value of photographs; showing something literal has significance in the present day, even though the truth value of documentary photography is debatable, and computer-generated images contest the indexicality of photographs. These photographs tell of an act of taking a photograph and sharing it for others to see. They stand for labour; someone working in maintenance had placed the items on the floor and taken a photograph. They represent a performative act: photographs created after an instruction, a method used by conceptual artists starting from the 1960s (Iversen, 2010), and a gesture that artist and writer Jane Birkin links with archivists' work (Birkin, 2021). In addition, these acts are performative in the sense that they create actual effects in the world (Bolt, 2016).

I will present the 40+ lost and found photographs as a slideshow and use them as a prompt for a poetic exploration of the differences, contingencies and overlappings of computer-generated images, training datasets, mundane smartphone photography and conceptual art. I treat photography as something that is simultaneously practical, mundane, aesthetic and performative. I will bring these different aspects into confluence to eventually raise questions about the relationship between automation of imaging, and automation of care work.

**Keywords:** instrumental photography, conceptual art, performativity, maintenance, care

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