



Visual Blogs

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Different mediums evoke different ways of viewing. While we might gaze at a painting, we watch television and we see films. The Internet, however, we tend to glance^[1] at; our eyes skim over the screen in a freefall of vision until something interests us enough to pause the plummet momentarily. It is therefore a medium that requires readily accessible information; lean news, pared-down narratives.

Weblogs - or blogs - arrived^[2], and filled this need. Native to the Internet and personal in approach, weblogs deliver bite-sized portions of information on a daily basis to an ever expanding audience. Weblogs are the conjunctions of the Internet: the *ands*, the *buts* the *ors* -- they add to online conversations, refute them, or provide new perspectives altogether. They are such a successful medium that current figures estimate blog numbers to be in the millions^[3]. This poses a dilemma: with so many blogs to choose from, how do we, as readers, know which ones to view? And as bloggers, how do we explain, as quickly as possible, who we are and what our blog is about? One way is through the use of imagery.

If we think of weblogs as being "homepage[s] that we wear"^[4] then it is the visual elements that tailor the garment to fit the individual. One blogger may add a [title image](#) to the top of their blog, or insert a photo of [herself](#) in the about page. Another may take an "off the rack" template from Blogger and replace it with a visual style of [her own](#). It is often images that present the most immediately obvious point of difference between one blog and the next.

This paper focuses on the use of figurative photography and illustration within the blogging medium. It examines the ways images shape and alter how we view blogs and how blogs shape and alter the way we view the images placed within them. It suggests that ultimately both images and the weblogs that contain them stand to benefit from the relationship.

Being Public, Privately

The Internet feels like an intimate space. We tend to view it on our own, and up close; the computer screen is like a face, watching us as we work. The weblog format propagates this sensation; the first person narrative with its confiding tone can make us feel that we are partaking in a one-on-one exchange.

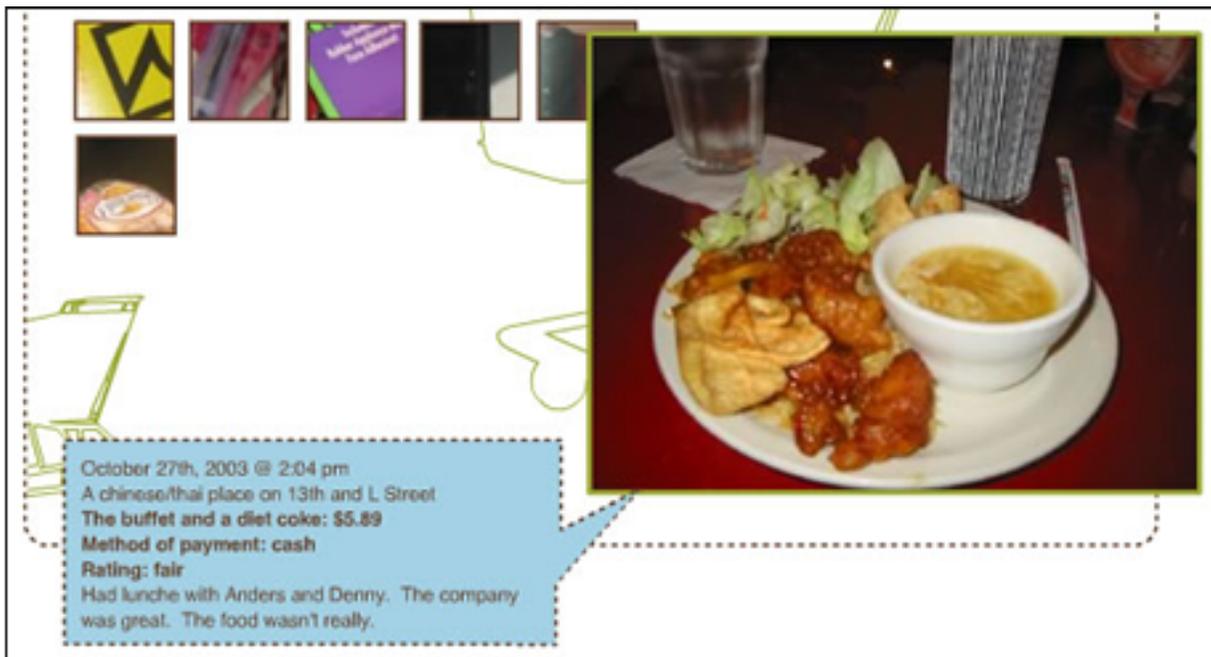
Weblogs occupy a dichotomous position. They wish to stand out and present an individual voice, but they also want to fit into the genre of weblogs - to be instantly recognisable as being part of a community. Weblogs, as Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker observe, are forever hovering on the border between public and private.^[5]

When we encounter images in weblogs the sense of entering a private space is enhanced, particularly as weblog images often reveal information about the blogger, either intentionally or by accident. Some weblogs include an image of the blogger at the top of the page and we carry this face in our minds as we read the text. Is the blogger young or old? Male or female? What nationality? The information imparted by the blogger's photograph inevitably influences how we react to the words that surround it.

Often, however, the images contained within blogs do not show the blogger at all but we can still construct an impression of who the blogger is based on the subject matter they choose. Viewed over time, photographs in weblogs create a composite image of the blogger, a portrait that builds incrementally.

Heather Champ's photo-blog [hchamp](#), for instance, rarely includes pictures of herself. Nonetheless, an impression of Champ is formed as we notice themes emerging in her work. She has an eye for [stripey leg-wear](#) in a crowd. She notices [dogs](#) and the [surfaces](#) of [things](#). She likes [pink](#) and [red](#) and lives in a place where the sky is often [blue](#). These are small details, of course, but the focus of photo-blogs is often less on the big events in a person's life -- the sweeping vistas and formal portraits -- and more on the small moments and details, the fleeting impressions that often characterise the text of blogs as well. The viewers of a photo-blog like Hchamp may well feel that they have been invited to accompany the blogger as they go about their daily business.

This impression of "walking with the blogger" is also evident in [Obsessive Consumption](#) - an art site created by Kate Bingaman. It pivots, blog-like, around a daily posting of images depicting recent purchases by Bingaman. We may actually feel like we are walking behind the blogger rather than with her, peering over her shoulder as she eats her dinner, goes out, or shops. The photos are presented not as high-art objects but matter-of-factly, the unadorned "evidence" of a life being lived. Each image is like a small confession, presented up for the viewer to judge: "Did I spend my money wisely?" This sense of intimacy makes us feel that Bingaman is confiding in us, and the audience connects with the author over common purchases, feeling that they know her because they know what she buys. [↩](#)



<http://www.obsessiveconsumption.com/front.html>: Oct 27, 2003

In both of the hchamp and Obsessive Consumption we feel that the bloggers allowed us into their worlds, yet there is still a comfortable distance between blogger and audience. The bloggers achieve this balance between revelation and privacy by rarely becoming the subject of the photographs themselves.

Illustrations in weblogs may initially appear to be less revelatory than photographs, as the artist controls the amount and types of detail included. Yet if we look at a site like James Kochalka's [American Elf](#) we can see how illustrations, particularly those paired with text can actually create a very strong sense of intimacy. The daily comics on American Elf present the large and small occurrences in the life of Kochalka, his friends and family. The comic feels autobiographical and real events are depicted, such as the birth of Kochalka's son in 2003. The serialised nature of the format adds to this. Each day a new comic is posted, a little more information is imparted and the audience has the sense that they are following the lives of actual people in real time.

Yet Kochalka mediates this sense of revelation by introducing elements of visual fiction -- he draws himself as an elf, for instance, and his lawyer friend, Jason, appears as a dog. It seems unlikely that this is done to protect identities as Kochalka does not use a "realistic" drawing style and it is not done to affect the narrative -- Kochalka as an elf has no magical powers and Jason never complains about how difficult it is for dogs in the legal profession. Perhaps then this fictionalisation has been introduced for another purpose: to create a distance between the artist and his audience. Once the fiction has been established it frees the artist to discuss personal details more frankly than he may have otherwise felt able to do, especially within a diaristic format. The shift into fiction reminds the audience that is a version of reality and not a literal portrayal.



<http://www.americanelf.com>

The blog format is one that encourages self-exposure and revelation; personal information about the blogger is imparted in a similar way to how it is revealed in most relationships; a little more with each meeting. Images give us information about the blogger that text alone may not impart in the same way that our gestures and expressions may give away things about us not revealed by our speech. Sometimes, of course, the primary purpose of the visual blog is to reveal -- this is particularly true of the bride blog format where a written description of how lovely the bride's dress is cannot match a photograph of the dress itself. Revelation in the bride blog context is expected - the blog is intended to be viewed by a specific audience known to the blogger and who require this kind of detail. For the blogs such as American Elf, hchamp and Obsessive Consumption, however, the audience is largely unknown to the blogger, and as such the artists wish to create a balance between the revelatory, intimate aspect of the medium and maintaining a degree of separation between themselves and their viewers.

Words and Images

When images appear in blogs they usually do so in conjunction with some form of text; the weblogs mentioned so far exemplify different ways through which this interaction can occur. [Hchamp](#) uses words minimally, as captions for the images or links to other sites. [Obsessive Consumption](#) uses words to describe her photographs: what is depicted, how much the items cost, where the picture was taken, a rating for how successful the purchase was. The words in the [American Elf](#) comics are intrinsically linked to the images; without them, the narrative would be almost impossible to interpret.

There are also bloggers like [Kevin Sites](#) who use words and images similar to the way we see them paired in newspapers and on television news. Sites is a solo-journalist currently stationed in Iraq who uses photos to illustrate and give weight to his words, anchoring them to a specific time and place. Sites often intersperses long passages of text with images, which act like stepping stones, drawing the eye further down the page and deeper into the narrative. The following images were taken during a night raid that Sites attended with the 101st Airborne 1st Battalion in November last year. They appear on the site in an unbroken sequence:





www.kevinsites.net: November 5, 2003

We can glean a great deal of information from these images about the events that took place during the raid: this is a tense, wartime situation -- the battalion has come to a local house, looking for someone or something. The men have been separated from the women and children. A man lies flat on the ground, with a foot on his back; his expression is curiously passive, or defeated. Another man stands in the corner looking small, vulnerable and almost child-like compared to the tall soldier pointing a machine gun at him.

If we looked at these images without reading the text by Sites that follows them we might assume that Sites is empathising solely with the Iraqis. But the text adds further information. Sites, we discover, has spent some time with the soldiers, knows their names, has asked for their opinion on what is happening around them:

"I looked around town today," one lieutenant told me, "I was hoping to find someone doing something bad, somebody I could hurt -- but there wasn't one. Just people that needed my help."

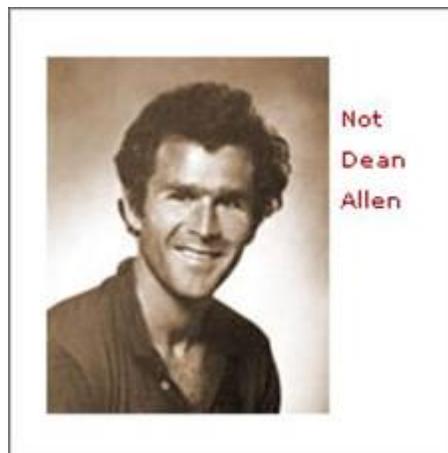
It's just that kind of mission whiplash that has confused and demoralized so many troops in Iraq. Soldiers are ordered to go on night patrols or raids--where danger can lurk at every corner or behind every door -- and life and death decisions have to be made within the hair-fraction of time it takes to pull the trigger on M4 assault weapon -- then the next day they're told to monitor the selection of a new local mayor or to rebuild a school."^[2]

Sites' reportage gives a slightly different perspective from that of the photographs and suggests that both Sites' and the soldiers' feelings about the situation are not as clear cut as we may have assumed by looking at the images alone.

This linking of words and images to recount news is not unusual of course, but what is unique about the blog form of photo-journalism is that it expresses the vision and viewpoint of a single person. It is the blogger who has taken the photographs, written the text and published the words. He or she hasn't had to answer to an editor, a department head, or to the whims of the people who own the media outlets, yet they may have a daily readership numbering in the thousands. Blogging connects the person who has witnessed the event directly to their audience; the infrastructure that is usually required to get a story published is simply not needed with blogging. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that while working for CNN.com Kevin Sites was asked to stop posting on his blog.^[8]

The counterbalance of words and images that we observe in Kevin Sites' blog also occurs in Dean Allen's [Textism](#). The writing in this blog is often [biting](#) and [acerbic](#) and may leave us fervently hoping never to be the object of the blogger's scorn, yet the impression we build up of Allen is as much informed by the daily, affectionate images that he posts of his [two dogs](#) cavorting around the French countryside as it is by the text. Were Allen a political commentator in a newspaper it is unlikely that we would know about this dog-loving aspect of the writer. The blog medium is one that allows disparate elements and contrasting styles to co-exist harmoniously, rubbing up against each other and influencing the way we respond to the other elements contained there. It is hard to think of another publishing medium that creates such a successful blending of tone, style as well as the public and private aspects of the one person.

Clearly then, images can affect how we read blogs and blogs can alter the way we react to images. So seductive, in fact, is this word/image/blog combination that it can sometimes lead us astray. The image on Allen's [About](#) page is of a young George Bush, yet Allen has had to write "Not Dean Allen" next to it, perhaps tiring of people believing it was him. The viewers' confusion is not surprising; we are so familiar with seeing the formula of a portrait shot accompanying text from newspaper or magazine editorials that it is difficult not to assume that the photo depicts the author.



<http://www.textism.com/about/>

The Kaycee Nicole hoax of 2000 similarly reveals the power that images can have in verifying blog texts even when the text itself is false. The Living Colours blog, ostensibly written by a cancer patient, included pictures of a pretty young girl -- purportedly the author of the blog. The

pictures gave the words credibility, and made the viewers feel as if they knew the blogger. Kaycee's diary became well known and when her death was reported many readers grieved. The blog was subsequently revealed to be a fake, and when the girl in the photographs was recognised and contacted, she knew nothing of the weblog or how her image was being used.^[1]



<http://www.logboy.com/jr/kaycee/BKhoop.jpg>

Why do images have such a powerful effect on words in blogs? Perhaps it's because there is nothing else there to act as a means of verification. We tend to trust, rightly or wrongly, that newspapers and television networks value their reputations too much to allow deceptions of the Kaycee Nicole scale to occur (although, of course, there have been recent incidents of fictional characters slipping into reportage^[10]). We assume that newspapers and television stations have the staff and structure to ensure that the images they present to us do in fact represent the words. Journalists and writers in the public eye have reputations they wish to maintain, but with blogs there is generally no masthead, no tv logo, no publishing house reputation standing behind the words and consequently, no proof that the blogger is who they claim to be. All we have is the text describing the images and the images vouching for the words.

Reproduced Images and the Weblog Context

Prior to the invention of mechanical reproduction, images were strongly linked to a sense of place. To see an image, we had to travel to where it was displayed. Photographic reproduction allowed artwork to be removed from its original context and made it transportable; the image was now able to access places where the original would have been unable to go^[11]. This is clearly true of images on the Internet, where a single photograph can be simultaneously viewed by many people all over the world. There is, however, a price to pay for this malleability. Benjamin writes that the "aura" of a work of art withers when its ties to "place" are severed and it becomes detached from "the domain of tradition."^[12] In addition to this, as Andrew Darley points out, the ability to easily reproduce images can make the work seem less precious^[13], its status as "unique" is called into question by the presence of the reproduction.

Weblogs, it could be argued, help to re-establish the connection between image and place. When we look at a blog image we also look at what appears around it -- the design of the blog itself, the text, the other images, the voice of the blogger. The context within which we view an image will always influence how we read it - we react one way to an image in a gallery and another way when we see it printed on a tea-towel. The weblog context is one of directness and immediacy and as such when we view images on weblogs with do so with an awareness of the date-stamp that accompanies them. Visiting a regularly updated visual blog is like being invited back to the blogger's studio and we may see the images as being part of a process. We may be shown rough sketches that lead on to a finished piece. We might be given links to other artists who have influenced the work. The blogger might describe the thinking behind a piece, what has worked, what they'd do differently next time. The images become linked in the mind of the audience to the circumstances surrounding its creation and as such, intrinsically linked to the blog itself.

Claire Robertson's weblog [Looby Lu](#) exemplifies this "showing the steps along the way" approach. Recently, Robertson posted a sketch for some dolls she was making, along with links to artists who had helped to inspire the idea. The initial post was followed some time later by photos of some of the finished pieces, along with descriptions of the process undertaken to make them.





"So I started off with some little drawings for ideas for felt doll monsters (very big hat tip to Maurice Sendak and the super cool [Kaori Kasi](#)). They looked simple enough to stitch together quickly...

And then I got around to making one up ready for a birthday this week... and discovered it's not so simple and I should have made a pattern and I almost forgot the arms. They were added on at the last minute and are accidentally way too long. So now it's "Mr Huggy - the Hugging Monster". I am a rather ad-hoc crafting type. I like to fly by the seat of my pants and thank my lucky stars that monsters are quite strange looking at the best of times."

<http://www.looby.lu.com/archives/000174.html#000174>

The images on Looby Lu have an obvious and immediate appeal which increases as the audience becomes familiar with the blog and the voice of the blogger. The Looby Lu regulars are not unknown visitors passing through a gallery; they engage with the blogger, leave words of encouragement and advice in her comments, watching as sketches develop into finished pieces. Any of Robertson's images can, and do, stand alone, but within the blog context a new, rich element is added: the image's backstory.

The link between image and place on weblogs is further illustrated by the way news of visual weblogs is stored and spread. If we find an image we like on a weblog we might save a copy to our hard-drive, but we are just as likely to bookmark the address so we can visit it again in its original context. To show others, we may forward the address on to them, so that they too can see the image in relation to what appears around it on the blog.

Quotation

An image from one blog is sometimes displayed or "quoted" within the body of another. This may initially appear to threaten the image's ties with place: it has been removed from its intended

context and is now in danger of being associated with another URL. Yet quotation can in fact strengthen an image's bond with its place of origin when it occurs in conjunction with linking. Most bloggers, when quoting images, will either link the image itself back to the original context or will provide the original URL beneath it.

The quoted image is often accompanied by a written recommendation from the blogger who is doing the quoting as a way of alerting their readers to a site they enjoy. If the viewer is interested in the image they will follow the link to see if there are more images (perhaps it is part of a sequence) or to see what else is on the site. The borders on both blogs involved are loosened and extended by the act of quotation: one by allowing images from another blog to appear within its framework, the other by having its contents appear before a new audience in a new context. The quoted image within the weblog context is therefore not just a way to attract attention to a page but is symbolic of the way that blogs continually glance around the blogosphere, forming connections with others while progressing along their own paths.



http://www.mandarindesign.com/2003_10_01_archive.html, November 25, 2003

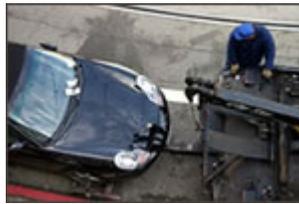
The image above was constructed after Meg from [Mandarin Design](#) asked her readers who they would bring to a "tech prom" and why. With each nomination Meg added an image of the nominated blogger to the square and linked it back to their site. Rolling over each square produced an ALT tag description of why the blogger was nominated. The resulting image acted as a visual directory to blogs enjoyed by other bloggers.

Unstable Images, Serialised

Blogs not only shape the way we view individual images but they also influence how we read one image in relation to others within the blog context. Images are unstable. Even before the age of mechanical reproduction, how we reacted to them depended on who we were and the circumstances surrounding the viewing. Images on the Internet are further destabilised -- their appearance changes depending on the browser, platform or monitor on which they are viewed.

Images within weblogs become stable when we think of them as being part of a series. The format provides more than just a convenient repository for digital material -- weblogs bring with them the implicit understanding that the images not be viewed alone, but considered in relation to what has come before and what follows. Thus the emphasis in weblogs is less on individual images and more about series. The following sequence is from hchamp and tells the story of a car being towed from a no-parking area:





The series reads like a time-lapse sequence, with each image divulging a fraction more information than the previous one. The humour of the piece and its success as a narrative depends on the audience reading each image in relation to the others.

The car series provides an example of a deliberately constructed sequence, but multi-level narratives can form between images on blogs even when they were not intentionally constructed. Take an individual image from hchamp, for instance:



www.hchamp.com: Oct 18, 2003

The image could depict a number of situations. Perhaps someone has dropped the pillow on the step during the process of moving house. Perhaps it's been put there as a bed for a pet. Maybe someone has been sitting on it while waiting for a bus. The next day, however, Champ has posted an image of a pair of boots also resting on a step and this may make us start to think that both the boots and the pillow belong to someone who has spent the night on this step. A link has formed between the two images.



www.hchamp.com: Oct 1--, 2003

The two images look like they have been taken at the same site on the same day, so perhaps the narrative that forms between them is unsurprising.

The image that appears the next day, however, has a very different look:



www.hchamp.com: Oct 20, 2003

How do we interpret this image? We could read it on its own, as an image of two policeman. We could see it as building on the composite portrait we have of Heather Champ herself; where she

lives, the things that catch her eye as subject matter for her photographs. We could look back over her archives and compare this shot with others taken with her pinhole camera. We could, however, choose to see it as continuing the narrative started by the shot of the pillow -- perhaps this is the story of a runaway, sleeping on the streets until he finds somewhere more permanent. Maybe the boots are a recent discovery and a prized possession. If we continue this line of thought then the third shot might change from depicting two policemen waiting patiently for a pinhole photograph to be taken and becomes instead a slightly menacing image of a potential source of conflict as seen through the eyes of someone who doesn't want to be recognised.

Clearly, it is not necessary that we look for the relationships between sequential images on blogs and often any attempt to do so would be forced. But sometimes lines of narratives may occur to us out of the blue, purely because of the way that weblogs present one image before or after another. Presenting images in sequences is something that blogs do very well and recalls Scott McCloud's description of comics as being based on the simple idea of "placing one picture after another to show the passage of time." The difference between the two formats, of course, is that while we are meant to find a relationship between individual panels in a comic, we are not necessarily intended to do so with images on a blog. Yet as McCloud points out with comics^[14], it is the space between images where things start to happen, where the viewer constructs bridges between one image and the next, filling the gaps, making the connections.

Conclusions

We live in an image-hungry society -- screens are embedded into aeroplane chairs, phones double as cameras. Images compel us to look at them and their message is instant, unlike text which requires some time and effort on our part. Consequently, where images and words compete, the consensus is generally to go with the image, as "It's the image they'll remember the next day, and the next week and possibly for the rest of their lives."^[15]

Does this mean that future weblogs should favour image over text? To do so would be to the detriment of the medium as it is the combination of words and images presented over time that make the visual blog what it is. Yet the contributions that images can make within weblogs should not be underestimated -- they act as a way of catching our attention and turning a glance into a sustained appraisal but as the examples discussed in this paper show, images are more than mere decoration. A rapport is quickly established between images and words in weblogs where one supports and enhances the other. If blogging continues to develop as it currently is -- with images becoming an increasingly common element, it seems reasonable to expect that visual blogging will evolve from being a subset of the phenomenon and will strike out on its own -- a medium in its own right. It is already possible to see this happening with the development of the video weblog, or "vlog." The vlog, which may require the viewer to get plug-ins and which work best with fast connections may appear to be a move away from the simplicity and accessibility that underpins the blogging ethos, but it should perhaps be considered as a way of subdividing the burgeoning possibilities offered by the medium, creating areas of speciality.

What is interesting to note about the vlog is the awareness that the vloggers have about each others' work and the information that is shared. As these ties strengthen we may expect to see collaborative experiments emerging on and around visual blogs between artists who have never have come in contact with each others' work if not for weblogs.

There are other applications for visual blogs that are already beginning to emerge and will almost definitely be explored further in the near future. Artists may be invited to keep guest blogs on gallery websites to coincide with real-world exhibitions of their work, blog "curators" may invite artists to hold online shows within their own blog where a new exhibit is added each day.

Future visual bloggers increasingly will have to contend with the negative aspects of the medium. Theft of online images is easy, for instance and copyright is difficult to police. Publishing your work in an online diary creates pressures for the blogger to make work regularly and consistently, whether they are inspired to do so or not. It brings with it the possibility of negative feedback, either through the comments function or simply through lack of visitors. Yet these drawbacks will always be balanced by what is offered to artists by blogging -- a direct line of contact with their audience; an audience limited only by access to computers, not dependant on the whims of printers, curators, editors, distributors.

Visual weblogs present a new aspect of visual literacy grammar, where images must be read in direct relation to the passage of time and as indivisible from the personality of the blogger themselves. Visual blogs show the process; *how I got there* rather than *what I saw once I arrived*. It is this aspect of visual blogs that make them a useful tool for pedagogy; they become a tool for examining how images operate online and how they interact with text. Visual weblogs are a starting point for debate and discussion. They emphasise the present tense -- this is what I saw today, this is how things look to me from where I stand right now.

[1] "Glancing is a strategy in the arsenal of blindness, a way of skipping over the surface of the world and taking in almost nothing." James Elkins. 1----- . *The Object Stares Back*. NY: A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc. 207

[2] Rebecca Blood in her essay '[Weblogs: A History and Perspective](#)' suggests that the explosion in weblog numbers happened in 1-----, but that blogs had been in existence for a couple or years prior to this.

[3] Current estimates of blog numbers vary. Blogcount estimates that there were roughly 2.4 to 2.-- million active weblogs as of June 2003. The [Perseus Development Corp](#) estimated that there would be five million hosted blogs by the end of 2003. However, blog abandonment rates are high; their survey suggesting that there are at least 2.72 million hosted blogs that have been either permanently or temporarily abandoned.

[4] Tom Coates. 2003. '(Weblogs and) The Mass Amateurisation of (Nearly) Everything' *Plastic Bag*, 03/0--/03: "The weblog is the homepage that we wear."

[5] Torill Mortensen & Jill Walker, 2002. 'Bloggng Thoughts: Personal Publishing as Online Research Tool'*Jill/txt*. 25--

[--] Pete Dulin. 2003. 'What Did You Buy Today?' Interview with Kate Bingman, *Juicy Magazine*:

I think that viewers of my project might feel like they know who I am by what movies I watch, what books I read, what music I buy, and through what I eat.

[7] Kevin Sites, 2003. 'Hearts and Mines (Part 1)' *Kevin Sites Blog November 5 2003*

[8] Susan Mernit, 2003. 'Kevin Sites and the Blogging Controversy' *Online Journalism Review* April 3 2003

On March 20, Sites got the word that the CNN brass wanted him to discontinue posting. "Covering a war for CNN and its 35 international networks is a full-time job," said CNN spokesperson Edna Johnson. "We've asked Kevin to concentrate on that for the time being."

[--] Dianne Lynch, 2000. 'Not Dead: Beautiful Cancer 'Victim' Only in Mind's Eye' *ABCNews.com*:

And those charming snapshots of "Kaycee"? They're photographs of one of Swenson's former neighbours, a young, beautiful blond -- and very much alive -- woman who until two weeks ago had no idea she was being represented as someone else.

[10] In 1----8 Boston Globe columnist Patricia Smith resigned from the paper after admitting to fabricating people and quotes in four of her articles. She is quoted in CNN.com on June 1--, 1----8 as saying:

From time to time in my metro column, to create the desired impact or slam home a salient point, I attributed quotes to people who didn't exist I could give them names, even occupations, but I couldn't give them what they needed the most -- a heartbeat.

This followed the confession by Stephen Glass earlier in the same year that he had fabricated 27 of 41 articles he wrote for The New Republic magazine.

[11] Walter Benjamin, 1--35. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. [online at http://pixels.filmstv.ucla.edu/gallery/web/julian_scaff/benjamin1.html]

[12] Walter Benjamin, 1--35.

[13] Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture*. London and New York: Routledge. 125

[14] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* New York: Kitchen Sink Press.

[15] Don Watson, *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, Sydney: Knopf. --2

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