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Citation

Fogarty, B. L. (2024). TikTok and the politics of photographic time. *Current Anthropology*, 65(2), 382-383. doi:10.1086/729538

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

TikTok and the Politics of Photographic Time

Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela

Gone are the days when a long wait followed the act of photography. The time of photography—be it stills or film—was once closely hinged to its means of production, its major obstacle construed as the wait. Whether waiting for the emulsion chemistry to do its magic or the original act of waiting for the “decisive moment,” to wait was part of the photographic ritual. The awaited photograph—that deferred object of attachment that accrues affect and value as it withholds itself from our gaze’s grasp—has long been central to photography. Historically, the bottleneck of its production necessitated the wait—be it to hold the photograph in our hands or to experience the sequence on screen.

Digitalization turned the photographic wait on its head. The rituals of production now relegated to an afterthought, photography centers consumption—the shoot itself far shorter than the “Let me see it!” act of consumption ensuing shortly thereafter.¹ Concomitantly, the wait inverted into a negative of itself as photography became characterized by acceleration.

Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok each index time and its acceleration by name. At a design and technical level, each proffers ease, each speeds up time. Each is tethered to a particular politics of time, in which faster is better. Darkroom developing, the norm for photography merely a few decades ago, is nearly unthinkable under such acceleration. So, too, has editing—once a respected domain of time-consuming expertise—given way to filters, AI apps, and auto buttons. Indeed, such acceleration dealt a death blow to the figure of the still photographer. Their primary role—that of clicking the shutter at the decisive moment—has been put to rest. With the introduction of Live Photos,² the camera takes a short video, and the cameraperson later selects a still from dozens of possible frames. New platforms such as TikTok have ruled out the still photograph altogether, replacing it with the engagement of short videos. The photographic “event” now takes place across a continuum; the timely shot has transformed into a constant spray.

1. While this essay was originally conceived of as a commentary on photography in the sense of still photography, its insights apply to photography broadly construed, namely, cinematography and photography.

2. Live Photos are the iOS version of this tool, one that exists with similar names in other operating systems.

While such platforms and tools are pitched as tools to accelerate production, their driving force lies elsewhere. The business model advanced by tech giants such as TikTok and others is to accelerate the consumption of content, where the wait for production is replaced with the duration of consumption. The more scrolling and liking, the more user data and corporate advertising revenue. As such, producing photography on such platforms is overshadowed by anticipating how it is going to be consumed; similarly, what would have formerly been a wait to be able to consume the products of photography has now turned into additional time to consume them.

Such a politics of accelerated time demotes long-standing art forms—photographers, cinematographers, sound editors, and printmakers—to today’s umbrella category of “content creators,” paid to constantly and rapidly produce media in order to secure a share of consumption time within what has been called the “attention economy” (Bueno 2016; Odell 2020).

But in spite of these developments, much like Maus’s (2000) gift, which builds a “hau” of expectation for reciprocation over time, so, too, does the wait for the photograph continue to generate a distinct sort of experience. In the end, at the core of photography is a play on time. A juxtaposition of past and present. Delayed gratification.

While accelerated consumption—Snaps, Instas, and TikToks—has driven the development of photography amid digitalization, the wait is still crucial to the politics of photographic time. After all, photography bears the strongest affective blow when we least expect it, that is, when it has withheld itself from us over time and is suddenly brought back, in a flash (Benjamin 2020), into our experience. Such increasingly rare, intimate experiences of photography remind us of the multitudes, past and present, that have born their traces upon our fragile, present self. It is the wait that endows photography with the force of collapsing past and present, subject and object, if momentarily. This happens to me, for example, when I see the photograph of a deceased loved one, of an estranged friend, or of a younger self.

Such harvests of withheld photography, historically relegated to solitary experiences with boxes of dusty prints or collective home video viewings with friends or family, are currently also at risk of capture by big tech through an ever-sophisticated production of “Memories” delivered on our

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smartphones in clockwork fashion. A far cry from the often alienating, hasty experience of consumption through scrolling, Memories lock on to our Achilles' heel, rehearsing again and again the payload of still photographs and videos withheld over time. As photographic archives are increasingly uploaded solely to the immaterial cloud, so, too, does our relationship to their production and consumption, to waiting and to immediacy, shift. Will photography be replaced by ever-accelerating media consumption? Will platforms like TikTok render the photographic still into relic?

It is the work of artists, scholars, and photographers like Camilo de Leon-Quijano (the winner of the 2023 Visual Anthropology Competition, whose images, also published in his recent photoethnographic book [Leon-Quijano 2023] are also featured on the covers of this year's *Current Anthropology* issues) and others, to continue to apprehend the power that photography holds over our lives. A long-awaited photograph can slow the world down to a thoughtful and emotive standstill. A well-placed video can vividly elicit past sensoriums.

Such experiences can provide the starting point for everyday sensibilities, affective structures, and critical engagement. So, too, can scroll-bait photography fuel a rabbit hole of cursorily engaged surfaces, ensnaring consumers in haphazard cycles of fleeting joy and painful estrangement. Such politics of photographic time are at the center of transformations brought to the art form at the intersection of media, technology, and capitalism in the twenty-first century.

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