

# Relocating Florence Weiss' fieldwork photography as anthropological practice

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# RELOCATING FLORENCE WEISS' FIELDWORK PHOTOGRAPHY AS ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE

**Text:** *Michèle Dick*  
**Pictures:** *Florence Weiss*

During her 17 months of fieldwork (1972-74) in the village of Palimbei in Papua New Guinea, the Swiss anthropologist Florence Weiss took 5 674 black and white negatives and 4 794 colour transparencies. Although the photographs were not taken at regular intervals, the average number of approximately 19 photographs per day gives an idea of the presence of photography in her fieldwork practice. Yet, Florence Weiss was not considered – or considered herself – a visual anthropologist. So, what kind of practice does her photography represent, and what role did it play in her wider fieldwork practice?

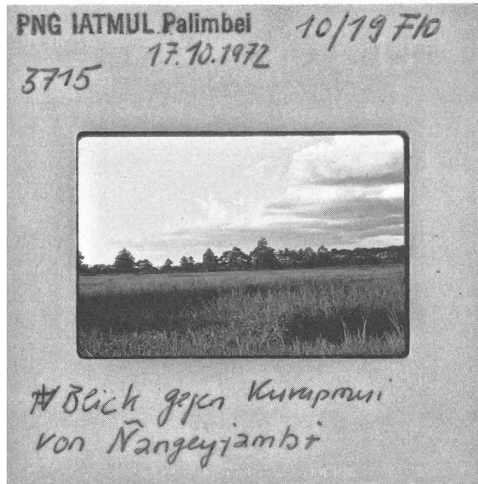
In a conversation in March 2015 Florence Weiss explained that «It was self-evident that anthropologists would take pictures and I don't know whether that ever stopped. If you do research in such a remote area, you will take pictures. I'm not aware of any anthropologist who didn't take pictures.» (Dick 2015:46, translation from German by the author). She exemplifies a generation of fieldworkers who started to use 35mm roll film cameras in a very specific, if yet unspecified, manner. Huge amounts of these photographs from ethnographic fieldwork in the late twentieth century – mostly regarded as supplementary records – are today lying idle in public and private archives. While the photographs in Weiss' publications generally act to illustrate her text, the entire photographic collection suggests a different perspective on fieldwork photography and its location within scientific research practices. It seems difficult to separate Weiss' photographic practice from the other practices and cognitive processes that led to her research outputs. Thus, this article reconsiders the role and location of fieldwork photography in ethnographic research. While the complex entanglements of digital photography have called for new approaches to photography that take the practice of taking pictures more closely into account, as part of wider

practices (Larsen 2013, Cruz 2016, Pink, et al. 2016), this article proposes a similar approach to analogue fieldwork photography. Going beyond photography as a representational and illustrative medium and considering photography as a practice in itself shifts attention to the very act of picture taking, its embeddedness in broader contexts and its interconnection to other practices.

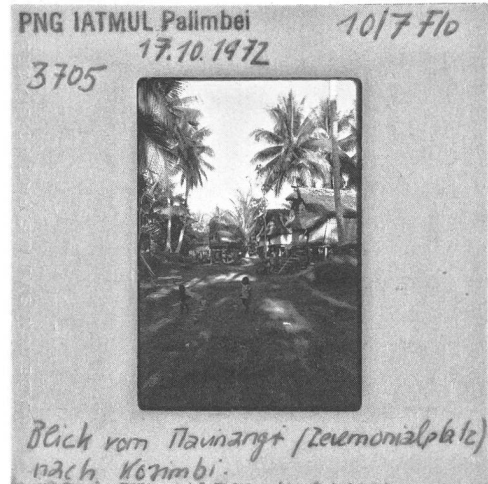
Conceptualizing Weiss' photography as a hybridized (Latour 1993), embodied (Larsen 2008) and routinized practice (Reckwitz 2002) may help in scrutinizing Weiss' analogue photography. By considering changes in frequency, framing and image content in her collection of colour transparencies, this article asserts that her photographic practice did not take place separately or detached from other observational activities, but was a recurrent and well-integrated way of engaging visually with her surroundings. As such, it influenced and altered her observational practices and, possibly, her vision of anthropological realities as well. While it is difficult to identify any clear interconnection between Weiss' photographic practice and her research outputs at the current stage of my research, this article nevertheless proposes understanding fieldwork photography not as a supplementary practice to anthropological fieldwork, but as being localized within central epistemological processes of ethnographic field research.

## The Sepik River expedition and Weiss' collection of colour transparencies

In 1972 Florence Weiss took part in an expedition to the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. Organized by the Ethnology Department at the University of Basel (Switzerland) and led by



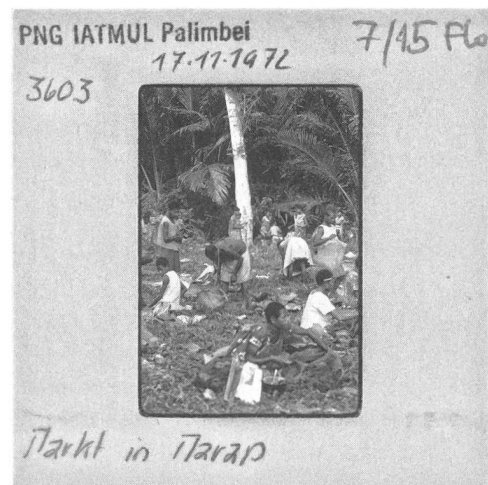
**Picture 1**  
*View from Nangey-yambi towards Kurupmui*



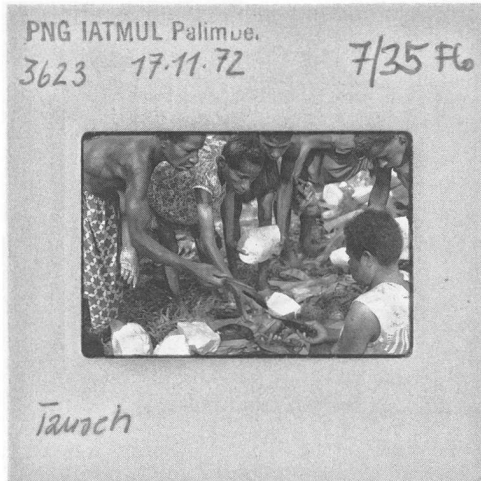
**Picture 2**  
*View from Marinangi (Ceremonial Square) towards Kosimbi*



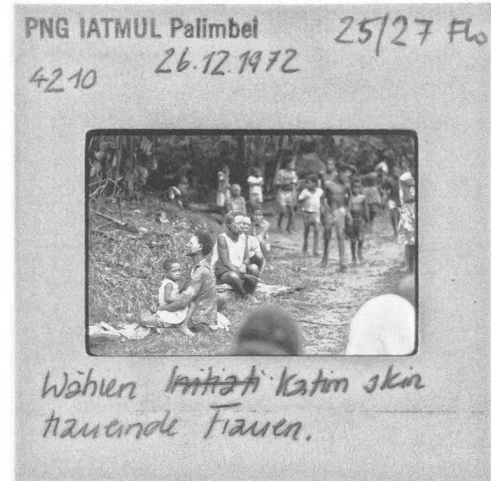
**Picture 3**  
*Ceremonial House: Payambit*



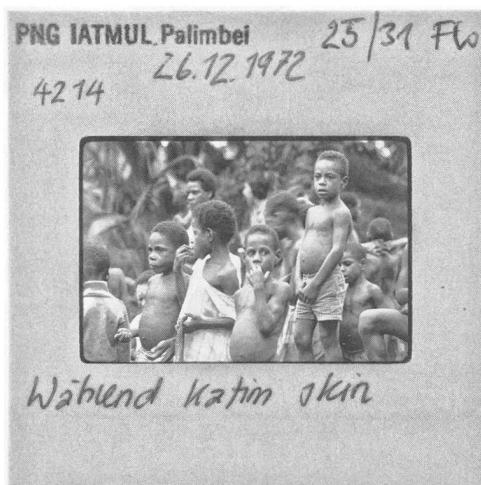
**Picture 4**  
*Market in Marap*



**Picture 5**  
*Exchange*



**Picture 6**  
*Mourning women during katim skin<sup>3</sup>*

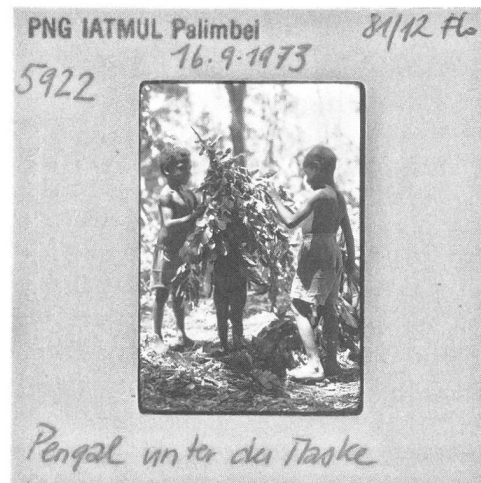


**Picture 7**  
*During katim skin*

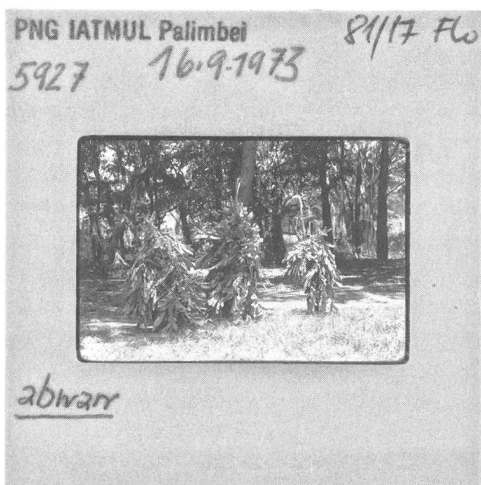
<sup>1</sup> *Katim skin* is the pidgin English term for the scarification that is performed as part of young men's initiation rituals. The mothers bemoaned being separated from their sons.



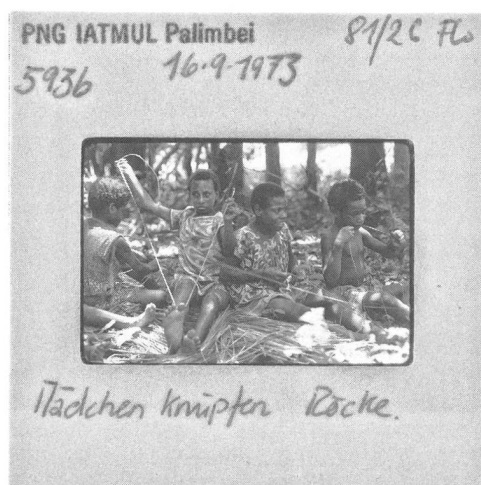
Picture 8  
*Kambugat tying a mask*



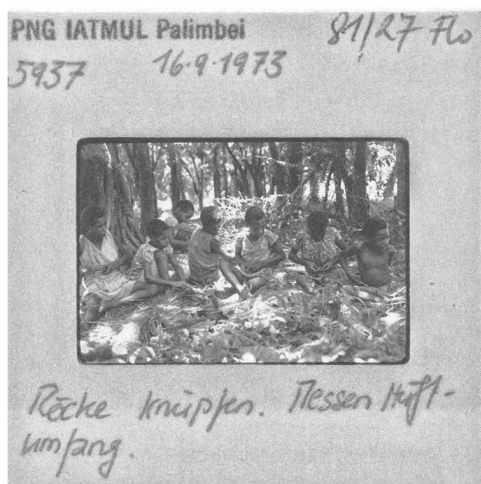
Picture 9  
*Pengal underneath the mask*



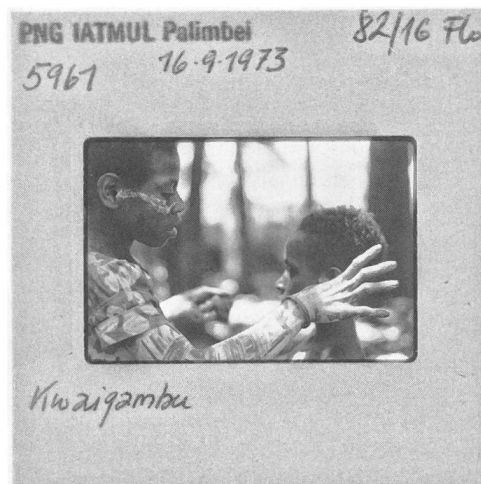
Picture 10  
*Abwan*



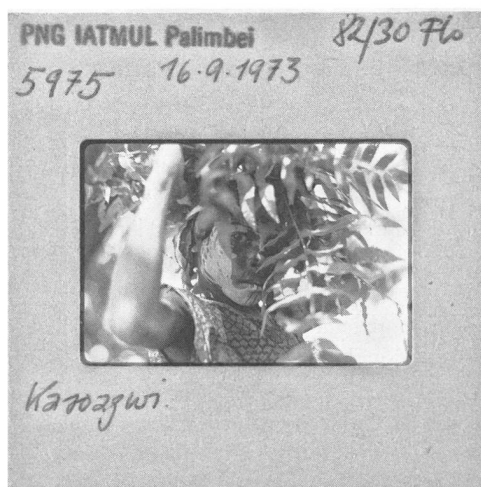
Picture 11  
*Girls knotting skirts*



**Picture 12**  
*Knotting skirts. Measuring hip sizes*



**Picture 13**  
*Kwaigambu*



**Picture 14**  
*Kasoagwi*

Professor Meinhard Schuster, six students were dispersed among different Iatmul villages. Together with her partner and colleague Milan Stanek, Weiss worked in the village of Palimbei and, from October 1972 until March 1974, she conducted fieldwork into childhood. By the end of her stay, she had begun to focus specifically on the question of how children were integrated into the village's economic system (Weiss 1981:11). As she described in her monograph and PhD thesis *«Kinder schildern ihren Alltag»* (Children describe their everyday lives), she collected the data to investigate this research question through interviews and conversations with adults and children alike, through participant observation and observation protocols (Weiss 1981:28-29). As I will show later in this article, her overall observational practices were regularly affected or modified by her observational practices through the photographic lens.

Each of the expedition's students was provided with a Minolta 35mm roll film camera for their field research. Weiss also took along her own Leica M3. Roll film, being the common medium in the 1970s, provided these anthropologists with relatively unrestricted photographic material. This enabled Weiss to develop her own routine and frequency of taking photographs. Her collection of colour transparencies, which is held by the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, sheds light on her photographic practices in the field, as every individual transparency carries a short caption and a date, which Florence Weiss added, in consultation with her photographic diary, when she returned to Switzerland. Reviewing this collection, one can see significant changes in terms of frequency, image content and framing during her stay in the village. Rather than being merely an illustrative practice that follows an understanding of a certain ethnographic reality, her collection brings forth the reconstruction of a practice that seems to have been closely intertwined with her evolving observational practices during her stay.<sup>2</sup>

### Two sets of photographs, two observational practices

Two sets of photographs give an idea of the major changes apparent in this collection of colour transparencies: one set of photographs from the beginning of her time in Palimbei and one set dating from towards the end of her stay. The collection

from her first few months indicates wider temporal gaps in her photographic practice. There were generally more days on which she did not take any photographs, along with more numerous images from the days when she did. While the photographs taken on a single day often covered one specific activity or topic, the contents of her images taken during her first months in general were more diverse.

The first set of photographs (pictures 1-7) originates from the first weeks of her stay. In this period, Weiss mainly took photographs of special events such as rituals, marriages and non-daily practices – such as accompanying women to the market or children to their irregular attendance of the school in Kapaimari – or general pictures of the landscape and the village's architecture. The framing indicates that Weiss, as an observer, stayed somewhat outside the occurrence: she tried to capture what she perceived to be important, based on her existing knowledge and on what she could access – both mentally and physically. Overall, she seemed to have been guided less by any specific topic than by the aim to gain an initial overview. Photography here not only reflects and documents this objective, but also seems to have provided her with a tool to cope with the various stimuli of her new surroundings. As a method for understanding and structuring the field through the photographic lens, photography helped her to capture a first impression and might have guided her observational practice. I will come back to the meaning of this observational photographic practice in more detail later. First though, it is important to note how Weiss completed the first phase of anthropological fieldwork – that is, obtaining an overview – not by observational practices alone, but accompanied by, and performed through the photographic lens.

Her initial photographic practice, characterized by long intervals and rather distant capturing and composition, started changing when, after a few months, she began to take photographs more regularly.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this change in frequency correlates with a change in image content and the way that she framed her subjects. From May 1973 onwards (after approximately 8 months) the pictures of her research subjects – children – became more frequent, with photographs being taken on more days and with shorter intervals between those days. This indicates a different regularity and routine in her photographic practice, correlating with an advance in her scientific focus.

<sup>2</sup> While this article focuses on the collection of Weiss' colour transparencies, some of my arguments will presumably also be applicable to her collection of black and white negatives. However, this is unconfirmed at the current stage of research.

<sup>3</sup> This may also partly be due to heavy rains that start in November and the high water level in the Sepik region that lasts until May. During this time of the year, solid ground becomes increasingly rare and, at one point, even non-existent. However, Weiss had already changed her practice slightly before the water levels started to recede.



The second set of photographs reproduced here (images 8-14) dates from 16 September 1973. On that particular day, Weiss accompanied the children into the forest, where they separated into gender-based groups in order to prepare for one of their own rituals. Weiss took 84 photographs on this occasion. A striking conclusion can be reached from examining this entire group of photographs – she not only *documented* the children's preparations for the ritual, but captured and interpreted them, both as individual skilful subjects and autonomous group, independent of the adults. Compared to the photographs from the beginning of her stay, she was now focusing more on details, choosing more close-up views and therefore leaving more things outside the frame. Her photography had become more decisive and determined but, at the same time, more intimate. Her framing was no longer that of an outsider, but of an inside observer.

### Weiss' photography as embodied and routinized practice

What do these changes in frequency, framing and image content tell us? And what do they mean in relation to the role and location of fieldwork photography? At the beginning of her stay, photography was mainly applied to moments of perceived ethnographic importance – as a documenting tool, as a structuring device, or simply as a visual engagement when conversations were difficult. Towards the end of her stay, her photography seems to have become more frequent and fluid but also more focused and, hence, more excluding. These changes show that Weiss not only used photography for certain purposes – instead, it was integrated right from the beginning into what is widely known as observational practice. What Morton has termed the «participant photographer» (Morton 2009) in his analysis of Evans-Pritchard's photographic practice during the rite of gorot, could, in Weiss' case, be seen as a form of an «observational photography» – a photographic engagement that recurrently replaces other observational practices.

I argue that this replacement results in an immediate change of perspective. Carrying a camera might lead an ethnographer to start looking for subjects or moments which they consider to be worth recording. As the art critic Read comments: «We see what we learn to see, and vision becomes a habit, a convention, a partial selection of all there is to see, [...]» (Read 1974:12).

Here, the very act of taking along a camera plays a crucial role. As Florence Weiss once explained in an informal conversation, the Leica taught her how to see, which impacted on her photographic practice with the Minolta. Accordingly, the partial selection Read refers to is also guided by the camera, or what Latour (1993) calls the 'new hybridized actor', which an

anthropologist becomes once they set out with a camera. Thus, taking photographs means seeing and highlighting certain things – and, of course, leaving others out – that we might not have spotted or highlighted without a camera. Photography as a specific selectional practice of framing therefore not only reflects, but also may affect, what we see and observe.

It is evident from this photographic collection that photography was repeatedly applied at different moments of ethnographic observation. As such, Weiss' photography did not evolve alongside – but at the very centre of – ethnographic encounters and respective knowledge production. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact impact of this channelled vision accompanying photographic practice on her research outputs at my current stage of research, Weiss' photography is best understood as a hybridized embodied practice that took place in a routinized and recurrent manner, replacing and modifying other observational practices which are so central for epistemological processes in a discipline like social anthropology. Hence, photography should no longer be assumed to be just representative, but should instead be regarded as denoting small steps in a complex process of observing and understanding the field under scrutiny.



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## PICTURE CREDITS

All the colour transparencies reproduced here were taken by Florence Weiss between 1972 and 1973.

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**Michèle Dick** is currently a visual anthropology research assistant and a PhD candidate at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich. After her preliminary research on the photographic heritage of the Swiss social anthropologist Florence Weiss and her curation of the exhibition «*Kinder im Augenblick. Florence Weiss – Fotografien vom Sepik*» (Children in the Moment. Florence Weiss – Photographs from the Sepik River) in 2015, Michèle Dick is currently pursuing her PhD research on 35mm roll film photography as scientific practice in late 20<sup>th</sup> century social anthropological fieldwork, using the Florence Weiss collection as a case study.

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