



A CURATOR'S FINGERS: PHOTOGRAPHERS, SUBJECTS, AND THE THIRD THING

David William Cohen

Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment.

Donald Hall, 'The Third Thing'

Room 49

In early September 1992, during a visit to South Africa, I found some 80 photographic negatives under a layer of dust on a concrete bunk of Room 49 of the Angelo Hostel at East Rand Proprietary Mines (ERPM) on the Reef near Boksburg. The photographs, all colour, offered views of leisure, recreation and sociability in the context of the living and working regimen of a South African mine in a time before Angelo Hostel was abandoned. And, at that moment, they did so against the prevalent images, typically in black-and-white, of the senses of confinement, exploitation and oppression of the mine-labour and mine-compound system of South Africa over the decades from the late nineteenth century to the end of apartheid.¹

While I have identified neither the photographer nor the photographer's subjects, expert assessment² suggests that the photographer was himself a miner and that these pictures were contracted between the photographer and his subjects. The indeterminacies of identity of the photographer and the subjects, and the sense that these negatives were *property*, opened ethical and moral issues regarding handling the found negatives produced by another individual who had maintained possession of these negatives – presumably, beneath his mattress – until he and his colleagues were evicted from the Angelo quarters and the hostel left as a ruin.

