Digital Image and Culture

Assignment 3 Critical Essay

Is there a future for the photo album?

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Is there a future for the photo album?

Discussing his exhibition in Arles, "Album Beauty", Erik Kessels said "It’s extraordinary to think that photo albums have only been in existence for roughly one hundred years, and now they are virtually dead," (Clark, 2013) Is this true and, if not, what is happening to them? Kessels was talking specifically about a largely 20th century phenomenon of putting printed photographs into special books for archival and viewing purposes. Was this relatively recent phenomenon really almost dead?

To understand the possible future of photo albums, we need to understand how they came into being, how and why they have changed and what societal and technological changes are occurring that will influence the future of the genre.

The beginning

It seems likely that humankind has wanted to make visual representations of ourselves since the earliest days of homo sapiens.

Fig.1 Early cave painting, circa 40,000BC

A section of the ancient cave art discovered in Indonesia that depicts a type of buffalo called an anoa, at right, facing several smaller human–animal figures. Credit: Ratno Sardi
We cannot know why paintings such as this mythological scene were created. The figures are hybrids, human-animal chimera, taken from the artist's imagination. Many academic studies of early figurative painting talk about probable religious-supernatural motivation. (Cave art (s.d.) In: Encyclopædia Britannica) In less obviously mythological scenes, there are other potential interpretations:

Fig. 2 Magura cave 4,000-8,000 years old
Fig. 3 Cueva des los manos 9,500 to 13,000 years old

These images (Fig. 2 & 3) seem much more modern than the Indonesian painting (Fig.1). They are playful, more realistic and more easily identified as being about the people who produced them.

"The neural changes that provided our ancestors with the imagination to understand, through logic, the continued existence of something that is no longer visible, together with the anatomical attributes that enabled them to outrun prey over long distances, would have had a genuine evolutionary advantage." (My italics) (Morriss-Kay, 2010) It seems likely that these latter two images were as much about recording themselves and their own existence as they were about trying to influence a supernatural force. Morriss-Kay’s comment is fundamental to an understanding of both the past and the possible future of family albums.
The development of the portrait genre

Between the cave paintings and the first family albums, there is a continuing record of human representation in art. A walk around any gallery will show us a fascinating mix of styles and media but, however different they look, it is clear that artists have drawn, painted or sculpted figurative images throughout history. As well as pursuing their own artistic paths, those artists needed to produce works which would pay the bills, with their income depending on producing work that someone would pay for. Pre-photography, there were two clearly identifiable main strands to the portrayal of people in art. One strand was based on the demand or desire of the subject to be depicted. The second strand was led by the artist identifying subjects that would sell. In both cases, there was a client who was distinct from the artist.

A third, smaller strand, was self-portraiture, with a multitude of possible reasons.

By the middle of the 19th century and still alive today, there existed a strong appetite amongst the wealthy for individual and family artistic representation in its fullest sense; these might be facial images, part or full-body, clothed or unclothed, with or without props and static or active, as well as often including a telling location as background, with a personal significance to the subject. These representations, images and sculptures, all provide evidence, even after death, of a state of being at a particular time, proof of existence and possibly also of status.

It was into this environment that the camera became available.

Photography

Since individuals and families were a feature of representational art long before photography was invented, it is not surprising that portraiture was a very early subject for commercial and amateur photographers.
Family portraits followed, of a kind more similar to those found in the first photo albums. The early photographers, such as Hill and Adamson or Julia Margaret Cameron, frequently
produced images for wealthy clients or friends. Perhaps because of that, as well as sometimes controversial styles, such as Cameron’s blurring, a common feature of early photographic portraits, is the relative formality of the images, (Mike 2014) even those that included images of children, with and without their families, “the abiding impression is of children at work told to enjoy themselves come what may”. (Stokes, 1992 200)

Fig. 6 Group Portrait 1847,
Even Queen Victoria utilised the availability of the family photograph to show herself to her subjects:

Fig. 7 The Royal Family in Buckingham Palace Garden, 1854

These images still follow the two previous main strands of people imagery and are subjects that can be sold.
Similarly formal and usually following the established fashions of the day, are photographs associated with big occasions or important life stages, such as school portraits of individuals and classes and wedding photographs. These are important for friends and family, and also for the people portrayed and are likely to be a part of their family archives.

To return to the earlier quote from Gillian Morriss-Kay, are these images and their antecedents all about a desire to prove "the continued existence of something that is no longer visible"? A lot of the 20th Century literature about family albums focused strongly on memory as the motive for production of an album. The rapid growth of portrait photography, which eventually gave rise to the genre of the family album, certainly suggested a desire to capture today for the future.

**Democratisation of photography**

At first, taking a photograph was expensive and time-consuming and it required a certain amount of skill as well as the necessary equipment. That changed in 1888, when Kodak launched its Brownie box camera with pre-loaded film and the immortal slogan “You press the button, we do the rest.”. Photography was now easy, although not truly accessible, with a launch price of $25. With an average labourer in New York earning less than $1.50 per week, (Labour rates s.d) this was still not affordable to most, until 1900, when Kodak released a camera that could be bought in America for $1, with removable film that could be developed for $2. (BBC News 2015)

Family albums have always had the capability of doing more than archiving photographs. Photographs, even when viewed individually, have huge potential power. We do more than see the surface- we can recall places and happenings, not necessarily all of which actually occurred. We even remember, or perhaps we think we remember, such things when we see other people’s photographs. (Maynard, 2000) Photographs may help us remember, but they also help us create a new unreal past, and act as "cues for our own fictions" (Stokes, 1992) As Sontag put it, "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs — especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past — are incitements to reverie." (Sontag 2001 Kindle
Locations 208-210) Put many photographs into one place, an archive of related images and the photo album becomes a powerfully evocative artefact.

Kessels' installation, from which came his claim that the family album is virtually dead, was called Album Beauty, which was a misnomer; the installation had little or nothing to do with Beauty. It was, however, a fascinating result of what seems to be a change in the way we view our personal photographs. The writer says of the installation, comprising albums found in flea markets over many years searching and greatly enlarged images taken from those albums, “it’s a form of archaeology that lists the detritus of beauty, boredom, travel, companionship, innocence, youth, pride and participation”. (Clark, 2013) This description is correct when seen from Kessels' eyes, but it ignores the fact that these images were not created for him or for us. We cannot know the story of how the images came to be lost, and so could be found by Kessels. What we can be sure of is that they were not always seen as detritus. Someone cared enough to buy an album and to select and place these images within its pages. Nonetheless, they had now been rejected and so Kessels' assertion had some force. Against Kessels, we can put Stokes' view: "Whatever else they may be, these untidy masses of images should never be ignored, and instead cherished for the cloud of witnesses contained within." (Stokes, 1992)

Towards the end of the 20th century, photographers began to appropriate family photographs for their own artistic and commercial purposes. Artists as varied as Sally Mann, with often sexualised images of her own family, Larry Sultan and Tina Barney, with idealised views of their families in staged setups and manipulated prints, and Richard Billingham, with his harrowing pictures of his family at home, all created of family photographs in a more documentary style.

In recent years, the album has also become a medium for self-examination. Annette Kuhn (my blog barryoca 2018) wrote movingly of her attempt to understand her past through looking at her family albums. She says “The promise is of a brighter past in the future, if we only seize the chance today to consume the raw materials of our tomorrow’s memories.”. (Kuhn, 2002) No doubt this is true, but given the inherent danger of untruths when we resurface prompted memories, also potentially dangerous. It has been said that albums are valuable for people not because of the scenes and persons they depict, but because they
trigger the revival of memories and promote the oral transmission of stories that strengthen the personal bonds and provide coherence to the group." (Langford, 2001). These are possibly advantageous even if the stories are less than real.

The Digital Challenge

Static images of people, images intended to be permanent, have been part of human life since humanity began. Analogue photography and Kodak allowed the creation of such images to be more egalitarian and less elitist. With that change there was an inevitable proliferation of images made and a natural progression from sketchbooks and scrapbooks (deCandido, 1993) to the family photo album.

The first consumer digital camera was produced in 1993 (Skipworth, 2014). Some of the changes brought about since then by digital technology have been easy to perceive. In 2006, Marien was moved to say "The millions of digital images now on hard drives and memory chips may be changing the definition of the snapshot and family photography as a palpable, lasting record, the stuff of albums........generally are not kept for the long term.....the new technology has dematerialized photographs” (Marien, 2006 517) We could write something very similar now, except that we would replace millions with billions or, on many estimates, trillions. Some of the other changes say more about changes in society than about photographic media. As Wells has noted, not all the changes were foreseen at the beginning of the 21st century. (Wells, 2015) She also noted how much of the material in family albums in the 20th century had become dominated by tourist photographs. Families were wealthier and foreign travel was easier. As Sontag noted earlier, it became more important to photograph a holiday trip than to look at and enjoy it. (Sontag, 2001).

One thing that was not predicted was the rise of the camera-phone and the consequential exponential growth in both the volume and the mobility of picture-taking, as well as a new spontaneity. The camera-phone is still only some 20 years old. (Hill, 2013) As Murray said, "the social uses of digital photographs by amateurs are characterised by a shift away from using photographs to record the important moments of domestic life, as was associated with amateurs using analogue photographs, towards using digital photographs to record mostly everyday, mundane images" (Murray, 2008 151). The increase in the number and the
quality of combined mobile phones and cameras coincided with the emergence of what we now call social media. Myspace was founded in 2003; Facebook was founded in 2004; Instagram was founded in 2010. There are various published estimates of the number of photographs on these and many other social media sites. They are, for my purposes, so big that the actual number is irrelevant.

These images are readily available. For most of history, images were largely kept in one place and had to be visited to be seen; usually the visitor also needed some form of consent to see the image. Family albums were kept in cupboards or on shelves and were brought out to look at and share memories. Even so, Barthes considered that "The age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly." (Barthes, 1981 98) Now, even with the availability of privacy settings, many of the billions of photographs taken each year are freely and continuously available to anyone with an interest and an internet connection.

There are few photo-developers or printers around; most photographs are not printed, still less archived in an album. Although digital images now form the vast bulk of the images taken and seen, via the internet, they have not in fact fully superseded photographs. (Keightley and Pickering 2014) Blurb and other suppliers continue to provide a service to customers wanting to print custom-made photo-albums. Relatives and their children adorn the kitchen wall in a personalised calendar. Amazon share is on the browser favourites list, to facilitate sharing photographs with remote relatives. The posts and the tweets come with narratives as well as with unreferenced images. Sontag said "The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing." (Sontag, 2001 Kindle Locations 145-146)

Perhaps the biggest change of all has been the development of the selfie, effectively eliminating the concept of a photographer "capturing" a subject. The pose, the place and the caption now all originate from the camera-holder and the resulting image is distributed, often instantaneously, to whatever destination the owner of the camera decides.
Many of the least satisfactory aspects of the personal photo album have been removed and the content that would have been archived for most of its life is now seen, posts and replies shared, re-posted and talked about almost instantaneously. It seems likely that the memories and reveries, described by earlier writers, have been replaced by something more instantaneous. Whereas in a past of books filled with precious memories, those memories were probably rarely evoked by actually getting the books out and looking at the images, now the images are constantly available and form the nexus of many social inter-actions in iterative and continuing ways, aided by tagging anyone connected to the image, as a way of saying "Come and look". Then more content becomes available and they merge into the background and the new images become the focus of attention. (Rubinstein, and Sluis, 2008) Perhaps even the social media providers are aware that this temporality is a shortcoming; Facebook now sends out "memories" to its users. In the meantime, captions and comments make future understanding more accessible than ever.

The digital image, once shared, has in fact a permanence most albums could not hope for. That permanence even extends to the actual existence of the image. Digital images may seem at first to be very ephemeral, possibly not even on the photographer's own data storage system, but instead held on a little-understood Cloud platform, owned and controlled elsewhere. And yet, the number of companies, including those based in the Cloud, that advertise the backup of images as one of their primary offerings, attests to the level of fear of loss of the images. A printed version of an image is still seen by many as a more genuine record of the truth of their memory than a digital one.

How that permanence will be utilised, as the new generations of photographers grow older, is impossible to predict. It may be that the images remain in the Cloud and are rarely, if ever, visited by their creators. It is also possible that the need for memories, so long served by the physical photo album and its non-photographic antecedents, will be met by going back to these digital mementoes. Kessels predicted the death of the photo album, largely on the evidence of so many albums being destroyed, because the reason for their existence had disappeared; dead, moved on or simply lost. I believe that prediction is premature, wrong even. For all the reasons given above, it is clear that the photo album has served an important purpose in many lives and that, although it took photography to democratise the
containment of our past in images and then in a book, the urge to retain the past has a much longer history than the photograph.

Tobiassen thought that "The function of the photographs is obvious. They fix perception and memory, represent a method of preserving memories, document important moments and confirm social relationships and fact of belonging." (Tobiassen, 1989). Much of that narrative could be easily adapted to describe our use of digital images. The physical photo album no longer has the place in every household that it did for much of the twentieth century. The digital memory bank is a new format for those albums and will undoubtedly continue to evolve.

Sandbye describes the role of photography as "a primarily social, participatory, performative and culture phenomenon" (Sandbye, 2012 107) In a different paper, she says that "Albums are objects that are produced, used, circulated, talked about, laughed at, cried at, cared for, forgotten, and even discarded". (Sandbye, 2014 12) I would suggest that, in both cases, the definition could be widened to include not just photographs and, by extension digital images, but image making more generally. The urges described by Sandbye existed long before photography, have continued with digital images and will most likely continue for much longer yet. The stationary shop still sells brightly coloured photo-albums, family photo-books are popular and digital social media provides a whole new experience of sharing and remembering to its users. The photo album is not yet dead.
Illustrations

Figure 1 Early cave painting, circa 40,000BC This image is thought to show a painting created over 40,000 years ago. (Callaway, E. 2019) 'Is this cave painting humanity’s oldest story?’ In: Nature At: http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03826-4

Figure 2 Magura cave 4,000-8,000 years old Image Source: Wikimedia
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Magura_-_drawings.jpg

Figure 3 Cueva des los manos 9,500 to 13,000 years old. (Cary, Z. 2018) 10 Most Mesmerizing Prehistoric Cave Paintings. At: https://earthnworld.com/cave-paintings/ (Accessed 23/03/2021).


Figure 6 Group Portrait in Oehme’s Studio, Gustav Oehme, 1847, copied from Alexa Wheeler, University of New Mexico Valencia (2016) Ppt ch02 marien_4_e-205391. At: https://www.slideshare.net/alexawheeler/ppt-ch02-marien4e205391 (Accessed 15/02/2021).

Figure 7 Robert Fenton, 1854, The Royal Family in Buckingham Palace Garden (From Pinterest)
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Further reading.

These referred works are not cited above but were helpful in forming my views.


