The significance of Orphan Photography: Rethinking Vernacular Photography in the context of Art History

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Abstract: The study investigates the cultural and historical significance of orphan photographs, a category of unnamed, unclaimed, or abandoned photos that offer intriguing insights into the lives of everyday people and challenge conventional notions of family representation, thereby contributing to the growing field of vernacular photography studies. Orphan photographs have often been overlooked in the context of visual history studies. However, this study also proposes to fill a gap in the existing literature. The first part examines the structure of family photo albums, emphasizing that the photographs on an album may not always represent authentic family relationships and events. Furthermore, the significance of orphaned photos is highlighted, demonstrating how they provide insights into regular people's daily lives and societal customs. Sharing and organizing vernacular photography has become possible with the rise of digital technologies and online platforms, while repair and preserving technologies have made it possible to keep and fix ancient and damaged photos. Orphan photos are valuable as artistic and academic works because they can be reinterpreted and recontextualized in novel and thought-provoking ways. In conclusion, abandoned photos provide exceptional views of the past and present, providing valuable insight into everyday people's lives and social traditions.
Keywords: orphan photographs; family photo albums; vernacular photography; digital preservation; cultural heritage; snapshot photography.

Introduction

This article explores the realm of orphan photography, also known as vernacular photography, which refers to photographs detached from their original context. These photographs hold immense historical and cultural value, but they face the imminent threat of irreversible destruction due to constant movement and poor storage conditions. To understand the significance of orphan photographs, it is crucial to classify and analyze the various

photographic genres that fall under the umbrella term of vernacular photography. Furthermore, this research aims to address the evolving landscape of collecting practices, influenced by the rise of image sharing and social media. Traditional collections often lack the nuanced representations and subtleties of everyday life, leading to a reevaluation of collecting methodologies. However, the abundance of images in the digital era offers opportunities for active participation in creating new content for cultural heritage. By examining the morphological possibilities of vernacular photography, we can gain new historical perspectives on photographic identity.

What we will refer to throughout this book as orphan photography is also known in the literature as vernacular photography. In a brief attempt to describe orphan photography, this is photography detached from its original context in which it was created. The reasons why this break in context may occur are various and include the family putting the photograph albums up for sale following the death of a person so that the photographs become irrelevant to the owner's memories; simply throwing the photograph albums away to get rid of them or storing them in one place and having them discovered by another person. Orphan photographs and their history is closely linked to the invention of photography itself and its commodification. This convenience of producing photographs dates back to the 19th century, and the photograph was mass-produced towards the end of the 19th century. As a result of the plethora of photographs now created, many photographic albums need to be revised.

As Elisabeth Boogh points out, according to the number of objects, photographic collections are more numerous than any other collections in a museum. The images thus contribute in a profound way to how we perceive the world, but as these collections were formed through the receipt of gifts and donations this representation does not include all the nuances and subtleties of life but rather is a re-enactment of essential people.[1] This brings into question how vernacular photography can fill these gaps and how exactly it finds its place in literature and art history. As the author argues further, the practice of collecting images for museums has changed with the rise of image sharing and the emergence of social media. These new forms of self-focused and trivial photography have no place in traditional collections, leading to a rethinking of collecting practices. However, the abundance of images is an opportunity for active participation to create new content for cultural heritage. Another problem reported is that photographs are prone to be lost due to a lack of methods and poor storage conditions.[2] Even if in essence these practices refer to digital photos, the situation is no better for analog photos they can be more

[1] Elisabeth Boogh, "Samtidsbild/Contemporary Images – a Method of Collecting Vernacular Photography in the Digital Age," *Museum International* 65, no. 1-4 (2013): 54, https://doi.org/10.1111/muse.12033..

[2] Boogh, "Samtidsbild/Contemporary Images – a Method of Collecting Vernacular Photography in the Digital Age," 55-56.

at risk than the ones mentioned above. In the case of orphan photographs, they are in danger of irreversible destruction because of being constantly moved. Further, even though we often refer to orphan photographs as vernacular photographs, a classification of these photographic genres is necessary.

As the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) explains, vernacular photography is an umbrella term that distinguishes artistic from non-artistic photographs for a variety of purposes including commercial, scientific, or personal.[1] An example of such photos is the classic pictures found in home albums, capturing ordinary moments of everyday life. In the text on vernacular photography, Geoffrey Batchen refers to this type of photography as one that is not "proper" or mainstream. The text suggests that vernacular photography focuses on exploring the morphological possibilities of photography that can provide new historical perspectives on photographic identity. In addition, vernacular photography can draw attention to the physicality of photography and its creative and thought-provoking nature.[2] Another definition of vernacular photography is offered by María Tinaut who defines vernacular photography as a photographic genre created by an amateur or unknown photographer that captures ordinary and mundane aspects of everyday life to represent and present memories. The author also brings up the fact that they represent our natural desire to remember and leave a legacy. In this photographic genre, photographers do not see themselves as image-makers and are the embodiment of the idea that photography is for them simply a way of recording a singular reality. These snapshots include beautiful moments often captured without intentionality and serve as a window into the lives and memories of ordinary people.[3]

Orphaned Photographs as Windows into the Past

The definition of orphan has several meanings and can be seen as a negative term, which is not the case in the context of this book. For this purpose, we will refer to the term orphan with the definition provided by Merriam-Webster's dictionary, which defines the term as "one deprived of some protection or advantage"[4]. Displaced photographs from the families who once owned those mementos fit the description of the definition because they are unprotected, circulating from owner to owner until someone decides their value. Another definition provided by Tina Campt Orphan photographs in Tina

[1] "Vernacular Photography: Moma," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed March 9, 2023, https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/vernacular-photography.
[2] Geoffrey Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (2000): 263. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2000.10443418.
[3] María Tinaut, "Construction of an Album for Oneself," (2017): 1, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25772/9NHC-VN70.
[4] "Orphan Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed March 13, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/orphan.

Campt's definition is those photographs to which there is no longer access to the people who are depicted in the photograph or to their families who could speak to the circumstances in which the photograph was taken.[1] Complementing this definition comes Ewa Stańczyk who exemplifies the scenario from her family photo album where the author evokes the personal memories and feelings associated with the family album and how it embodies the working class. The text reflects on how formal photographs blur the boundaries of a family's possible class affiliation and the context, stories, and subtleties remain invisible to outsiders. The context will disappear in the meantime and only the materiality of the photographs will be left behind along with the bent corners and the wear and tear of time. Meanwhile, the author insists that vernacular photographs that are frequently lost or abandoned can be found and used to find new meanings. Orphaned photographs are powerful narrative tools, and a way must be found to integrate them in the literature.[2]

In conclusion, the exploration of orphan photographs challenges preconceived notions, highlighting their inherent narrative potency and urging us to reevaluate the negative associations typically attached to the term "orphan." These photographs, with their displacement and untold stories, call for our attention and demand a place within the literary realm. By embracing their power and seeking to understand their significance, we can uncover new dimensions of meaning and give voice to the forgotten fragments of history.

The rise of snapshot photography

This part discusses the snapshot concept and its historical evolution. Most people associate this term with the emergence of digital photography, being far from correct, but associating this term with digital photography is explainable. In an article, Thierry de Duve discusses the paradox of photography as both an event and a picture. The author argues that the photograph can be seen either as obvious evidence and witness of the past or as an abrupt artifact that is unable to capture the essence of life. These opposed ways of looking at photography are mutually exclusive, but at the same time coexist in everyone's perception of photography. The article also looks at the nature of snapshots and exposures, which both contribute to this paradox. Thierry de Duve (1978) defines the snapshot as follows, "the snapshot, or instantaneous photograph. The snapshot is a theft, it steals life. Intended to signify natural movement, it only produces a petrified analogue of it. It shows an unperformed movement that refers to an impossible posture. The paradox is that in reality the movement has indeed been performed, while in the image the posture is frozen".[3] As the author continues,

[1] Tina Campt, Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 87.
[2] Ewa Stańczyk, "The Rebelling Orphan: Adopting the Found Photograph," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 6 (May 2017): 1040-41, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1393763.
[3] Terry De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," October 5 (1978): 114.

the 19th century used photography as an attempt to immortalize visual reality appropriately.

However, with the emergence of photography in motion, artists struggled to find a way to express reality. The author gives the example of Eadweard Muybridge's snapshot of a galloping horse which shows a galloping horse in various poses but does not show movement, creating a contradiction in aesthetic ideology.[1] Further development of the snapshot was brought about by the Brownie cameras developed by Kodak. This aforementioned idea is supported by Olivier who discusses the fact that snapshots were popularized by Kodak with the promise that these cameras would democratize the voice of the common man and become something that transcended the achievements of print culture. In this article, it is brought up that Eastman positioned the camera as a high form of self-expression, placing it above the written word. Another belief was that photography would replace language as a method of communication, and Kodak's advertising reinstated these thoughts.

The idea that Kodak is linked to is that the desire to make photographs is linked to a return to the innocence of childhood by making image-making a purer narrative form.[2] Another perspective brought into discussion comes from the direction of Lomography. As Albers and Nowak develop, Lomography was a trend that started in the 1990s from a group of students in Vienna. They were using Russian cameras to take many photographs without even looking through the viewfinder. This process often resulted in fuzzy photos, revealing the trivial and nostalgic nature of Lomography, but it was also seen as a response to the fact that most amateur photography tried to emulate a professional style, and was an effect of digital photography. Those who adopted this style wanted their authentic rhetoric to be acknowledged while embracing mass production of photographs, disregarding traditional standards of composition. However, their photography is not due to chance, having preferences in themes and perspectives. Their photographs generally capture a youthful dynamic and urban lifestyle.[3] As Jonathan Schroder argues, the realism of snapshot aesthetics is a key aspect of communicating authenticity in advertising. As the author notes, realism is seen as a sub-category of representation and interpreted as a style of transparency, but in reality, it is a style in itself. The author suggests that advertisements with a snapshot aesthetic work so well because they look real, even if that reality is how they were constructed.[4]

Therefore, the concept of snapshot photography has evolved and has been

[1] Terry De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 115.

[2] Mary Olivier, "George Eastman's Modern Stone-Age Family: Snapshot Photography and the Brownie," Technology and Culture 48, no. 1 (2007): 11-17.

[3] Philipp Albers and Michael Nowak, “Lomography: Snapshot Photography in the Age of Digital Simulation,” *History of Photography* 23, no. 1 (1999): 101-104, https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.1999.10443805.

[4] See Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination," *Invisible Culture*, no. 18 (2013).

shaped by factors such as technological advances, advertising campaigns, and artistic movements. The snapshot can be seen as both a record of the past and an artifact that fails to capture the essence of life, creating a paradox in the perception of photography. This style of photography popularized by Kodak cameras and various photographic movements such as Lomography that reject traditional standards of composition and promote mass production of photography continues to exist today and represents a way in which people capture their everyday lives. As Zuromskis concludes, snapshot photography is a genre that is difficult to define because of its diversity and internal contradictions. The author proposes that instead of trying to define this genre, it is more important to understand it by piecing together multiple perspectives including history, theory, practice, and aesthetics. As the conclusion draws, with the emergence of digital photography, this photographic genre has taken on new meanings while continuing to embrace certain conventions of analog photography. The complexities of snapshot photography can reveal insights into how we use personal photographs and the significance of photographic culture as a whole.[1]

Camera advertising and Kodak's domination of the market

When it comes to cameras in the early days of photography, Kodak has been a competitor that took center stage. On September 4, 1888, George Eastman received the patent for the film roll camera under the name Kodak, thus starting the camera's unique selling point of being the first camera that could be used without a manual. The camera came with the film already loaded managing to eliminate a lot of technical issues such as darkroom, making photography portable and affordable for amateurs. On top of that, they created a system where the amateur user did not have to bother with film processing, they just had to take the camera to a Kodak center where the film was processed, a new film was loaded into the camera and the user was ready for another round of photography.[2]

As Bahar Tahamtani argues, Kodak introduced the concept of adventure and spontaneity at the end of the nineteenth century, implicitly developing through its advertising that photography should be something that captures the moment impulsively, while succeeding in moving photography out of the photo studio and into nature.[3] Photography thus became a vehicle for nostalgia and memories, or rather a commodity. Another sector impacted by Kodak was tourism and social life. As Lívia Aquino argues photography and tourism worked together as an apparatus, influencing each other, with both areas provoking

[1] Catherine Zuromskis, "Snapshot Photography: History, Theory, Practice, and Esthetics," in A Companion to Photography (2019): 304.
[2] Bahar Tahamtani, "Morbid Memento: Private Keepsakes of Public Violence" in *The American Papers* (The American Studies Student Association California State University, Fullerton., 2017): 127.
[3] Tahamtani, "Morbid Memento: Private Keepsakes of Public Violence", 127.

desire, creating the tourist photographer.[1] Lívia Aquino also analyses how Kodak's marketing strategy created the photographic tourist, concluding that the phrase "Picture Ahead" suggests a way of looking at photography as a tool to always document an event, any moment becoming worthy of being captured in images, the world becomes "a series of event, a myriad of opportunities, a promise that the world will survive in images."[2]

Another theme that Kodak has addressed in several advertising materials is the theme of family. As Marita Sturken notes Kodak pushed the idea that photography was a family activity, with women being encouraged in advertising materials after the 1920s to photograph the family and create photo albums that captured family life, important events, and family holidays. This message was emphasized after the end of World War II.[3] Another marketing theme identified by Snow is Kodak's campaign during the two World Wars "Serving Human Progress through Photography". According to the author, the fact that Kodak omits the use of the word Kodak, replacing it with Photography lets the audience alone draw the synonymous association between Kodak and photography.[4] The company has adapted its message according to the context but has never given up promoting photography as something that belongs to the family and the household.

Identity through orphan photography

This part of the chapter highlights the significance of orphan photographs in constructing a culture's identity. Orphan photographs offer a nuanced perspective of the past and can either confirm or challenge previous beliefs about a particular culture. However, caution must be exercised when utilizing such photographs, especially when they immortalize violence or war. To illustrate how orphan photographs help to form a more objective identity, Phu presents the story of the Vietnamese diaspora population who left in 1975 and the second wave of "boat people". As the author stated, photographs played a central role in their lives and represented a connection to their families left behind. The author argues that family photographs offer a new perspective on understanding Vietnamese culture and emphasize narratives of survival and everyday life rather than violence and war.[5] An important

[1] Lívia Aquino, "Picture Ahead: Kodak and the Construction of the Tourist-Photographer" *Revista Do Centro De Pesquisa e Formação* (2016): 289-290.

[2] Aquino, "Picture Ahead: Kodak and the Construction of the Tourist-Photographer", 292.

[3] Marita Sturken, "Advertising and the Rise of Amateur Photography: From Kodak and Polaroid to the Digital Image," *Advertising &Amp; Society Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2017): 23. https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2017.0021.

[4] Rachel Snow, "Photography's Second Front: Kodak's Serving Human Progress through Photography Institutional Advertising Campaign" *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 9, no. 2 (February 2016): 175, https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2016.1190206

[5] See Thy Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs, Orphan Images, and the Art of Recollection," Trans Asia Photography 5, no. 1 (2014).

contribution of the aforementioned research is the fact that it does not focus solely on state archives but also looks into various projects initiated by the Vietnamese diaspora community.

These projects, including exhibitions, oral history collections, multimedia installations, artists, activists, and public historians, challenge traditional ways of representing and comprehending displacement and rupture in diaspora groups. By focusing on survival and ordinary life narratives, the author gives a new perspective on a well-studied issue and emphasizes the agency of diaspora communities in shaping their narratives and histories. The author's emphasis on community-led projects highlights the significance of protecting cultural assets and developing communal memory.[1] The approach acknowledges the importance of community-led activities in constructing a culture's identity. In conclusion, the approach of investigating the role of family photographs in mediating the Vietnamese diaspora sheds light on the importance of orphan photographs in forming an objective identity, challenges conventional modes of representation, and emphasizes the agency of diaspora communities in shaping their narratives and histories.

In Dearman's (2011) case study, the author examines six photographic albums belonging to a Danish family, which are distinguished by a structured presentation and a strong sense of authorship. One album, in particular, captures a series of family photographs from 1860, with four to five images dedicated to each family member, including Ellen, Ulla, Poul, and Axel. The viewer's position is questioned in one image made by Poul, where he and Ulla appear together. Other albums focus on the life and journey of Ulla and her family, and the last album is structured to build a map of their house.[2]

A different and notable case study is that of Vivian Maier, a self-taught photographer who left behind a vast archive of black and white photographs after her death in 2009. Her work showcases her ability to make the invisible visible and to capture the world and its people through her camera lens. Her self-portraits depict her journey of discovering her own identity, with stark contrasts of black and white that emphasize the vivid forms and strong compositions. While there are ethical concerns about posthumously exploring the archives of a private person, the curator of the exhibition sees the delayed recognition of Maier's work as a blessing in disguise. Her images reflect her quest to solidify her place in the world, a conversation with the camera, and a journey from being nothing to becoming something through photography.[3] Interestingly, Maier spent over 40 years working as a nanny while secretly

[1] Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs."
[2] Andrew Dearman, "Working ('with') the Dead: Agency and Its Absence in the Use of the Found Image," Colloquy 22 (2011): 238.
[3] Thea Hawlin, "Lost Photographs Documenting New York's Streets in the 1950s," AnOther (AnOther Magazine, March 29, 2018), https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/10721/lost-photographs-documenting-new-yorks-streets-in-the-1950s.

capturing over 150,000 photographs, often taking the children she cared for on street photography adventures in underprivileged areas. Her ascent to recognition as a renowned artist is just as intriguing as her art itself.

Conclusion

Dearman delves into the concept of family photo albums and their role in constructing a family's history. The author highlights that while viewers may assume that the images in a photo album are presented chronologically and reflect significant events, the construction and organization of these albums are dynamic and subject to change across generations.[1] Consequently, the coherence of the images in an album may not accurately reflect the true relationships and events within the family, but rather an artificial representation shaped by a desire for a coherent narrative. Chalfen's paper explores the relationship between home media and evidence, asking how home media fits into visual culture, media culture, and Kodak culture. The "How They Looked" paradigm is introduced, suggesting different approaches to recognizing reliable evidence.

Orphan photographs, in recent years, have gained significance as they offer unique insights into the lives of ordinary people, their daily routines, and social customs that may not be documented in official histories or archives. They serve as a bridge between the past and present, facilitating our understanding of the evolution of our society and cultural practices.[2]The emergence of digital technologies and online platforms like Flickr, Instagram, and Pinterest has enabled the sharing and curation of vernacular photography. Restoration and archiving technologies have also made it possible to preserve and restore old and damaged photographs, making them accessible to a wider audience. Orphan photographs have also become a subject for creative and scholarly works, recontextualizing and reinterpreting them in new and thought-provoking ways. In conclusion, orphan photographs offer unique perspectives on the past and present, illuminating the lives of ordinary people and their social customs. As we continue to explore the history of orphan photographs, their significance and relevance in contemporary society will undoubtedly be further uncovered.

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[1] Dearman, "Working ('with') the Dead," Colloquy 22 (2011): pp. 238.

[2] Richard Chalfen, “Snapshots ‘R’ US: The Evidentiary Problematic of Home Media,” *Visual Studies* 17, no. 2 (2002): pp. 141-149, https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586022000032215. pp. 141-143.

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Article history

Received:	**Reviewed:**	**Accepted:**	**Available online:**
21.03.2023	26.05.2023	30.05. 2023	5.06.2023