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Strange Bedfellows: Appropriations of the Vernacular by Photographic Artists

Martha Langford

Martha Langford is the author of *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (2001), *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Photographic Art* (2007), and the editor of *Image & Imagination* (2005), all published by McGill-Queen's University Press. She is an Associate Professor of Art History at Concordia University in Montreal and was the founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa.

Abstract

The article discusses a range of artworks that appropriate, emulate, or copy the photographic works of amateur photographers, especially the photographic album. Examining a variety of processes that have generated such works and taking issue with critical claims for originality and universality, the article questions whether anything of vernacular photography's specificity and private nature can survive its transformation into a public work of art.

Keywords: **appropriation, found object, primitivism, rephotography, performance, snapshot, tourism, vernacular photography**

> This quality that is not in life but in the image of life, how should we define it?
>
> Edgar Morin 1956

The phenomenon is hardly new: artists' affiliations with the vernacular emerge on a cyclical basis throughout the history of photography. Twentieth-century bursts of activity include Dada photomontage and the Snapshot Aesthetic, the former recycling materially, the latter stylistically, images of non-artistic

extraction. While these episodes make room for the vernacular in an art history of photography, entrance is limited to images that have been touched by the hand of an artist. The other's photographic object—the raw material and source of inspiration of photographic art—is transformed in the process, sometimes honoured, sometimes sealed in servility. The bulk of photographic production and experience—its unwashed "vernaculars"—remains on the margins of most artistic production, its function in photographic history being, as Geoffrey Batchen has pointed out, to show us what art photography is not (Batchen 2002).[1]

This article looks at one type of work generated by the amateur-artist affiliation: the artist's bookwork as photographic album. I have focused my attention on works of European and Canadian extraction, ranging in date from 1970 to 2007, and exemplifying a variety of approaches. The UK-based American artist Christy Johnson's *Feast* (2007) is a thematic collection featuring girls at their First Communion. The artist purchased or otherwise acquired these images in European and American cities, and supplemented them with testimony from thirty-three "confessors" (Figure 1).

Indonesian-born, Amsterdam-based Fiona Tan's *Vox Populi* commissions are created through another process entirely, on the basis of a call for entries: ordinary people submit their albums and Tan, as artist-curator, selects and organizes the images into an installation and a book—a collective family album. At the other end of the scale are two book projects by German conceptual artist Hans-Peter Feldmann, *Porträt* and *Ferien* (both 1994), each strictly bounded by the

Fig 1 Christy Johnson. This is My Body. *Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors* (University College for the Creative Arts, 2007)

formation of a single female subject. And in the same vein, though dramatically different in effect, is French artist Bruno Rosier's rephotographic project, *Un état des lieux ou La mémoire des parallèles* (2005) based on the extended self-portrait of a male traveler, known only as R.T. Two different uses of the vernacular photograph are found in the oeuvre of Canadian artist Michael Snow: the artist's book and exhibition catalog, *Michael Snow/A Survey* (1970), and the album bookwork, *Scraps for the Soldiers* (2007).

In this list of artists' names and titles, we sense the vigor of intentionality: the death of the author, or replacement of the author by the author-function, is a moot point. Transferred into the hands of artists, ordinary people's pictures are being re-authored and re-signed. The vernacular is possessed and translated as a relic by these gestures; one might say that the *idea* of the vernacular is being honored. But this is of course a contradiction in terms. The vernacular is the opposite of an *idea*, being by definition locked into place, time, and specific circumstances. Evocation of such specificity is built into these appropriative works, but in most cases, as we will see, alienated from the source to the point of abstraction. Which brings me to a fundamental question: is everyday photographic experience transferrable to art? And by this I mean not just its reification, nor even its simulacrum, but the complexity of a photographic object that has been part of a life lived. Exposure to some of these works and their critical apparatus has left me fretful that we are being sold, not "knowledge at bargain prices" as Susan Sontag once suggested about photographic content, but local photographic experience inflated to universality by a global economy (Sontag 1978: 24). There are alternatives, as my argument has been constructed to show.

This article is not a survey of the genre, but a consideration of ideas that motivate this kind of production and critically uphold it—ideas exposed in a recent article by Mark Godfrey in relation to a bookwork by Tacita Dean. I bear down on Godfrey's article, without prejudice to its subject, to unpack his faith in a trinity of values: originality, intuition, and fascination. These notions are familiar to us from the cultural discourse of primitivism, though they are rediscovered and naturalized by Godfrey as flowing from photographic objects that have had an effect on an artist, catalyzing some kind of transformative, appropriative action.

Robert S. Nelson's definition of "appropriation" helps us to understand what the motive and effect of this action might be. Nelson sees kinship between the act of appropriation and the semiotic shift that Roland Barthes enacts in relation to myth—he allows both actions to be seen as public *and* personal: "personal agency, not merely the play of signification" (Nelson 1996: 119). Intentionality rules, though significant nuances arise from the source object which is not just anything. Inside the walls of the art world, Duchampian play takes place on an even playing field: an image generally recognized as art is translated into another form that is also labeled art—in Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* is given a mustache and retitled. This action takes place within institutional norms: the aura of the object is only temporarily displaced. For these are carnivalesque shifts, by which I mean that roles and ranks are not really changed, but merely exchanged for the

duration of the action, as expressed in Pierre Bourdieu's socio-economic terms: "Artists, art historians, and critics may lack the means to purchase actual works of art, but some have the power to transform ordinary objects into art and vice versa" (Nelson 1996: 123). Inserting the word "photographic" between "ordinary" and "objects" serves our purposes here—a vernacular photograph is by definition ordinary. And this leads us to Nelson's consideration of appropriative primitivism: "the cultural asymmetries involved in the discovery, redefinition, and appropriation of tribal artifacts by the modern art world" (ibid.). By substituting "vernacular photographs" for "tribal artifacts," we can consider the ramifications of this asymmetrical relationship, asking ourselves whether the use of amateur photographs risks the authority of the artist, or enhances the artist's status as a dialectician.

Artists envision these works, but their status as art depends on the approval of critics, dealers, curators, and historians—the vernacular is sometimes a conceit, strictly in the eye of the beholder. Henry Sayre's study of late-twentieth-century American avant-garde practices attends to the art-world phenomenon of photographer Nicholas Nixon's extended portrait of his wife and her three sisters, *The Brown Sisters*, an annual ritual that began in 1975. Made by a professional artist using an 8 x 10 view camera and setting strict rules for the project (the women always lining up in the same order; one public image/year), the series strains the definition of snapshooting, but the photographs are nevertheless called "family snapshots" by the Museum of Modern Art curator Peter Galassi: "they function as snapshots, to mark time" (Galassi 1988: 25). That they do so on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York[2] and in the pages of *Artforum* catches Sayre's attention as a phenomenon that he summarizes in a tautology: "a family portrait is a family portrait, and it is art because it is art (or, at least, because someone has declared it to be so)" (Sayre 1989: 39). For Sayre, the declaration functions on many levels: the Nixon project functions as a "hinge" between formalist and historical concerns (Sayre 1989: 40). The reliable staging of the Brown sisters translates their specificity—what Sayre calls their "vernacular fullness" (Sayre 1989: 37)—into a formal coherence that fastens the institution of the family and the institution of art into "the same rhetorical, aesthetic, and social structures" (Sayre 1989: 51). Galassi expresses this tight and circular relationship when he writes: "It is by now a familiar observation that no two photographs are exactly alike, that the medium is inherently plastic. Nixon's pictures recast the observation, suggesting that it is not photography but experience that is plastic, a quality made plain by photography's mechanical precision" (Galassi 1988: 25). For Sayre, *The Brown Sisters*, drained in public presentation of any personal meaning, becomes a site of speculation about modes of repetition—whether repetition of a model generates sameness, leaving the original unaffected, or difference, altering our idea of the model—in this case, the family. In *The Brown Sisters*, the Brown sisters are acting out the idea of family in a way that ask us "to contemplate whether the family is itself only a simulacrum" (Sayre 1989: 65). This is a productive line of inquiry, whether the Nixon series stands up to such intense scrutiny, or whether Sayre the critic is projecting his own

dialectical desires. In what follows, conscious and unconscious collusion between the various art world players—spectators, included—is assumed and taken as another form of performance, illuminated long ago by Erving Goffman, and deeply conditioning our reception of these everyday photographic works (Goffman 1959).

Lost or Found?

Mark Godfrey's analysis of Tacita Dean's fourth bookwork, *Floh* (2001) is an elaborate argument for its status as an art work (the edition of 4,000 is signed, or each book "has been touched by the artist") and its originality (Godfrey 2005: 91, n. 2). His reasoning is curiously old-fashioned: strictly on the basis of *Floh*'s formal characteristics—"its weight and size, the diversity of subject matter, the arrangement of the images, and the superb quality of their reproduction, *Floh* cannot be assimilated into existing models of artists' uses of found photographs" (Godfrey 2005: 96). *Floh* is therefore *original* and Godfrey makes it more so by contrasting Dean's work with eight established models of appropriative production. One, self-conscious deskilling à la Ed Ruscha: Dean selects both good and bad photographs, but she arranges them artistically. Two, archival arrangements of images, as practiced by Hans-Peter Feldman: Dean's themes, when they cohere at all, are purely intuitive. Three, visual expression of cultural and political systems of knowledge, as found in Gerhard Richter's monumental *Atlas*: Dean's *Floh* is comparatively humble, while steering clear of personal or political history. Four, ironic appropriation, with political implications, as exercised by Steve McQueen: Dean is not shifting the meaning of the photographs that she uses, because they are meaningless to her where she finds them, at the flea market. Five, the reification of collective memory, as constructed by Fiona Tan: Dean's concerns are not sociological. Six, the discreditation of photographic truth claims by artists such as Christian Boltanski: Dean crafts no photographic story that might be taken as true or decried as false. Seven, the exploration of narrative structures, as in Pierre Huyghe and Douglas Coupland's collaboration *School Spirit* (2003): Dean's work is devoid of narrative devices. Eight, photographs "sourced" rather than "found" because they are the target of a directed investigation: Dean takes a random approach, methodologically comparable to the Surrealists, but yielding different effects, in part by the lack of caption or improvised text (Godfrey 2005: 96–102). According to Godfrey, *Floh* is different from everything that has come before it in all these respects.

The argument is perverse. Against the grain of a work that appears on the surface to come from the collectivity and go toward the collectivity, Godfrey frames his appreciation of Dean in terms of originality, artistry, and unbridled intuition, traits that are supposed to override her ideological and methodological formation as a subject. Her motivations are then explained in terms borrowed from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. This is ironic, to say the least, for *Camera Lucida* is universally understood as Barthes's experiment in self-conscious deskilling, the shedding of his sociology and semiological skills that left him "'scientifically" alone and disarmed" (Barthes 1981: 7). Fitting *Floh* into a reading of *Camera Lucida* actually contradicts Godfrey's point about

Dean's artistic skills, because deskilling reigns in *Camera Lucida* as its primary skill set.

Throughout *Camera Lucida*, Barthes deliberately dulls the edge of connotation, the blade that had flashed so brilliantly in "The Photographic Message," an essay published in 1961. *Camera Lucida* shifts the reader's attention from the *studium*, the realm of public knowledge, to the *punctum*, the realm of private feeling. Barthes's book is about that shift and, to an appreciable degree, about the excitement that loving a photograph for all the wrong reasons—succumbing to its charms—can engender. In a very real sense, *Camera Lucida* is the unfinished business of "The Photographic Message," in which Barthes had referred in passing to Edgar Morin's notion of *photogénie*, shoehorning Morin's mysticism into a few terse comments on "informational structure" (Barthes 1983: 202). In 1961, Barthes seemed determined to keep the charm of photography in the picture without surrendering to it. Not quite twenty years later, his unabashed subjectivity seems much closer to Morin's: "the properties that seem to belong to the photo are the properties of our mind that have fixed themselves there and that it sends back to us ... The richness of the photograph is in fact all that is not there, but that we project or fix onto it" (Morin 2005: 22). Barthes gives himself over to that richness by hooking himself into the details of photographic images, something that most people do when they look at other people's pictures—he speculates, he empathizes, he projects. For Barthes, these activities are licenced by the indexicality of photography, its lamination to the real, which, again surprisingly, he embraces with confidence when he believes that he is seeing something that has escaped the notice of the photographer. Speculation growing into confidence in one's singular perception: out of this faith, one kind of *punctum* arises. In Barthes's analytical oeuvre, this confidence seems almost archaic, a pre-semiotic confidence in the mimetic arts, a naïve view of photography that "The Photographic Message" had aimed to debunk. Barthes's self-conscious deskilling catapults him back in time to a state of self-recognition through realism adumbrated in Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, a book published in 1908. There is a difference, of course. In Worringer, Western man's empathetic attachment to the mimetic arts is "a sensation of happiness ... a gratification of that inner need for self-activation," which can be contrasted with the primitivist anxieties that produce abstraction (ibid.: 14). Barthes does not succumb to this "bipolar swing between cultures," as Margaret Iversen has called it (Iversen 1993: 14); rather he makes himself vulnerable to psychological attack by objects discerned, or half-discerned, through photographs. In the half-light of grief, this is what he needs to feel alive. But this self-activation depends utterly on the indexicality of the image—he needs to have seen for himself what was there to be seen by others, but spoke through the photograph only to him. Being thus singled out and activated by the real sets up his own bipolar framework which he develops in concluding remarks on whether the photograph is "Mad or tame?" (Barthes 1981: 119).

Godfrey takes up this question in relation to Dean's work. In *Floh*, Godfrey argues, Dean is "releasing photography from those who would tame it" (Godfrey 2005: 102). Taming is explained by Godfrey as carrying some

knowledge to the photograph, and especially the time-based calculation that the pictured subject is most certainly dead. Building on Barthes and Siegfried Kracauer, Godfrey rehearses the idea that making this informed calculation is akin to re-killing the subject. *Floh* does not commit that crime, because we know nothing of the people in the pictures; with "no memory or knowledge" of the subjects, our encounter with them through the photograph is "innocent" (Godfrey 2005: 104). In other words, *Floh* is a *studium*-free zone in which deskilling avoids re-killing: this is effectively what Godfrey is saying.

Barthes is saying something else. His point about time is illustrated by flashes of *studium*, but fits into his discussion of the second kind of *punctum*, the temporal kind in which the spectator confronts the likelihood that the person who was once alive to be photographed is now dead. Like the other kind of *punctum*, this sudden realization is both objective and imaginative, sparked by a heightened awareness of three times: the spectator's present, the past of the living moment that was photographed, and the past of the unpictured death. But it is above all subjective, for as Barthes continues, "each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death" (Barthes 1981: 97). Each photograph contains the seeds of this realization: that the photograph could not perpetuate the life of others and will not keep death from his door. That is the source of its *punctum*, a feeling too banal to share with others, embarrassingly personal to the core.

Can we sense a *punctum* in common, say, when the single thing that *is* known about a photograph is that it has turned up nameless at a flea market, that no one was around to prevent this occurrence, either by keeping the photograph or destroying it. We can say so, but we are depriving ourselves and others of Barthes's fine distinction. A *punctum* cannot be shared without embarrassment—it is a idiosyncratic lonely *feeling*, which is why Barthes sites his most searing example in the vernacular and declines to show us the picture.

Contrary to Godfrey's reading, there is a taming taking place in *Floh*. He puts his finger on it when he discusses the "duds" in the assemblage—the incompetently made or damaged photographs that made it to the flea market and continue to circulate in this work. Godfrey muses over their miraculous survival: "they all bear witness to their owner's one-time superstitious attachment" (Godfrey 2005: 112). This is not an innocent statement; rather it suggests a baseline of photographic criteria that is known to ordinary people and seen by ordinary people to be flaunted in Dean's work. "In some of the most marvelous images in the book, everything has gone wrong ... Obviously these were not purposefully 'abstract' photographs but errors destined for the flea market" (ibid.: 108). Deskilled, in other words, but redeemed by Dean's artistic intervention. Photographs are snatched from oblivion, sometimes because they remind her of other works of art: in interview, she calls one particularly mannered found photograph "my Jeff Wall" (ibid.: 118). Mechanism and chance may override the anonymous photographer's intentions, but the artist's talent and intentions trump both.

"Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become

critical" (Stewart 1993: 132). So writes Susan Stewart, laying the groundwork for her study of souvenirs as "objects of desire" and sites of memory, divided between purchasable souvenirs of exterior sights and souvenirs of a more intimate type, often representative of rites of passage. Both types "move history into private time" (Stewart 1993: 138); the life-course with its many social intersections is translated into autobiographical compendia, such as scrapbooks and albums. Stewart stresses the impossibility of reproducing such objects, and not just because their aura is missing, but because the experience of the object is irreproducible. This kind of souvenir, says Stewart, communicates sensually, "its perception by hand taking precedence over its perception by eye" (Stewart 1993: 139). Godfrey notes that reproductions in *Floh* include the marks on the originals as signs of temporality, but "all the found photographs are reproduced flat and with straight borders. There is no indication of formerly serrated edges, bumpy surfaces, or worn corners" (Godfrey 2005: 109). To retain these things would be to "fetishize" them, according to Godfrey, but if we listen to Stewart, or indeed to Geoffrey Batchen who has carefully studied the connections between photography, tactility, and memory, to strip the images of their signs of use, or even abuse, is to sever their connection to memory (Batchen 2004). The touch of an artist may not compensate us for that loss; on the contrary, it may make our sense of loss all the keener.

To sign is to touch, Godfrey argues, almost, but not quite, snuffing the Duchampian paradox that haunts the act. For, as Peter Bürger points out, a signature carries both individual and institutional freight: "Once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it" (Bürger 1996: 52). Today, 4,000 people can refer to their signed copy of *Floh* as "my Tacita Dean."

Collecting Practices

Originality is sometimes indistinguishable from the intense, almost narcissistic, fascination that an artist brings to his or her own processes of discovery. All curatorial practices, private and institutional, participate in some way in this singularizing mode of self-validation by removing an object from one context and placing it in another. This act of authorship is by definition subjective and self-serving, just as autobiographical or family history intends to cut one's self or one's familiars out of the pack, to enlarge the importance of particular life experience. A photographic album or shoebox full of snapshots may function in this way, as an expression of specificity, each photographic element nested in an idiosyncratic vernacular. Can a public work of art speak and be understood in the same way? As artists, Christy Johnson and Fiona Tan are engaged in collecting practices, constructing narratives of religious or national belonging from fragments of other lives.

Johnson's motif is Catholic girlhood, a system of reward and punishment that reaches its apex on the day of First Communion (Figure 2).

Like Dean, Johnson has found her images in the marketplace. As essayist Catherine Clinger explains the origins of the collection:

Fig 2 Christy Johnson. Souvenir de ma Première Communion. *Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors.* (University College for the Creative Arts, 2007)

"The original for each of the large digital prints was itself displaced … Presumably, most resided at one time in a family album or on a mantlepiece, then were passed down to heirs, discarded upon death, thrown away or sold, eventually finding their way to bins and boxes in markets, junk shops, antique and book stores in New York, London, Paris, Rome, Prague, Berlin, Vienna, Los Angeles … and Santa Fe, New Mexico" (Johnson 2007: 191–192). To which narrative one might add the less romantic possibility of studios going out of business, since so many of the portraits were made by professionals. The portraits range broadly in terms of place and date—racial characteristics, economic

markers, photographic style, décor, and sacramental fashion codes are the handprints of the vernacular, though the signs are faint. The overall effect is truly catholic, in the sense of universal and atemporal—the depicted subjects are anonymous and voiceless, facts camouflaged by the inclusion of first-person narrations that Johnson gathered from thirty-three women who agreed to record their reminiscences about their First Communions. She then correlated the portraits and memoirs in reciprocal suggestiveness. This fictional construction creates a startling first impression of signed public confession, brimming with brutal candor, mortification, triumph, barely suppressed anger, and considerable critical distance on the little girl that was. To photographic literalists, the truth about her process will be somewhat less exhilarating and curiously reminiscent of dubious documentary projects such as Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), in which Bourke-White's portraits of struggling American farmers were accompanied by Caldwell's contrived statements. Still, first impressions matter and Johnson turns this ambiguity to artistic account, benefiting from the vulnerability of the images and the vivacity of her informants' stories to emulate the ebb and flow of photographically induced memory. With considerable agility, she walks a very fine line between imagination and memory. Imagination is a friend to memory, but innovation for its own sake is not. Johnson appears to know that, and while she plays her game of correlation, her book's fidelity to the qualities of the photographic object and the grain of the conversing voices makes a space for spectatorial intervention. Do I feel this because of my own Catholic girlhood? Perhaps, but is that necessarily a weakness? After all, the vernacular begins and ends at home. Does Johnson's act of authorship thus constitute a meta-vernacular, in which my own embarrassed authoring is released, or is such a notion so contradictory as to be pure nonsense? Yet unsure of where the vernacular is, I am fairly certain where it is not.

Fiona Tan's *Vox Populi: Norway* teases the spectator with Kodak's universal promise of local knowledge and intimacy (Figure 3). The genesis of the work is a commission by the Norwegian parliament.

Tan toured the country, pouring over the offerings of 100 Norwegians who wanted their snapshots to be part of the national album. Tan chose 267 photographs for the mural and made a sub-selection for her artist's book, grouping the images under three headings: portraits, home, and nature. Home is the largest section: home is where the babies, the elderly, the pets, and the food are. It is also where the flash is, bouncing off the walls and mirrors, contouring the bodies in dark lines that underscore the spontaneity of this moment, that moment, and the next one, with wearing universality. In nature, the bodies seem even more robotic, functioning as staffage in vast open areas, or occupying their domain through weaponry or other forms of technology. Inside or outside, photography is the collection's common denominator, catalyzing activity, demarcating both space and spatial experience. In short, Tan's divisions are more formal than scientific: *pace Godfrey*, but if this is sociology, the discipline is doomed. As Suzanne Cotter writes: "[Tan] pulls apart the assumptions implicit in documentary

Fig 3 Fiona Tan, detail from *Vox Populi, Norway* (Book Works, 2005). Original in color

process to create a new and infinitely more elastic space in which the verifiable and pure conjecture are confused and scattered by the unquantifiable collection of experiences that make up individual subjectivity" (Tan 2006: 120). In other words, *Vox Populi: Norway* is Tan's selection and arrangement. From the particulars of the participants' lives, Tan has constructed a narrative of national cohesiveness in a structure of clever alternations between posed, flashed, somewhat isolated figures, deathly in their stillness, and candid, intertwining figures, alive to the camera. That they are all Norwegians is unquestionable—them's the facts—but nationality is merely the pretext for the artist's "Family of Tan," an exercise that she has since repeated within the city limits of Sydney, Australia, and Tokyo, Japan.[3] *Vox Populi* has become a trademark for Tan's artistic curatorship. There are no homes, no resting places, in such an elastic space.

Performative Practices

Hans-Peter Feldmann could also be classified as a collector and user of found photographs. As Godfrey says, Feldmann is interested in archives, and especially in their copiousness and integrity which he treats with great delicacy. His prodigious practice offers

Fig 4 Hans-Peter Feldmann, detail from *Porträt* (Schirmer/Mosel, 1994)

two examples that are complementary to each other, while casting the collection bookworks examined to this point in stark relief. Spanning fifty years (1944–1994) in the life of one German woman, *Porträt* presents 324 black and white images in chronological order (Figure 4).

The same woman appears in every one. A comely and adventurous creature, she is photographed mostly at play, but there are also images at work, identification shots, commercial photographs, and even a few self-portraits. Reproducing everything in black and white homogenizes the group, but its real glue is the photogenic quality of the woman. She is a polymath of photographic performance, at one with the instrument, and this right from her childhood, and she is constantly expanding her repertoire of poses, grasping with astonishing acuity what is called for by different situations, different formats, different lenses. And yet she is always herself—the project is rooted in this individual, its formation by, and expression in, a photographic vernacular.

Another bookwork of Feldmann's from the same year, *Ferien*, concentrates as its title suggests on holiday snaps (Figure 5).

The book, as sold, is empty, save for a short text and one tipped-in color plate. It is accompanied by a packet of reproductions of color pictures taken at tourist destinations,

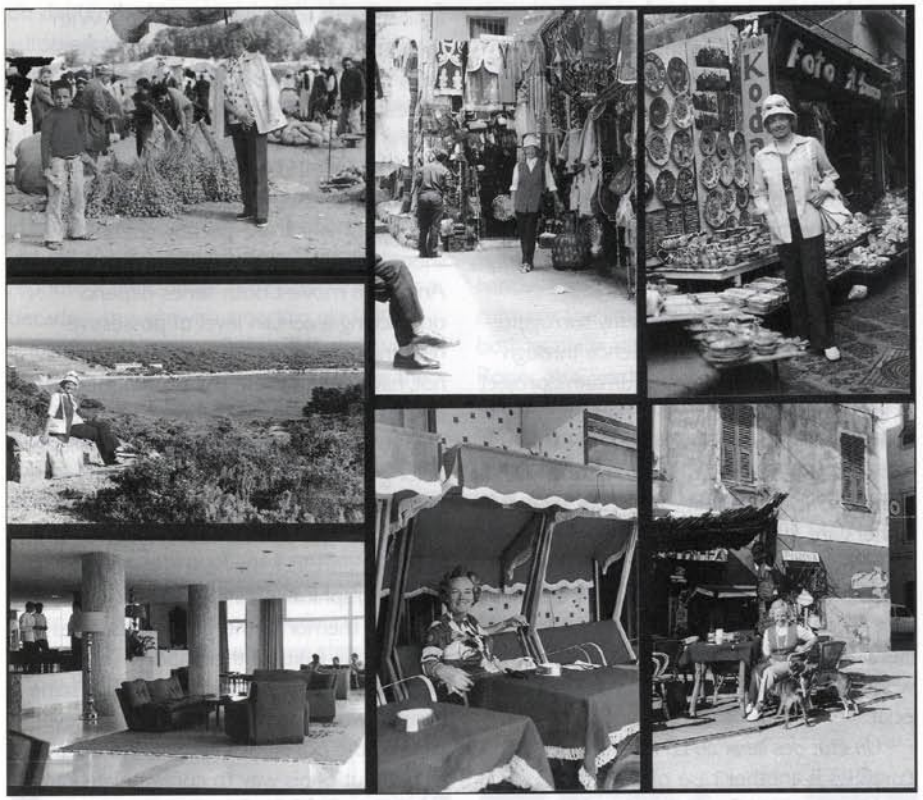

Fig 5 Hans-Peter Feldmann, details from *Ferien* (Weiner Secession, 1994). Original in color

places such as ruins, markets, natural wonders, and hotel pools. I own this book. My copy has 107 pictures, including some duplicates. I have never done what I was supposed to do: glue them into the book in my preferred order. In this, they are treated no differently than the drawerful of images earmarked for my own family album. *Ferien*'s collection appears to have come from a single source: as in *Porträt*, there is the recurrent figure of a woman, though here functioning more as a signature or as staffage, than as the object of fascination described above. Her neutrality, or near neutrality as a white, middle-class tourist, licenses the spectator to do what Feldmann suggests, compile the album as one wishes, or to do what I have done, revisit it occasionally to shuffle the pictures. *Ferien*'s performative aspects are therefore much stronger than *Porträt*'s; the handling of this bookwork is the making of it, a process that can only

ever be unfinished, a process whose final execution would cause the binding to explode. *Ferien* suspends time, as the best holidays do, and this is endless food for thought as I contemplate this woman—my representative—posing among the Others (snake-charmers and exotic beasts) and picking through bazaars and flea markets for the tourist trophies she will triumphantly carry home.

That I take this woman as my surrogate—trying to enter her life experience through my imagination—anchors Feldmann's project in the vernacular, though not hers, but my own. I write of her physical and human surroundings as "exotic" but of course she is the exotic element in every case. The Others are at home, just as I am at home when I pull *Ferien* from the shelf. Bruno Rosier's rephotographic project, *Un état des lieux ou La mémoire des parallèles* (2005) literalizes the identification that I am making with *Ferien*'s traveler, and with considerable éclat.

Un état des lieux ou La mémoire des parallèles is another case of flea market discovery, twenty-five prints dated from 1937 to 1953 depicting a man posing before famous prospects in Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Greece, Haiti, Iceland, Peru, Portugal, Uruguay, and the United States.

Most of his travels took place after World War II; Algeria, 1937, and Iceland, 1939, are the exceptions. The pretexts for these journeys are unknown; their cover story is tourism. The sites include natural wonders, such as Niagara Falls and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove, and monumental constructions, such as Hatshepsut's temple and the New York skyline. In the source photographs, this man, known to us as R.T., stands alone against these nameable backdrops. With the support of the Musée Européenne de la Photographie, Rosier set out to recreate the found images, himself taking on the leading role. As a rephotographic project, *Un état des lieux* is reminiscent in its ambitions of Cindy Bernard's *Ask the Dust* (1991), for which she photographed the shooting locations of twenty-one mainstream American movies. Both series depend on exciting a certain level of possessive recognition in spectators who may, or may not, have visited these places, either bodily or cinematically. They are reprises of collective memory; as Emmanuel Kraft puts it, "they belong to us. They are as much a part of our common patrimony as our personal memories, real or invented" (Rosier 2005). In Rosier's project, they are also doubly autobiographical—R.T.'s and Bruno Rosier's lives and memories merge on these sites through the fruits of their labors. Tourism is work, as Morin argued long ago: "The same Parisian who ignores the Louvre, has never crossed the portal of a church, and does not go out of his way to contemplate Paris from the top of the Sacré-Coeur will not miss a chapel in Florence, will pace up and down museums, and exhaust himself climbing the Campaniles or getting to the hanging gardens of Ravello" (Morin 2005: 18–19). For Morin, the historic view is already a souvenir. The musts of any travel guide are sites already "embalmed," haunted by spirits, while the snapping tourist seeks something for the future, "enriched by the power of remembrance squared" (ibid.: 19).

Rosier presents the original and the remake of R.T.'s tourism side-by-side. The scientific aspect of his project is thus served; viewers are able to compare the two pasts

on display, the histories of place and the autobiographies of two men. R.T. sets the bar of self-presentation very high; he has traveled great distances; he takes the business of *being there* very seriously. His poses are manly and resolute, and with rising intensity, so are his double's. Each photographic instant drives Rosier's stake deeper into R.T.'s ground. As R.T. ages, so does Rosier—his rephotographic project stretched out over a decade—though with a certain elasticity. In the Lisbon pictures (1949/1994), their visits are separated by forty-nine years, while the two men's trips to Algeria (1937/2003) are sixty-six years apart. But just as the present triumphs over the past, the organization of this book imposes Rosier's timeline as he works through this archive, the photographic legacy of another man's life. Each consumated pairing puts these syncretic twins one step closer to completion of their extended self-portrait, and one step deeper into a Barthesian foreshadowing of their own death. This simple fact is affectingly performed in the 2001 re-enactment of R.T.'s self-portrait of 1948 at Iguazu Falls, Argentina (Figure 6).

Shot from above, with a plunging guard rail and immeasurable force and space opening out below, R.T. stands in profile to the camera. He seems pensive and self-contained, and yet a blurring of his left hand—some exploratory gesture arrested—ruptures the limits of his body, extending it both spatially and temporally. His double, Rosier, also reaches forward, though not so much imitating as completing the gesture of R.T. and somehow meeting him through his outstretched fingers. The dematerialization of R.T. is purely photographic: it is something that only the camera saw and the film recorded, the doubled trace of his presence and inevitable disappearance. The *punctum* (my empathetic embarrassment) is the doubling of the wristwatch, then blurred, later sharp. Rosier's re-enactments intensify

Fig 6 Bruno Rosier, detail from *Un état des lieux ou La mémoire des parallèles*. Argentine, Chutes d'Iguaçu, 1948 (left) and 2001 (right). (Editions Lieux Dits, 2005)

the melancholy and mystery of images set adrift from their owner, and they do so by re-domesticating them as vehicles of armchair travel and private photographic mourning.

New Works from Old

Michael Snow produced his first public photographic work in 1962 but his professional interest in photography, and specifically in the photographic vernacular, had been active since the late 1950s when he produced a series of twenty-two charcoal drawings based on two photographic portraits that he had clipped from a magazine. In its final form, *Drawn Out* (1959) includes the found clipping, a reflexive Duchampian gesture that marks the beginning of Snow's incorporation of found, or otherwise acquired, photographic images into his work. This process has run parallel to his creation of photographs from scratch. Common to both modes of production is Snow's fascination with the nature of photography, specifically its indexicality, mechanism, and potential as a tool for art-making. His appropriations are undeniably licensed by twentieth-century avant-garde attitudes toward art-making, and especially its authorization by the artist, though his actions do not tilt at notions of originality or the status of the modern art museum. Photographic re-presentation is a means of heightening or altering perception of visual phenomena; this realization has led to a number of mixed-media and cinematic appropriations from the public photographic realm. In his bookworks, however, Snow's recourse to other people's pictures has drawn exclusively on his personal archive. *Michael Snow/A Survey* (1970), an artist's book published by the Art Gallery of Ontario as the catalog of Snow's first major survey exhibition, also surveyed Snow's life, beginning with his ancestors and using their family photographs, his own photographic memorabilia, as well as his engineer-father's documentary photographs, for their biographical information and formal characteristics. He accompanied these images with a family history, one that requires a very close reading as it is set in a small font. The Snow and Levesque family photographs merge with his own collection of snapshots and photographic documentation of his work. Snow provides a key to the collection by reproducing the gridded layout sheets whose last entry is his first public photographic work, *Four to Five* (1962). The placement of this work in the book marks a turn away from Snow's photographic memories toward his current artistic concerns, and personal photographs inserted after that point relate more directly to the works of art reproduced nearby. For example, images of *Snow Storm February 7 1967* (1967), photographic studies in shades of gray shot through the window of Snow's New York apartment are followed in the book by six snapshots of "Denyse and Michael Snow and Buck" (a dog) playing in deep snow before their maternal grandparents' home in Chicoutimi, Quebec. The book's penultimate image is of a snapshot taken by Denyse Snow in 1936 in which the future artist demonstrates the strange photographic effect of foreshortening by holding his feet up to the camera.

That this photographic assemblage is presented in the form of a book seems obvious, but in the work of this artist, form is never a minor consideration. *Michael Snow/A Survey* is a bookwork, in the full sense of the term—that is, a set of propositions about what a book of images and text can be. Snow improvises freely with layout and type. He emphasizes the mechanical nature of the process and alludes to chance with instances of reversed type, variable margins, overprinting, and blank pages. He makes the beholder participate in the book's eccentric construction. There is much handling, much page-turning, required to match the captions with the pictures; their shapes and relative positions must be committed to memory in order to retrieve the names. Vernacular photographs are interleaved with documents of a conceptual art practice. Family photographs fit into this family of resemblance as black and white prints first of all, and secondly, as compressions of real-life, real-time vitality onto a photographic surface—images of life. Morin's study of *photogénie* seems to have predicted the pregnancy of Snow's home-grown dualities:

> An extraordinary anthropological coincidence: technique of a technical world, physicochemical reproduction of things, product of one particular civilization, the photograph looks like the most spontaneous and universal of mental products. It contains the genes of the image (the mental image) and of the myth (the double)—or, if we prefer, it is image and myth in a nascent state. (Morin 2005: 33)

Snow's most recent bookwork is *Scraps for the Soldiers* (Figure 7). The work is an almost perfectly faithful reproduction of an album compiled by Snow's aunt, Dimple F. Snow (1896–1978) in a scrapbook published during the First World War by the T. Eaton Company, to be filled by "friends at home" and sent to the soldiers overseas. Dimple Snow filled its pages with snapshots taken before, during, and possibly after the war. A variety of formats and mounting corners suggest that arrangements accrued over several years, while the inscriptions appear to have been done at one sitting. The handwriting is consistent and wet ink has sometimes bled through or blotted on facing pages and pictures. The scrapbook is signed and dated 1 February, 1921, in the same treacherous black ink. Now reproduced in its entirety, this work of art is credited to Dimple F. Snow, 1921, and Michael Snow, 2007.

The photographs are lively, cheerful. As Snow writes: "The book is a record of events relating to the faraway war but most importantly it is a record of some summer holidays that still resound with happy laughter echoing over a lake." Visually, war is a recurrent sub-theme, whether through portraits or candid shots of uniformed soldiers and nurses, or snapshots of radiant young women soliciting donations for the cause on tag days. When Snow looks at the album, he recognizes some of the figures as relatives and all of the figures as part of a prosperous anglophone set, taking its pleasures in the luxury hotels of the Ontario lake country or roughing it at Bear Trap Camp, Nova Scotia. If Snow sees this world from within and without, so it seems, does Dimple who never self-identifies as "me" but writes either "Dimple" or "Dimp," the latter sometimes with quotation marks around the word, as though, in novelist Margaret Atwood's words, "she were citing some written opinion to the effect that she is who she is" (Atwood 2006: 214). One

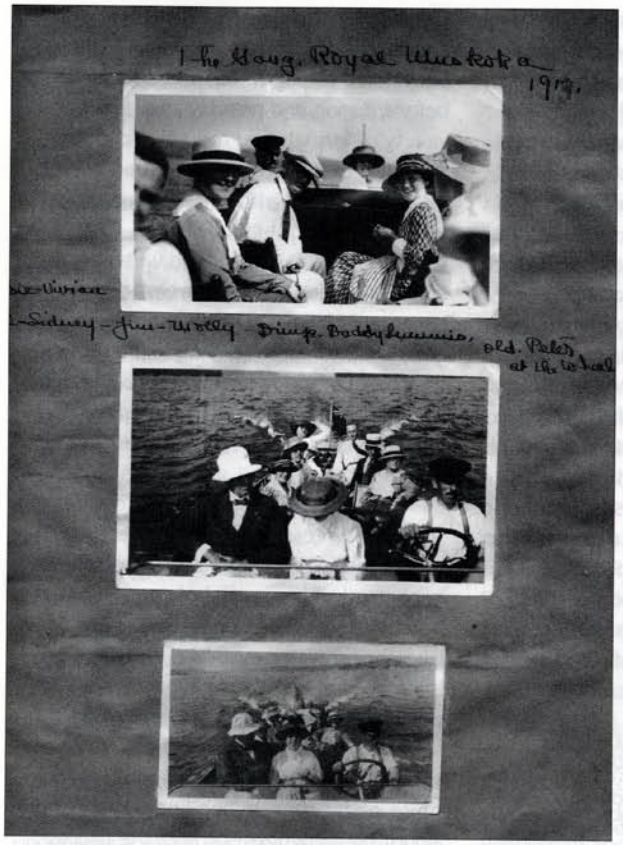

Fig 7 Dimple F. Snow and Michael Snow, detail from *Scraps for the Soldiers* (Zona Archives, 2007). Original in color

effect of the work, noted by Snow, is of local happiness—this despite the tragedy of the far distant European war, which took the life of Geoffrey Snow, Dimple's brother. With these scraps of memory, Dimple creates the myth of never-ending pleasure; Snow creates its double.

To translate this work from the private to the public realm, to turn a scrapbook into an artist's book, three stages were involved. First, Snow had the idea in response to an invitation from artist-publisher Maurizio Nannucci to produce an artist's book under the imprint of Zona Archives. This brought the scrapbook he had inherited to light. Second, Snow wrote a brief introduction which has been inserted on the front and inside front cover in four languages: English, Italian, French, and German. A thousand copies of the book were printed in Florence.

At Lucca, the third act took place: Snow physically signed thirty copies of the book.

The conceptual signature was already affixed for, as a bookwork, *Scraps for the Soldiers* continues Snow's investigation of the nature of photography and photographic reproduction. Extending the performative aspects of *A Survey*, *Scraps for the Soldiers* is almost eerie in its tactility. Digital reproduction of the entire scrapbook has kept the browning and crackle of the sheet, the dog-eared corners, the marks of excision, the weight of other objects in a box or a drawer. Lying before me on a table, the object seems almost to breathe. Digitization here captures the auratic qualities of the photographic object. If Snow's were a critical practice, *Scraps for the Soldiers* could be seen as a stern critique of collecting practices that strip photographs of their meaning and materiality in the name of visual poetry, collective memory, or universal photographic experience. *Scraps for the Soldiers* translates vernacular photography into art by retaining the specificity and mystery of its origins.

Is There Anybody Home?

Since surrealism, the avant-garde has made a convention of haunting the margins of the culture—its flea markets—and recuperating its photographic detritus as art. Dean and Johnson show us that art is still *there* for the taking and remaking. Tan proves that ordinary people are prepared to share their photographs, are indeed proud to play a part in a collective portrait of their country or city. There is nothing new in that discovery. Falling between the cracks of originality and sentimentality, it fails the avant-garde and it fails the vernacular. Feldmann and Rosier bring us something different because they keep hold of the crucial element—this willing de-skilling that is the optimum state of reception. Making strange on the basis of the anonymous and the exotic is not something we coolly contemplate; it is something we do. Their works excite the imagination; they take us by the hand and our reception is performative. Johnson's project does that too, though an understanding of its genesis may ultimately prick the balloon. Snow, for his part, honestly locates photographic experience in the personal: he shares his family's photographic hoard, shifting it from the edges of the art world to the core of his practice. This gesture is immersive and moving, and it is also richly informative about the uses of photography in ordinary life.

Batchen writes:

> Vernaculars are photography's *parergon*, the part of its history that has been pushed to the margins (or beyond them to oblivion) precisely in order to delimit what is and what is not proper to this history's enterprise … vernacular photography is the absent presence that determines its medium's historical and physical identity; it is that thing that decides what proper photography is not. (Batchen 2002: 58–59)

And that identity is improperly and unapologetically rooted in personal, present-based feelings and desires, the very opposite of Modernism's disinterest and universality, and just as foreign to Postmodernism's ironic corrections.

Snow is neither a historian, nor a theorist. His works of art are the seedbeds of theory and they are inscribed in art history because they locate a medium's most vexatious and intriguing problems and inform their

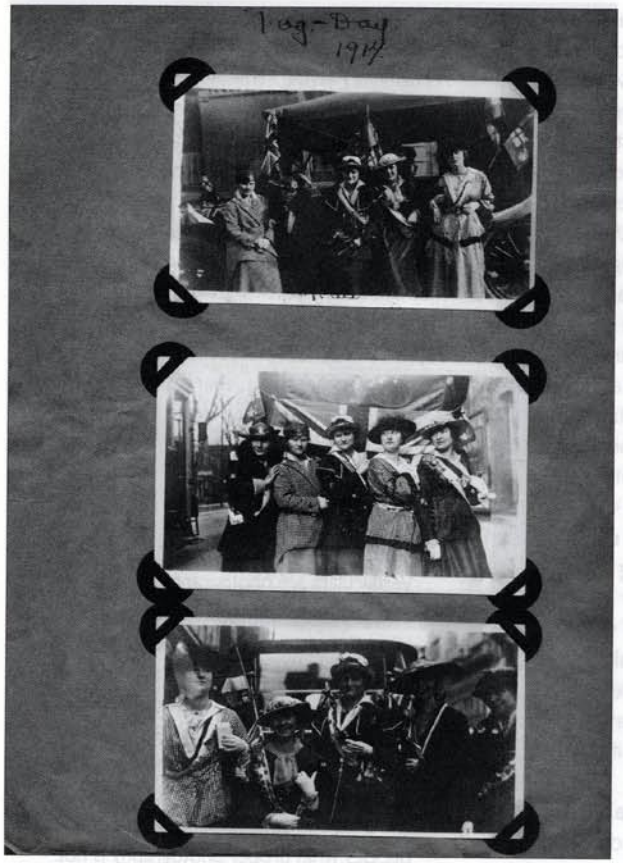

Fig 8 Dimple F. Snow and Michael Snow, detail from *Scraps for the Soldiers* (Zona Archives, 2007). Original in color

solutions. In this case, they encourage us to think about our feelings. *Scraps for the Soldiers* is a touching expression of singular happiness made in a time of general mourning (Figure 8).

This message comes from the other side—Dimple speaks from the grave—and with a pragmatism and joyfulness in the moment that is almost brutal—its madness is certainly not tamed. Earlier I spoke of primitivism's asymmetrical relationships, and their expression in acts of photographic appropriation. What we see in *Scraps for the Soldiers* is the reversal of that power dynamic: between Snow and his aunt Dimple, who knows better of what is spoken and unspoken in this piece? From the edges of an avant-garde practice comes a simple photographic lesson about the particulars of life and death; loftier ideas are also there for

those who seek abstractions to assuage their grief.

Notes

1 Batchen's interrogation of photographic history and attention to the vernacular as a significant omission has been taken up by a number of critics and curators, notably by Leslie K. Brown in her exhibition for the Photographic Resource Center, Boston, *Contemporary Vernacular: Contemporary Responses to Family and Found Photographs* (2004), see *In the Loupe: The Newsletter for the Photographic Resource Center of Boston University* 28(6) (2004): 8–11.

2 Sayre refers to John Szarkowsi's presentation of the first two portraits in the Museum of Modern Art's thematic exhibition *Mirrors and Windows* (1978). Nixon's images were classed by Szarkowski as "windows," thereby asserting their transparentness and specificity.

3 The author reviewed Tan's *Vox Populi: Norway* and Johnson's *Feast* for *Source*, under the editorship of Richard West.

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