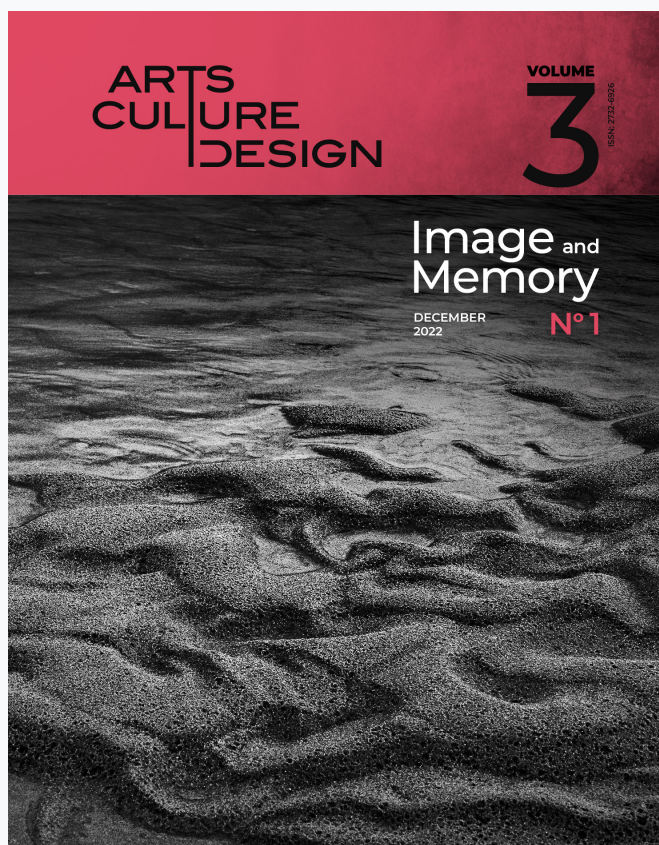


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Image and Memory



THE BALANCE OF PRIVATE IMAGE AND MEMORY

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ARTICLE

THE BALANCE OF PRIVATE PHOTOGRAPH AND MEMORY

FROM SNAPSHOT CULTURE TO
NETWORKED IMAGE

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Nina Kotamanidou's work focuses on everyday life and the representation of socially instigated, informal circumstances drenched in the feel-good indulgence of common culture. Within this context she looks for associations that give vent to privately nurtured emotions and autobiographical narratives, as DIY manifestations of contemporary selfhood. Accordingly, her academic research explores the field of informal, quotidian uses of visual culture and its meaning-making procedures. She works on a variety of media, such as painting, video and installation. She has participated in many exhibitions and has curated collective shows in Greece. Initially she studied painting in Aristotle University, Greece and then earned a PhD in Art (Wimbledon College of Art// UAL) specializing in video as a mode of self-presentation within pop culture. She works as an Academic Fellow in the Department of Interior Architecture, IHU.

THE BALANCE OF PRIVATE PHOTOGRAPH AND MEMORY

FROM SNAPSHOT CULTURE TO NETWORKED IMAGE

Abstract

The invention of photography was followed by its extensive usage as visual documentation of any possible scene, by nature, human, object or event. The watchful eye of the camera was hailed as an impassive observer of facts, a witness that tells no lies entrusted with the preservation of public and personal histories.

Under these assumptions it was connected with the crystallization of collective memory as well as the wide initiation of private archiving in the form of the family album, especially when easy-to-use camera technology became commercially affordable. In this short essay, accepting a line of continuity between snapshots and networked photographs despite technological and cultural ruptures, their attributes and uses will be held accountable for providing a mediated, visual shelter to notions of personal and collective memory.

Although this kind of imagery is deemed non-art, my approach is conducted as an art-fuelled investigation, with a mind to set a field of potent exchanges between memory function and images for cultural negotiation.

For that, using interdisciplinary discursive analysis I will look at the evolution of photographic imagery from snapshot to networked within a branch of personal, self-produced representations that have affected both our autobiographical referencing and collective remembrance.

The notion of memory, as the performative interaction between person, technology, media and narrative will be seen against snapshot and networked photography as an informal, meaning-making tactic.

In particular, network photography is acknowledged mainly through its manifestations on visual posts on Facebook or Instagram.

While snapshots as a genre satisfied the need to handle privately the visual documentation of our past and allegedly keep time frozen, networked photographs establish memory in fluidity as remembrance of the present moment just-turned-into-past.

The above positioning prompts a bipartite question: (a) do networked photographs support memory on a personal and collective level in ways similar to snapshot culture, and (b) in the advent of changes has the flow of memory been altered?

Keywords

vernacular photography

snapshot

networked photograph

networked memory

INTRODUCTION

Quite recently I came across a picture on the frontpage of a Greek newspaper. This is what I saw: someone – perhaps a soldier, sitting atop of the cannon of a rather battered tank, was taking a photo of himself while two more fellow soldiers, with guns in their hands, looked at him doing it. The caption read “Ukrainian police officers take a selfie on a destroyed Russian tank in the liberated town of Izyum in the Kharkiv region on September 14”. From this I deduced that it was a documentation of a selfie in the aftermath of a hellish situation – another proof that even war selfies should not come as a surprise anymore. I was flooded with questions concerning not the documentary photo in the paper (which I searched and found on the internet with no difficulty), but the photograph which was being taken in the photograph, the selfie as the caption called it. A stranger’s snap is usually perceived tacky or boring so I had no curiosity to actually see the image, but I was curious about who was going to see it anyway.



Figure 1. Ukrainian police officers take a selfie on a destroyed Russian tank in the town of Izyum, recently liberated by Ukrainian Armed Forces, in Kharkiv region, Ukraine on September 14, 2022. Image: Gleb Garanich/Reuters, Caption: Al Jazeera

How would it circulate? Was it shot for personal use only? Would it be sent as a private photo message to family and friends or would it be instantly uploaded to Social Network Sites (SNS here-on), such as Facebook or Instagram, as a post? Would it ever be printed and mounted on a wall? Maybe an ephemeral scroll on Facebook could be the only wall this photo would end up showing. Vernacular photography becomes easily pointless (Chalfren, 1981).

How does this picture work for memory’s sake? Does it keep private memory preserved or updated? Will it reach and enrich collective memory? Is this a digital snap? A selfie? A post? A visual mnemonic ruse? A memory-to-be? Does it do the trick? In accordance with these thoughts, I look at snapshot photography more as an agent of personal lore rather than an aesthetic formulation.

Thus, in this text the relation of autobiographical remembrance to images is handled through a snapshot-turning-to-networked memory debate based on attitudes and uses, as shaped through changes in technological affordances. Consequently, the discussion here follows the changes happening to snapshots as cultural artifacts and memory capsules due to their advancement from analogue to digital to networked photos observing their personal uses as mediated images. As the secluded photo album was superseded by the ubiquitous flow of online photographs, the text observes whether

private remembrance shifted accordingly towards an extrovert version of remembering, analogous to the current incessant processing of published images.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

In tackling the ways that autobiographical memory has been infused and is supported in personal photographs, I have considered the current debates on vernacular photography, networked imagery and autobiographical memory using interdisciplinary discursive analysis from photography, media, psychology and art discourses. Although I draw information from the writing of scholars in these disciplines, my interest is not sparked by social studies or media and communications studies, anthropological studies or an ethnographical approach. Being both a practicing artist and a trained scholar I probe these notions with a mind to underpin potent pictorial uses and probable meanings in art discourses. In that, I am not interested in technological details about apparatuses, systems of circulation, conditions of usage in any other way than to delineate the dynamic framework for the relations pertinent to my question. Moreover, the thought that while snapshot imagery has the plain goal to bear witness it “aims always beyond what it presents” underlines this text (Rancière, 2007). In order to define vernacular photography, I take into consideration three terms used to characterize behaviours and traits of everyday life photography, all initiated in the pre-digital era and addressing “specific junctures” of the debate (Cobley & Haeffner, 2009).

The term snapshot, originally denoting “a quick repeated shot of a gun with no deliberate aim” was coined in 1860 by British theorist and scientist John Frederick William Herschel (D’Aloia & Parisi, 2016). It was connected to the marketing of Kodak#1 in 1888 by Eastman and the introduction to the market of simple, affordable cameras. Soon, cheaper technology allowed casual picture-taking and signalled the turn to popular subjects as leisure activities and family-life (Raz-Russo, 2011). Still, it took years for the term to set into its present meaning: a quick, impulsive, untrained take, characterized by “practicality, informality, speed and immediacy” (D’Aloia & Parisi, 2016). Vernacular photography, “a genre that is at once deeply moving and intensely banal” (Zuromskis, 2008a), despite its vast area of production, has remained persistently ignored in official discourses, probably because it refuses to conform to any “formalist art-historical narrative” (Batchen, 2001). Although vernacular photos can take on many appearances they definitely are seen as one thing: non-art photography. This suggests that aesthetic criteria should remain out of any conversation and the genre should be ascribed to the realm of “common usage and communication” (Whalen, 2009).

The term “tends to be used to signify all that relates to local culture, the domestic or the amateur” (Alves, 2017) so it carries a lot of cultural undertones which connect it with the home mode, a potent keyword that delineates all the amateur picture-taking activities (both in video and photography, positioned in and out of the camera: capturing, editing, archiving) which happen within the confines of family life (Chalfren, 1987; Musello, 1980). Chalfren, speaking from the point of anthropology and visual communication, describes a field of visual modesty which “stresses a documentary function in order to produce a copy of a familiar reality” (Chalfren, 1987). Similarly, Musello (1980) discusses vernacular photography from an ethnographic viewpoint, as shaped mostly by social norms rather than technology. Such understandings shape vernacular photography as the area of spontaneous, familiar, close to home and the heart, untrained image making, partly recreational activity and consistent personal documentation, unperturbed by proficiency of equipment, technical mastery and artistic interpretation¹. Memory-function is considered innate to the medium.

Chalfren (1981) speaks of a “record keeping function”, “of a collection of people”, “for a collection of people”. His phrasing reveals snapshots as performing a personal/collective memory function for a specific audience. As analogue technology turned digital, vernacular photography managed to leave the confines of the photo album and moved on to become a versatile tool for personal communication and self-presentation. Within this context, I refer to personal photography² in accordance to Van Dijck’s (2008) suggestion of the term which, she argues, is used to emphasize the shift from “family re-presentation” to “self-presentation” (Harrison in Van Dijck, 2008). The overlapping of all three terms in the text implies a field of interlocking tensions that speaks of sincerity, conformity, everydayness, self-presentation and remembrance. In this set-up I will discuss the memory function of snapshot as the most “reliable memory-aid” (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 57) in analogue and digital era regarding both the maintenance of private memory as “a means for autobiographical remembering” (ibid.) and the cultural processing of remembrance on collective memory. Autobiographical memory is traced back to episodic memory and is explored in its relation to the home mode, the networked image and the concept of networked memory, shaping a process of remembrance facilitated by the affordances of online mediations. Nelson (2003) offers up a key to connect episodic memory to the ideas presented. She states that:

“If self-stories reflect general cultural narratives, whether purveyed in myths, novels, or in contemporary forms such as movies and television, there should be observable changes in the content, form, or function of autobiographical memory over this period.” (Nelson, 2003, p. 133)

Vernacular photography is part of the “general cultural narrative” of authenticity and truthfulness in quotidian representations of the self, providing the proofs of a “successful” living, which includes the enjoyable and competent presentation of the self in culturally resonant terms.

1. Formalist criteria and visual aesthetics aside, these cultural artefacts can be entangled to art discourses from various viewpoints, such as the reclamation of authenticity, the rejection of the institutionalization of art, photography as social performance, photography as public memory, autobiographical debates to name but a few (Cross, 2015).

2. Van House gives a brief, but comprehensive definition: “I define personal photography as that which is done by non-professionals for themselves and their friends and intimates. It subsumes but is not limited to family and tourist photography” (Van House, 2011, p. 125)

Within this framework, when snapshots are transformed into networked snaps, both their appearances and their functions have changed in order to conform to new rituals of image-making, and thus to participate in the current visual lore. Following these changes, it will be discussed whether these are reflected on the “content”, or the “form”, or “the function” of autobiographical memory, as an occasion where the circulating imagery dictates the ways we fashion our stories. This notion of memory, as an interaction of cultural representations and internal meaning-making, is also in agreement with Van Dijck’s (2007, p. 28) suggestion that “mediated memories...are complex manifestations of a complex interaction between brain, material objects and the cultural matrix from which they arise”.

SNAPSHOT LESSONS

“For this project it was the fact that we all take very similar photographs but we never learned how to do this. Our parents don’t tell us, we don’t learn it at school, and people all over the world do it nevertheless. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s because the resulting snapshots do what people expect them to do, and that’s all there is.” (Schmid, 2013, p. 2)

Artist Joachim Schmid who had started working with found snapshots from 1980, has touched on the straightforward, hands-on practice of snapshots from a pragmatic point of view. It is an acquired knowledge, passed on without any “official” education but based on the time-honoured method of trial and error combined with the certainty that ‘they work’, as he says in the same interview. Whether one acknowledges in them the depths of ‘sentiment’, or the sloppy edges of ‘sentimentality’ (Cobley & Haeffner, 2009, pp. 126-27) their emotional cargo is undoubtedly there. People maintain the circulation of clichés because happy contented images have a reassuring effect on them. Indeed, who wants to create unhappy memories? On the other hand, many vernacular photographs, contrary to the core idea of contentment that infiltrates their making, bring back unpleasant emotions. Overall, there was never a question if snapshots did the trick. In line with Schmid’s reasoning, quite simply people would have moved on to the next best thing, as it always happens and probably has already happened nowadays that contemporary snapshots are not exactly as they used to be.

Entwined with the emotional charge of snapshots is their function as an archive of private visual referencing, a visual indicator that verifies the oral stories of personal folklore which ran within family life. Musello (1980, p. 39) cites Sekula’s notion of photography as a ‘realist folk myth’ through which “photographs are conceived by home-moders as mechanical recordings of real events”. This claim brings forth the veracity vs reality discussion on photography and the reliability of photographs to represent an official, accurate version of memory. As Sontag (1973) has observed, people treat cameras as if it is the apparatus itself that takes decisions, personified in a mechanical, automated supremacy, “it is the camera that sees”. A complementary notion to this is a general consensus that photographs ‘know’. This is quite a disputable notion as snapshots do not happen on their own. On the contrary, they take sides, and the recollections they trigger based on their representational value “are drawn to perform in the rhetoric of social memory” (Arnold-de & Leal, 2018, p. 3) leaving the personal narrative a mystery, an agent always locked in itself.

Whether snapshots work as mnemonic aids, as an excuse for the retrieval of forgotten details, as the starting point of oral narratives or as the validation of what has passed, we can assume, in accordance to Rancière (2007) that there is a part of sheer visuality that remains mute and stares back. Moreover, Arnold-de & Leal observe that family photographs “become decontextualized and recontextualized triggering and shaping memories, inviting story-telling, helping us to negotiate the past and the future” (Arnold-de & Leal, 2018, p. 2). In this light it becomes obvious that we can never take for granted that vernacular photographs are “transparent documents offering veracity” (Arnold-de & Leal, 2018, p. 3). Whether they refer to an unsophisticated, straightforward representation, snapshots allude wordlessly to what they have omitted, and work as intermediates that “point inevitably elsewhere” (Cross, 2015). Thus, they are not perfectly frozen moments but material submitted for interpretation (Arnold-de & Leal, 2018) which might alter as time progresses.

SNAPSHOT MEMORY

“No one sees your snapshots quite like you see them” (Chalfren, 1981, p. 113)

Vernacular photographs, although evaluated on the grounds of their “representational values” rather than “aesthetic or expressive properties” (Musello, 1980) cannot provide viewers with a “magical mirror of past and present ‘true’ situations” (Chalfren, 1981). Regardless of popular claims about their veracity, their limitations are both external and internal. Considering the external factors, Chalfren (1981) observes that snapshots record ‘special’ or ‘significant situations’ but the ‘qualitative dimensions’ of such descriptions are not clear.

Actually, this notion works backwards: every recorded moment becomes special because this is what finally has remained. In addition, the extensive editing of the analogue era, which allowed only certain photos to enter the family album, was continued with a vengeance in the digital-era, when people started using their cameras differently. Digital technologies brought immediate control over the picture, and with the simple usage and no extra cost for films and printing, the established process of production so far was disrupted. People could review instantly their takes, delete unwanted ones, experiment more and as a result they started taking more snapshots, to the point that photographs stopped being as unique as their analogue counterparts (Keightley & Pickering, 2014). Still, digital photos were deemed perishable, since these archives could easily either become corrupted and permanently lost, or forgotten for good in unnamed computer files and CDs (Keightley & Pickering, 2014; Van House & all, 2011).

Consequently, the traditional relationship of private memory and personal photography was shifted towards immediacy, plurality and the recording of trivial scenes and a loss of the uniqueness of the shot. As for the internal limitations, a photograph whether material or immaterial is a two-dimensional surface with prefabricated dimensions. It takes less than a second to happen and occupies a specific viewpoint. This spatiotemporal rigidity in its production in conjunction to the palpable edges of its materialization delimits the photograph to include certain things and omit others. Sometimes the allegedly all-watchful camera-eye misses a lot. Tight close-ups, pan-outs shots, out of focus blurs, are some examples where many details are obliterated. In comparison, human perception is not restricted by the two-dimensional, somehow flat photographic framing neither can be contained within it. Photographs hold very short, imperceptible timelines while memory extends throughout an event. In particular, episodic memory which is responsible for the creation of autobiographical memories is formed as a narrative structure (Heersmink, 2018). Thus, it deals with sequences of events, providing answers for the when, what, and who in pertinent ways specifically to any given person's life (King, 2010), so that this “subjective re-experiencing of personal events”, “involves movement, non-visual sensory information and reconstruction” (Tulving in Fawns, 2014, p. 8). Following memory's temporal corrosion several versions of an event circulate at various times, even more if they are told by different persons as each participant relates to their personalized story.

The diversity of each individual narration is in stark contrast to the global homogeneity of snapshot as representational form. Usually, the social setup of a snapshot needs no guesswork, but understanding a story or an emotional process needs further explanation. This muteness is probably what Musello (1980, p. 40) has expressed when he noted that there is no “explicit system of conventions and rules for decoding the home mode message form”. Even though the memory function of snapshots ‘seems implicit’ (Musello, 1980) photographic representation is “too coherent and too linear” to equal memory, which is malleable and fictional (Batchen, 2004, p. 16).

In this regard, memory and image form an unstable, precarious co-existence that fluctuates as memories fade, narrations vary and images remain unwilling to be anything but themselves. Nevertheless, throughout the history of home mode people insist on taking pictures as an efficacious way to create mementos. This is probably the most prevailing mode of memory making in the 20th century, on the simple premise that it is better to have a photograph as a memory, even if it does not “say everything” than to have nothing at all (Cobley & Haeffner). In this, the idea of a snapshot as “the focal point of the memory system” upon which one can “build and build and build” seems rather resonant, for it refers to the experience of an event and not the actual moment,

its sole shortcoming that it explains the snapshot in too many words for the image that it is. This version of memory, which draws additional information as it comes along, reflects on memory “as constructed through a progressive layering of interactions” (Fawns, 2020, p. 903). Fawns speaks also of a ‘contextual scaffolding’ for the construction of memory which “combines inferred and ‘remembered’ information in which inferences enable remembrances and vice versa” (Fawns, 2020, p. 903, see also Heersmink, 2017, p. 3138).

In these accounts, a vernacular photograph is cryptic outside of the spatiotemporal frame of its unique circumstances and asks for (or promotes) verbal explaining. While oral narratives might explain snapshots and connect them to memories, photographs are primarily visual entities and it is their ‘non-verbal coordinates’ (Cobley & Haefner, 2009, p. 144) that people relish - whether about pose and lighting or as little as a crooked smile and a stained blouse. Thus, within the introverted seclusion of the home album, a snapshot holds a place in the family folklore. While insiders relate to the photos accordingly, it is almost impossible for outsiders to participate in the stories (and the memories) properly. As time goes by, oral accounts are gradually lost and photographs, even within the confines of home memories, become silent again. This ambivalence is exemplified by the turn to ‘found photography’ as “the found object of the moment” (Zuromskis, 2008a, p. 107).

Looking at strangers’ photographic archives and inserting found photographs in artworks employs memory as ‘borrowed’, rather than collectively shared an indication of a performative act which alludes to the utilization of someone else’s personal property.

Artists have employed this kind of images in order to draw attention to the inability to rely on their sameness because of their reticence³. Moreover, found vernacular photography’s appeal to collective memory can easily turn to the exoticism of imaginative experiences. Zuromskis (2008a; 2008b), on reviewing several exhibitions of snapshot photography held in museums from 2002 to 2008 is skeptical of such groupings⁴. She pinpoints that the tagging of photos as “visual elements of a ‘shared memory’, ‘strangely familiar’ despite their specific and dissociated origins” (Zuromskis, 2008a, p. 122) promote snapshots as ‘nostalgic’ and ‘generalized’ and therefore fail to communicate the “rich culture of snapshot photography”. In contrast, commenting on the exhibition “Pictures that matter” held in George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York, she praises the ‘brave’ curatorial decision to put on the walls of the museum snapshots with ‘blatant’ indifference to aesthetic conventions and “the ‘uniqueness’ of the image”. While she admits that as a spectator she was confronted by a “sea of thoroughly private, largely visually uninteresting images” (Zuromskis, 2008a, p. 124), “each image an isolated glimpse into the sentimental self-fashioning of a perfect stranger” (Zuromskis, 2008a, p. 123), she notes that due to this policy, vernacular photography avoided being drawn in “formalist aesthetics or generalized nostalgia”. Zuromskis’ reserve of nostalgia in the context of exhibiting ‘found’ snapshots can be connected to the secluded, personal environment where snapshots belong and where emotionally laden, meaningful recollections take place within a rightful context.

Snapshot memories are intense but private, hence when performing as collective memory they turn misleading, disorientating and bland.

The removal from context invokes a sense of ‘ideological’ nostalgia that, absent-mindedly, reflects on “the beauty of a ‘vanished’ past”, too generalized to open up a dialogue with the particular context that shaped it (Zuromskis, 2008a, p. 113). In short, snapshots remain private visual documents which resist being generalized as evidence of what has been. Boltanski, having employed snapshot photography in the early stages of his career, has claimed that family albums “do not represent reality, but only the reality of the family album” (Alves, 2017, p. 57). If snapshots act as “evocative objects” (Heersmink, 2018) with representational qualities, capable of containing a series of narratives, this is true only on a personal level.

3. Christian Boltanski in his work 10 portraits photography (1972) has played with such notions of ‘fake’ photographs that he presented to be from his childhood (but belonged to strangers). This use of the reliable photograph to form an unreliable autobiography was also explored in *Album de photos de la famille D, 1939-1964* (1971), when he reconstructed chronologically a family album (which belonged to a friend) and realized that it was impossible to convey any meaning apart from what the photos showed (Alves, 2017).

4. She notes that certain shows promoted an aesthetic appreciation of snapshot photography based on ‘happy accidents’ which provided intriguing visuals or others were proclaimed to be artistic, whereas snapshot photography is ‘rarely accidental’ and “certainly not made ‘without the intention to look good or bad’” (Zuromskis, 2008a: 113).

In the analogue era, as well as the early digital stages, such individual experiences were manifested as private recounting, both oral or non-verbal, thriving only within the confines of home, exchanged between relatives or close friends and preserved as series in albums and later in CDs or computer files.

NETWORKED SNAPS

"Now I recently got a little smart-phone and... I find myself many times a day, just you know, scrolling through them, yeah... but each one is like 'oh look at this, this is that day, look this is us having coffee'. I don't know why, I am getting more and more tearful and emotional about events and memories... Getting more emotions [laughs] like 'oh, I want to remember this?' I don't know, it's something like I appreciate some moments more. Like an ordinary day, coffee with your friend."

(Alma, a woman in her 30s who lives in Croatia, in Keightley & Pickering, 2014, p. 585)

In the previous sections I have already discussed the shifts in the production and usage of photographs that took place when cameras went digital, but the revamping of snapshots to mobile takes is more than a tribute to technological innovations. The omnipresence of mobile cameras alongside to the proliferation of Social Network Sites (SNS) have turned snapshots, formerly moored in the seclusion of home-mode, not just to mobile snaps, but into networked images, characterized by ubiquity, multi-layer textuality, connectivity and shareability (D'Aloia & Parisi, 2013; Mota, 2013; Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008; Hand, 2020). This convergence has given rise to a novel sense of immediacy (Hand, 2020; Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008) in communication, enacted as a direct link between subjective, asynchronous presentness within an expanded field of audiences, which do not anymore include only friends or acquaintances, but might also involve complete strangers who now are formed through SNS as social publics⁵ (Hjorth, 2013, 2014; see also Boyd: 2011).

The unavoidable transition of viewing practices from the traditional photographic surface which was still a tangible object to the immaterial computer (or mobile phone) screen as part of networked media platforms sets an example of how snapshots became embedded to an endless flow of data which gets appreciated as "central to the 'fun' things that the computer can do" (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008, p. 15). Such participation practices infuse the ways we understand and value these photographs, so that they have become "dependent on the interface which mediates our encounter with it" (ibid., p. 22). Also because of this new socio-cultural positioning, snapshots became shareable entities, extroverted, both enjoyable and performative as activities (as in taking a snap in anticipation of posting it) and highly communicative.

Villi (2013, p. 225) suggests the word 'publishing' to describe this "novel dimension of mass communication to personal photography".

Publishing therefore, indicating the combination of technological affordances and the expanded understanding of cameras as "tools for mediating quotidian experiences" (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 72) points to a succession of performative acts we enact daily in order to deal with personal photography as an enriched experience of the everyday. Moreover, the turn to prosaic themes has challenged the sense of picture-worthy. Such positioning affects the actualization of self-representation, the construction of identity and the continuation of memory, all of which now encompass in their image-layering notions such as 'posting' or 'sharing' and the incorporation of textual traces in the images such as 'tagging' and 'comments' (Arnold-de & Leal, 2018, p. 8; Nacher, 2013). In addition, networked photographs are placed in an asynchronous present which fulfils the contradictory condition to be ephemeral and to last forever, their predicted temporariness set against their unpredicted re-appearance. In this I refer to a fate common to SNS photographs: to become pretty soon dated as they get buried under more recent postings, only a few comments and likes further in the users' timeline.

5. "...not all publics that get around an emotional affinity via social media can be described as intimate. The coming together of loosely defined friends and acquaintances forms a public that shares collective ground, is self-forming, shares a horizon and is not institutionalized, and it does this through a shared social effect, but the nature of this effect is not strong enough or tightly bound enough to warrant the term intimate. They are, after all, just friends. It is, however, a "social public" inasmuch as the common ground, the motivating dynamic for a coming together, is a collective emotional or affective horizon, albeit more loosely defined and more fluid than is the case with an intimate public (Hjorth, King, & Kataoka, 2014, p. 11).

Their limited circulation from a few hours to a couple of days does not mean that they are erased forever. Once posted they do not cease to be online, but remain prone to resurfacing on the same site or elsewhere, re-contextualized, remembered in new (digital) environments or dismembered into new assemblages of image, text and meaning⁶. Hand speaks of “potential memories”, “persistent traces” and “undead qualities” (Hand, 2016, pp. 269-270) in order to characterize the interminable scattering of visible traces in a variety of mostly intercommunicative media archives. Within such environs he concedes that “digital memory-objects are fluid, rewritable” and “subject to continual negotiation” (ibid., p. 272).

Another feature of networked imagery, shareability is considered responsible for replacing the tangible printed versions of the past with digitized archives and multi-circulation. As a result, memory is removed from the seclusion of home and its terms are negotiated now in the open public space, designated by computer/mobile screens and the unlimited data of the net. In relation to this idea, an agony is expressed that memory is not only exposed as communicative, fluid and persistent but also – due to these qualities – prone to elimination, thanks to ‘the delete button’ which threatens a “death blow” to previous notions of photograph as “memento and keepsake” (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008, p. 13). It is uncertain whether something posted online can ever be deleted for sure, but the point of this argument is that digitized memory is also susceptible to disasters that are beyond our control: file-corruption, decontextualization, un-retrievability, unexpected modification (Hand, 2020, p. 215). A comparison of such externalization and amplification of functions to the discreet, home-bounded uses of the photo album or the shy shoe-box leaves a sense of awkward disbelief. It is uncertain whether memory’s propensity to be so outspoken, so eager to be communicated, so thinly but finely stretched enhances or undermines our relationship to images. Surely there is a tendency, proved by the millions of personal pictures circulating online that we have stopped saving our pictures in private places, only for us, and started to mediate them through networked sites like Facebook and Instagram so that an extra, culture-specific meaning should be added on the same pictures, instantly made different. As a result, our images have been adapted to specific format-peculiarities (square for Instagram, quadrangular for Facebook, vertical as a direct linkage to the format of mobile snap in Facebook and Instagram ‘stories’), all the while absorbing the use of filters (Snapchat and Instagram, might provide examples), and emoticons, wordless exclamations, thumps, hearts and smileys. Respectively, we might have to admit that image-wise our memory has developed a dialogue with visuals elements other than the representation of a photo and external to its initial visual traits. These textual intruders after their addition become an integral – if not essential – part of the photo they originally layered.

In this metamorphic procedure, what appears as an infestation that might obscure the initial meaning or representation of a networked photo ends up to support its distinctiveness. How would one like to be remembered? By a privately shared photograph, or by a networked snap amassing 200 likes? In such debate photographs might enjoy a shorter but more colourful life span and an extended, as much as an uncontrolled and extrovert external storage.

NETWORKED MEMORY

The merging of the ubiquitous with the vernacular due to the use of camera phones resulted to the extensive circulation of amateur documentary photographs during the last decade or so in an ensuing wave of informal, anonymous photo journalism (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008; Larsen & Sandbye, 2013; Mota, 2013; Shanks & Svabo, 2013; Mortensen, Jones & Keshelashvili, 2015; Hand, 2016). This trend, perpetuated in instantly uploaded mobile takes on SNS, is welcomed as a proof of authenticity even to official news sites. (Mortensen, Jones & Keshelashvili 2015, p. 216). The proliferation of such instances verifies that online vernacular aesthetics, as supported in smartphone snaps, continue to vouch for emotional resonance and ‘currency’ (Hjorth & Burgess, 2014, pp. 501, 505).

6. Proof of that is Facebook’s recent service to resurrect our memories as an integral feature. Older posts and pictures pop up in front of us, while the platform asks if we would like to share them, as remembered posts ‘commemorated’ publicly again. One could wonder if this function is a playful prompt aiming at a pleasurable recounting of digital deeds as a surprise encounter, or an assimilation or an appropriation of our memory as a set of prosthetic functions.

A new sense of history-in-the-making and memory-on-the-go has thus sprouted, which invests in affectivity, co-presence and shareability, while it questions the limits of official visual communication. Moreover, as personal photography usurped traditional notions of snapshot in networked environments, networked snaps provided visual material containing personal responses to collective events that are socially widespread or extensive and culturally important for the community of users. Built on external, vast tanks of virtual image-memory deposits which depend on personalized, eye-witness testimonies, this new reality has repercussions in the socio-political processes of creating tanks of communal memory as well as the understanding of memory as a techno-mediated process. Following from shock-instances that affect shared sensibilities, such events are collectively articulated online as the mediated circulation of personal posts entrusting in the affective eloquence of the vertically oblong, non-political, “normative”, “inherently benign” (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008, p. 23) mobile snap.

In discussing collective memory and connectivity Pogačar (2009) observes that off-line communities build memory out of their collective spatiotemporal co-existence, thus they turn collectivity to connectivity. Online, the abstractly shared horizons of social publics accommodate virtual collectivities, which “build memory out of connectivity” (Pogačar, 2009, p. 27) affecting the ways we “conceive of collectivity and memory online” (ibid., p. 38). Public narrative merges with autobiographical cues thanks to the [mobile] camera’s fluidity to be everywhere and to picture every possible mundane moment as “memorable in one way or another” (Shanks & Svabo, 2013, p. 12). This sort of published, shared reality that gets recorded-as-it-happens infuses the online flow of networked memory with the emotional resonance of snapshots and a heightened sense of newness. It is also argued that networked image is almost indifferent to subject matter or form or discipline, but rather depends on a “hybridization of distributing institutions, individuals, families and social or professional groupings” as these determine the fluid “modes of engagement” that add extra meaning (ibid., p. 8). In this spirit, traditional notions of photography and memory as a frozen perfect scene that speaks of the past while producing a well-ordered sequence of events become confused and problematized. Touching on issues as the clear separation of what is personal and what is public, or whether such recounting is intended as memory-mark or plain self-presentation, or glitches concerning authorship and circulation, such understanding of networked photograph as immediate presence and instant archaeology of a fluid past challenge the stability of networked “grand narratives” (Pogačar, 2009, p. 27).

Van House (2011) observes that the memory function of vernacular photography has subsided in favour of communicative practices concerning the self and identity formation, but Van Dijck (2008) claims that memory is still an important part of every vernacular digitization online. She also draws attention to a transition in vernacular photography from its representational value connected to the perpetuation of memory to the “performative rituals” (ibid., p. 63) enabled by camera phones. This prioritizes self-presentation as a function but still she concludes that “versatility and multi-purposing” qualify online photographs to endlessly reappear in ceaseless flows, so that “the definition of personal memory is gravitating toward distributed presence” (ibid., p. 74). Thus, the networked scattering of the digitized, visual traces of the self, which is discussed also by Pogačar (2009), seems to be a decisive trait of contemporary, mediated memory. The solidification of communal memory through the online circulation of personal photographs sheds light to another function of snapshot photography that was improbable before the networked era, which is to stand as the published, visual, non-verbal chronicle of communal testimony without ever denying its unofficial positioning, on the contrary, even more so. There is no doubt that memory and narrative connect to networked photography in different ways than before. As eye-witness evidence has placed the snapshot in public view, one might still wonder how its emotional content is to be interpreted on a personal level. Considering that the authorship of the networked photo is being continuously contested, it is argued that the publishing of personal photos might invoke feelings of detachment from our memories (Fawns, 2018, p. 125).

This idea alludes to the reception of networked snaps, within an ever changing flow of multifarious images and texts (depending on the social platform), as embedded in them. What has come before and after the picture might affect its understanding, because it is placed thereafter within an intertextual framework, both responsible for its specific form and equally the provider

of a receptive framework which allows certain repertoire of reactions among users (Facebook and Instagram for instance provide different sets of users' reactions). Thus negotiated, the memory is drenched in complementary meaning that has been accumulated after the online publishing of the photo, through collective interaction. Pertinent to this idea is another novel use, as derived from Alma's extract cited previously, the possibility to return to our photographs many times a day, due to smartphone's mediation as a prosthetic, portable memory device.

This is also enhanced by the possibility to interact with our published online photos and other people's photos many times a day. Moreover, online interaction- provisional or erratic as it might be – can be photographed to be kept or shared anew. Screenshots of posted photos or shares of an older post usually tend to accommodate commentaries and/or the allocated SNS reactions so that the same visual occurrence circulates enhanced by its online lifespan in a second wave of publishing. In this way the same image marks a new event which refers simultaneously to the initial photo, the tracing of its online reception and its novel resurfacing.

CONCLUSION

As it has been argued in this text, networked memory is mediated memory, not to be exchanged with the digital memory of apparatuses and applications, although such arrangements play a part in our understanding of it as infinite, continuous and ubiquitous. In an article titled "Memory: an Extended Definition", Zlotnik & Vansintjan (2019), argue that memory is a dynamic process, fluid and interactive "neither just chemical or digital". They suggest that it is useful to accept a widened explanation which might shift the focus from "experience" towards "a more material phenomenon: a deposit of events that may be stored and used afterwards" (ibid., p. 7). Following this view, the networked photo is brought to the forefront as a dynamic interactive storage of autobiographical cues. Throughout this debate, the images per se are deemed to be the same, old, nondescript, quotidian selves and in many ways they still are. The photographic abilities of the common users have not changed drastically, neither the content of their everyday stories. Still, ruptures are mentioned, here and then: themes have become more casual, almost opportunistic, images can be whimsically cropped or filter treated. Their reception is different, their circulation is made public. Commentaries and reactions can be added. Is this the same memory as before?

Meanwhile, networked personal photography has carried online the integrity, banality and sincerity of analogue/digital era to practices that enable, even promote, the alteration and falsification of original files. Many researchers interpret such choices, for example the extensive usage of filters and apps, as communicative necessities, expressive of our determination to override reality and adjust playfully our digital bodily imprint to culturally appreciated beautification standards (Van Dijck, 2008, p 73). Such practices leave an imprint on online photographs so while it could be argued that photographs are re-established as having control in the formulation of future memories, certain doubts might arise whether such actions continue snapshot's legitimate claims on veracity or on the emotional grasp of their owners. Moreover, the circulated images partake on a continuous streaming, which creates mementos as part of a serial progression of photographs that override one another on a continual flow. As Keightley & Pickering (2014, p. 588) argue, regardless of the digitization of images and their "distributed presence" online in stark contrast to the photo-album era, people continue to operate "the mnemonic framework that is constructed out of photo compilations". Only now, in the place of a tangible object or a denominated storage there is an online, ubiquitous platform. Such amalgamation of photographs, texts, emoticons, exclamations, gifs, more images, it is not just daily messaging, ephemeral posting or a flippant collection of likes and plaintive commentaries, but a consistent attempt to fashion in retrospect our memory in cultural accepted terms. This is not exactly novel in regard to a personal/cultural alliance of image and memory. Snapshots were often arduously selected – staged during shooting and then handpicked to conform to the desired effect, so not all of them made it to the sanctuary of the family album.

Therefore, digital snaps continue within the contemporary networked processes of non-verbal discourse on how we want to be remembered by others and most importantly on how we want to remember ourselves.

As Nelson (2003, p. 134) points out, in contemporary societies autobiographical memory is all the more important in an era that “common communal narratives” lose their strength and there is an increasing need for “perfecting the skill of the telling of one’s personal story”. Networked personal photography is an ongoing process of managing just this, all the while balancing the redistribution of “memory between person and connected media technologies” (Hand, 2016, p. 273).

It remains an issue of further discussion how this collectively built personal lore will be subverted, transcribed or inscribed in artistic practices. If snapshot memories were private, networked memories are shared, supporting the understanding of memory as enmeshed into a culturally complicated, ramified context. It is not a matter whether we want or not to negotiate memory in such terms, or as Fawns (2012, p. 126) suggests if we should become more ‘selective’ in the capturing, sharing and storing of personal photographs. It might be more forward both culturally and artistically to embrace and take advantage of the refreshed allegiance of memory and personal photographs, understanding the challenges of these – seemingly flippant – circumstances.

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