Flat Files: The Absence of Vernacular Photography in Museum Collections

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Flat Files: The Absence of Vernacular Photography In Museum Collections

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Art in Art History

by

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Richmond, Virginia
December 2010
Acknowledgments

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of several individuals. Firstly, I am indebted to Peggy Lindauer who has been an excellent advisor and mentor, a constant source of encouragement, and has been most generous in trusting me to pursue my research interests. I am also deeply grateful to Eric Garberson for his invaluable insight and support, as well as his ability to challenge and thus strengthen my ideas. Thanks also to Paul Thulin for his willingness to be a part of this process, to lend a critical eye and share his knowledge of photography. Additionally, I would be remiss not to thank my mother for her constant encouragement and love; she undoubtedly deserves credit for first introducing me to the fascinating topic of photography. And lastly, I am forever grateful to Michael Lease for his love and support; the study of photography has been an exciting part of our history, and I am sure it will continue to be a part of our future.
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Abstract

FLAT FILES: THE ABSENCE OF VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

By Kimberly S. Wolfe, MA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

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This thesis will explore the causes and consequences of the absence of vernacular photography from museum collections. Through historical analysis of vernacular photography and a close interpretation of a contemporary family snapshot, I will argue that vernacular photographs are important objects of great cultural significance and poignant personal meaning. Photography has always defied categorization. It serves multiple functions and roles, is studied in a vast number of disciplines, and exists in a variety of institutions and collections. Furthermore, it is difficult to classify a single photograph. Vernacular photography thus poses a challenge to museum methods of sorting documents, artifacts, and art. Consequently the photographs that are most significant in everyday life are often missing from the museum setting or are misinterpreted and stripped of their meaning.
Introduction

At first glance, it is simply a snapshot (figure 1). It looks like many others: a photograph taken at Christmastime, depicting the tradition of decorating the Christmas tree. It is but one instance of a type. The photograph depicts a woman with her back turned to the camera as she reaches to hang an ornament on the tree with her right hand, her left hand resting on the mantel for balance. The couch and the floor before the tree are strewn with gifts – a large box, a wooden cradle, and a brown plastic rocking horse remain unwrapped due to their unwieldy size. A coffee table visible in the lower left corner partially blocks the view of a potted poinsettia placed beside a Victrola cabinet beneath the mantel. We are able to see at least three stockings hanging from the mantel – one of which is tiny. Centered on the mantel is a clock flanked on each side by a portrait of a child: a boy on the left, a girl on the right. The boy is blond and wears a Dutch Boy haircut and a blue sweater over a collared white button-down. The girl has light brown hair, with a similar haircut, and wears a red jumper dress over a white blouse. Both portraits appear to be propped against the mirror above the mantel, in oval-cut mats; neither is framed. Some assumptions can be made based on the amount of visual information presented to the viewer. Though unable to see the woman’s face, the viewer might assume that she is the mother of the children depicted in the portraits. The unwrapped gifts and the Carebear® wrapping paper seem appropriate for the ages of the children. And based on this casual display of the portraits and the wintry clothing the children are wearing, one could assume that these
portraits were fairly new at the time the snapshot was taken.¹ A handwritten note on the back of the photograph indicates that it was taken on Christmas Eve in 1983.

The photograph is not particularly remarkable, yet it is packed with silently inscribed information that cannot be discerned by the simple act of looking – family history, relationships, emotion, meaning, and the circumstances of the occasion, time, and place. While it serves as a visual record of a moment, in turn it records the moment’s place in time – the circumstances of that day, that year, the days and years before and after. Though the subject matter and depicted Christmas scene are familiar, even cliché, this snapshot embodies a personal history. However, it is also highly constructed. Several common photographic conventions are employed in the making and reading of this snapshot: the cropping is well considered, the composition is balanced, the camera is at a distance that allows the photograph to contain the whole setting, and the woman is likely posing – holding her position as she hangs the ornament, until the camera has taken her picture. This contradiction – document/narrative, record/fiction – touches upon the paradoxical nature of photography that dates back to its inception – a paradox that has almost seamlessly been absorbed into the practice of photography and the way people relate to and use it. A snapshot functions as both a constructed narrative and a visual document; it is used to create a record, but it is also used to script personal histories. It is this dualism that constitutes photography as a social practice, and is what gives snapshots meaning. Like other objects valued for representing social practice, values, and customs, snapshots are meaningful objects that reflect personal and collective identity. They are constructed, shared, arranged, and handled.

¹The use of the term snapshot varies widely in the discourse of art and photo history. Originally a marksman’s term, snapshot refers to the ability to “shoot” impulsively and with little contemplation. I will use the term throughout this paper to refer to the photographs that began to be made once technological advancements allowed for lay persons to own their own cameras and easily create their own photographs.
While museums often value other objects that share these qualities, such as household furnishings, clothing, and journals, vernacular snapshots are rarely found in museum collections, and those that are are not valued for their personal narrative, but for documentary qualities. Since the 1980s, scholarly attention toward vernacular photography has increased. Likewise, since the 1990s, there have been several museum exhibitions of vernacular snapshot photography. As focused attention is turned toward these photographs, boundaries are inevitably called into question – boundaries between fine art and object, image and document. Today, many museum professionals and scholars are attempting to solve the question of how to approach vernacular forms of photography, how to define them, and from what perspective to view them.

This paper will question the causes and consequences of the exclusion of vernacular photographs from museum collections. Using the 1983 Christmas snapshot as a touchstone, I will explore why and how the meaning and significance of such a photograph can be lost as it moves through time, from place to place and person to person. I will first review the history of photography with close attention to the relationship forged between people and photographic images of themselves and loved ones. This assessment of photography’s past will serve to bring awareness to the historical development of intimacy with photographs and the personal narratives they embody – a complexity that often goes unnoticed. I will also examine photography’s history in regard to academia, art, and museums, in order to illustrate how vernacular photographs that are defined by intangible emotions, memories, and relationships problematize these exclusive fields of study. I will then consider how the 1983 Christmas snapshot and others of its kind might be of great value to a museum.
Before the Snapshot: The History of Photography’s Meaning

To take a moment to consider the abundance of photographs in our twenty-first century lives is to admit to the near impossibility of truly understanding what it would be like to live without them. For more than 150 years, photography has permeated more and more of our world.² It is likely that the average American in the early twenty-first century scarcely reflects upon the history of this medium of representation, and rarely considers what it would be like to live without it. Photography is simply ever-present as we move through space and time. Photographs are printed in magazines, tucked inside wallets, displayed in offices, and looming over cars on the highway. They are used daily, as proof of identity, and ignored daily as people breeze past them on the way to the kitchen. Photographs no longer have a strictly material presence; many of today’s photographs are never touched by human hands and exist only as digital documents on hard drives or the Internet. Photographs of Friday night’s activities may be posted to social networking websites by Monday morning for all of one’s friends, co-workers, and/or family members to see. Additionally, the presence of cameras has been absorbed into the everyday. As America has become increasingly accustomed to the use of cameras to document and capture identity and experiences, photography has in turn changed the way we view our world and ourselves – our “image.” A technology that was originally conceived as a way to

² Though I will frequently refer specifically to Americans and American history throughout this paper, I would be remiss not to note that the making, collecting, and displaying of photographs is a widespread global phenomenon.
capture reality has now altered how we experience reality. People photograph certain occasions, pose in particular ways, and are expected to photograph certain events and travels; common occasions and events consciously include the act of capturing “photographic moments.”

Photography is a technology so successful that its presence goes unquestioned, if not unnoticed, and it has become engrained in everyday life. Ironically, the pervasiveness of photography and the magnitude of photographs in daily life are partially what result in their exclusion from collective consciousness, and thus from museum collections. For this reason, I turn now to photography’s invention to gain perspective on this common technology and practice that has so changed the world, and to revisit a time when photography’s presence was not only new and exciting, but even bizarre or unsettling.

A Return to the Past: A New Image

As with many scientific and technological advancements, photography’s invention cannot be attributed to any singular individual’s genius. It was the product of a culturally specific moment in time, made possible due to the availability of contemporary research, tools, and strategies. Its invention was the culmination of a widespread desire for a means with which to fix a permanent image taken from nature. In his book *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Geoffrey Batchen offers an exhaustive account of the various individuals who were attempting to accomplish this feat. Many of these names are familiar, belonging to people noted for their contributions to the history of photography (i.e. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, William Henry Fox Talbot, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and Hippolyte Bayard). However, Batchen also includes mention of the many individuals who simply expressed a longing for such a technology by the turn of the eighteenth century. The purpose of this comprehensive roster is
to illustrate clearly that photography’s creation rests in the hands of many. It was an invention that was being pursued by several individuals, and it was partly a response to a far-reaching cultural longing.

The Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce is credited with the creation of the first permanent image made by light and chemistry in 1826 (figure 2). Niépce struggled to name this new technology and its unprecedented ability to capture the image of nature. His notebooks contain evidence of an internal struggle as he contemplated the characteristics of this invention. The words he scrawled were conflicting, sometimes even paradoxical: nature, itself writing, painting, picture, sign, imprint, trace, description, show, representing, true, real. A photograph was something constructed and produced by man, but it differed from other image-making techniques (painting, drawing, etching) in that it captured a true image of nature. It was an image, yet more real than a painting. It seemed magical, but it was scientifically explainable. It was a representation, but not quite re-presented by a person working with a visual medium – it was more of an imprint or a trace of the subject, created by light and chemistry. Photography represented an amalgamation of many dichotomies: nature/culture, discovery/invention, transience/fixity, space/time, subject/object, past/present.

More than 150 years passed between the creation of Niépce’s photograph and the 1983 Christmas snapshot. A visual comparison of the two silently implies the wealth of change that unfolded during that time, both in the ease of photographic methods and in the human experience in general. Niépce was an inventor who experimented with materials and chemicals in search of a desired outcome, and it was in this way that he managed to fix a permanent image taken from nature. The image depicts the view from his studio window, which consists of the convergence

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of the geometric shapes of several buildings, the play of sun and shadow exaggerating the harsh lines and flat surfaces. The color and tone of the scene have been reduced to black, white, and gray. His choice of still and well-lit subject matter was necessitated by this photographic process, which required an eight-hour exposure, a sheet of pewter, a tar-like bitumen mixture, and lavender oil. Sunlight would have moved over the various depicted surfaces, approaching from several different angles during the eight-hour period. The irreproducible, singular image resulting from Niépce’s quest is grainy and vague, similar in appearance to an abstracted charcoal drawing on a sheet of metal.

The 1983 Christmas snapshot was created by means of a much more controlled, sophisticated, and refined process. Photography had evolved from a difficult and arduous operation, cold, still subject matter, and foggy imagery, to a quick and manageable process, yielding a full color image on a small piece of glossy paper, capable of depicting a human being in the middle of a relatively active gesture. By 1983, photography had become a common social practice that took place largely inside the home. Snapshots from this time were most likely captured by a layperson in a fraction of a second, enabling the capture of a clear, still image of a moving subject. The image was first imprinted on a roll of flexible, light-sensitive, acetate-based film, which was housed in a lightweight, handheld camera. This film allowed for the creation of a series of exposures, each resulting in small negatives (the colors, light, and shadow were originally inverted, thus creating a negative image) with which to produce an unlimited number of paper prints depicting the positive image (the colors, light, and shadow appear as the eye would have seen them). The camera was among other gadgets, machines, and appliances that were common household belongings at this time in history. The camera that produced this snapshot would have been equipped with adjustable settings to account for variables such as the
amount of available light, distance between camera and subject, focus, and length of exposure. Additionally, the photograph was taken with the aid of a built-in flash, which flooded the interior of the room with a burst of enough light to allow for a quick exposure and thus no blurring, despite the limited indoor light and any movement of the camera. The camera did most of the work and was designed to be user-friendly for the masses. The roll of film would have been sent off to a commercial processor and the final full-color results would have been returned to the photographer, who had no need to engage in the process outside of pressing a few buttons – a far cry from the execution of skill and chemistry of Niépce.

Between 1826 and 1983, photography transitioned from being a nearly unattainable chemistry experiment pursued by only a few skilled men, to a common, simple and streamlined domestic practice. During the passing of these 150+ years, photography was used to perform a variety of functions, including the capturing of further landscape views such as the subject matter chosen by Niépce’s, and composed still-lifes, as well as documentary records, photo journalism, advertising… but a more personal and intimate relationship developed between people and photographs during this time.

Niépce’s photograph rests in the collection of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where it is on permanent exhibit, valued not for the depicted subject, but for the object’s fundamental role in the history of photography. It is elegantly framed, housed in an airtight protective plexiglas case and kept in a light- and climate-controlled room. Meanwhile, the 1983 snapshot resides in a common household living room, in the plastic sleeve of a photo album, surrounded by other Christmas snapshots from 1983. Furthermore, this photo album resides on a shelf, surrounded by other albums of more snapshots depicting the same family members and holidays, year after year. Partly because of the technological and social changes
that elapsed between 1826 and 1983, these two photographs exist in and remain emblematic of very different worlds. One of these photographs is considered a valuable historical object worthy of exhibition for public viewing, the other remains in a private, domestic collection. By 1983, as evidenced by the Christmas snapshot, photography had become actively incorporated into family life.

The first of what might be called “family photography” dates back to the photographic portrait. The first photographic portraits widely consumed by Americans were daguerreotypes. Louis Daguerre, having shared an interest in working towards a method of permanently fixing the camera’s image, partnered with Niépce, helping to refine his process. Niépce died in 1833, but Daguerre continued with their quest, and in 1839 his sophisticated daguerreotype process was publicly announced, causing a rush of other individuals claiming their part in this revolutionary discovery. Historian Pierre G. Harmant noted that a total of twenty-four people claimed to have invented the photographic process with variations in approach and chemistry, among them Hippolyte Bayard, who claimed success in a process similar to that of Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot, whose paper print process was more affordable and reproducible. The popularity of the daguerreotype continued for some time, however, and it was the preferred method of photography for portraiture through the 1850s, its image displaying more detail than a paper print, thus seeming more lifelike. Daguerreotypes of a variety of subject matter were made, but portraits became the most popular commodity. People saw in the

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5 Warner Marien 2006, 23.

daguerreotype an opportunity to use this technology for a personal, familial purpose. Rapid consumption of the photographic image ensued in America and an abundance of portrait studios were opened in the decade following the public release of Daguerre’s process.

The daguerreotype was produced by means of a camera enclosing a metal plate that had been coated with silver and polished to a mirror-like surface. The capturing of the image necessitated an exposure of at least two minutes, during which time the lens was opened, and the plate flooded with light. The stillness required of the sitter was often attained with the use of props (both seen and unseen) and resulted in the stoic and cold expressions seen on the faces of most sitters in these early photographic portraits (figure 3). The delicate surface of the plate was covered with a brass mat and a piece of glass and set into a book-like case. The hinged cases were made of leather- or paper-covered wood, or an early type of hard plastic called thermoplastic (made from compressed resin and pigmented sawdust). The exterior of the leather or paper cases was usually plain, while the thermoplastic cases, often called union cases, featured an embossed decorative design or image (a floral motif or historical figure, for example). There was a small latch on the side with which to secure the closed case. Inside the case, the left panel held a padding of fabric, usually a deep red velvet, while on the right the protected, framed image was displayed.

Though the dimensions of daguerreotypes were varied, all were intimate in size. The tiniest, the sixteenth-plate, would have been 1 3/8 inches by 1 5/8 inches, while the largest daguerreotype – the whole-plate – was 6 1/3 inches by 8 1/2 inches. The most popular size in the portrait industry was the sixth-plate (2 3/4 inches by 3 1/4 inches), a size small enough to retain a
precious, jewel-like quality, allowing it to be tucked away in a pocket or held in one’s hand.  

Some sixth-plates were advertised for as little as 25¢, but the cost is believed to have been around $2 each (the whole plate was approximately $15). According to the Consumer Price Index, $2 in the 1850s is equivalent to $56 in 2010. Thus, daguerreotypes were not inexpensive, but they were widely enjoyed by the rising middle class as affordable portraiture. During this time of rapid change and industrialization, the middle class was expanding to include wage workers in addition to learned craftsmen, and one’s social status was linked to a pride in occupation and the ability to contribute to society. In regard to daguerreotypes, the effects of these economic changes were twofold: in addition to the depiction of professional and working class citizens, the portraitist that created the image was also earning a living by embracing a craft which produced something for market consumption. Prior to the invention of photography, portraiture was a privilege only accessible to those wealthy enough to commission the work of established artists. Daguerreotypes may seem somewhat lavish today, with their decorative leather cases, red velvet, and gilded framing, as we are now accustomed to surrounding ourselves with an abundance of cheaply reproduced paper prints or even intangible digital images. But daguerreotypes were widely regarded as precious objects – family heirlooms meant to carry one’s likeness into the generations of the future. A typical person might have only had a single daguerreotype portrait made during his or her lifetime.

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Warner Marien 2006, 68.

The design of the daguerreotype case welcomed touch; the weight and textured design of the object caused the act of looking to involve more than simply seeing a flat image. To view a daguerreotype involved picking up the object, unhooking the tiny latch, and opening the case to view the image. Additionally, the daguerreotype image is not easy to see. The image is negative (the highlights and shadows inverted). Because the surface is mirror-like, it is highly reflective; when held at the correct angle, indirect light and the viewer’s own reflection allow the negative image to be seen as a positive. When turned toward the light, the figure returns to a negative image, appearing almost ghostlike if visible at all. This relationship between viewer and object necessitated a physical interaction as the viewer handled the object, turned it this way and that, in order to see the sitter’s image. Other kinds of early photographs were often set into jewelry, allowing a loved one’s image to be worn on one’s body (figure 4). Hair or other tactile objects such as fabric or handwritten notes were tucked inside a cased image or incorporated into a piece of jewelry (figure 5). In some instances, the daguerreotipist would have the subject pose while holding the case in which their image would be placed after the sitting – the case that the viewer is later holding in his or her own hands (figure 6). The viewer’s sense of physical interaction with the image of the sitter was heightened by the realization that in his or her hand is the same object that is being touched by the subject of the portrait.¹⁰ Thus, the experience of viewing photographs of the nineteenth century constituted more than looking at an image – it was a physical and interactive relationship between person, image, and tangible object.

The photographic process was introduced during a time of urban growth, increased controversy over slavery, and the development of the railroad and the telegraph. Commodities were being produced in more efficient and affordable ways in order to accommodate the rise of

the middle class. Portraits were among these new commodities. Photographs were emblematic of this changing landscape, acting as a symbol of increasing equality and the distribution of knowledge and privilege. To have one’s daguerreotype portrait made had a formal air akin to that of painted portraiture, such as that of the miniature (figure 7) – it was an event that required preparation, visiting a studio, and having a skilled professional direct pose and posture. But because of the changed demographic and the rise of the middle class, the portrait represented not only a new means of visual technology, but also a new image. The resulting photographic depictions of the middle class remain doubly emblematic of the changing social landscape. Painted portraits were often a show of wealth, depicting people in fine jewelry and their best dress. In daguerreotypes there was a new image – comparably modest individuals, humble families, and manual laborers (figure 8).

Walt Whitman saw the daguerreotype as a new way of knowing others, a medium capable of balancing social inequalities. Furthering the democratic nature of photography was the shifted emphasis from artist to subject. The making of daguerreotypes required the careful following of rules to obtain a delicate balance of chemicals, time, and light in order to produce the sitter’s likeness – it was a learned skill. While some portraitists went on to become famous (e.g. Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, of Southworth & Hawes in Boston, whose work is widely considered fine art today) most remained firmly rooted in the middle class. A studio name may have been printed on the back of a daguerreotype case or pressed into the velvet padding, but the person behind the camera was rarely the studio’s namesake. Thus, the

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maker usually remained anonymous.\textsuperscript{13} Photography lessened the social and economic gap between the sitter and the portraitist. The namelessness of this new everyman image-maker resonated with mid-nineteenth century American ideals. Though these portraits were made by professionals, they were not made by artists. Daguerreotypists were part of the professional middle class, having taken up a process whose inventors had not intended for it to be an advancement in art or the man-made image. Daguerre, Niépce, and Talbot all described photography as a way to let nature make its own picture, Daguerre having stated that “the daguerreotype is not an instrument which serves to draw nature; but a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself.”\textsuperscript{14}

**The Invisible Mass**

We are worlds away from the sensation that must have been felt upon seeing a photograph for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century. To see an image of a familiar face captured from nature and produced by light, after having only seen drawings, prints, etchings, or paintings, was surely an overwhelming experience. Even more moving would have been the viewer’s seeing an image of someone near and dear. Photography allowed for unprecedented realistic representations, which forever changed the way people related to imagery of loved ones. With the invention of photography, the definition of images was expanded, and people now saw images as windows onto the world, rather than man-made recreations of the world. Daguerreotypist Gabriel Harrison noted, “You cannot look upon anything in nature without

\textsuperscript{13} Trachtenberg 1989, 14.

\textsuperscript{14} As quoted in Warner Marien 2006, 23.
being reminded of some peculiar and beautiful result if daguerreotyped… even the small blade of grass.”

The public’s response to the photographic image varied. Some people were entranced by the magic of this new medium (likening it to “fairy work”) while others were skeptical of the bizarre new image. Regardless, the excitement was rooted in the photograph’s unprecedented reproduction of the natural world. Reluctant to change and concerned that painting would be devalued by photography, some people felt that a mechanically produced image offered nothing of value when compared to the work of a true artist. An anonymous commentator wrote in 1839:

This looks like superseding Art altogether; for what painter can hope to contend with Nature in accuracy or rapidity of production? But Nature is only become the handmaid to Art, not her mistress. Painters need not despair; their labours will be as much in request as ever, but in a higher field: the finer qualities of taste and invention will be called into action more powerfully: and the mechanical process will be only abridged and rendered more perfect.

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15 As quoted in Trachtenberg 1989, 18.

16 As quoted in Trachtenburg 1989, 15.

17 Warner Marien 2006, 28.

For others, the realness captured by the camera made the photograph more successful at capturing one’s likeness than the painted picture. Poet Elizabeth Barrett wrote a friend in 1843, stating:

…several of these wonderful portraits… like engravings – only exquisite and delicate beyond the work of graver – have I seen lately – longing to have such a memorial of every Being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases – but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing… the facet of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed for ever! … I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest artist’s work ever produced. I do not say so in respect (or disrespect) to Art, but for Love’s sake.¹⁹

Photographic portraits from the nineteenth century suggest that an immediate sense of intimacy was recognized in this medium, and people were quick to embrace it as a conveyor of familial relationships. Families would use magnifying glasses to closely survey facial features, looking for the resemblance between depicted family members. The popularity of the daguerreotype did signal the decline of the painted miniature, although the two had much in common. Both were small representations of loved ones, used as intimate objects meant to be held or worn on the body. Economics aside, the difference between the painted miniature and the photographic portrait was nothing more than the nature of the medium through which the representations came to exist in one’s pocket or jewelry box. As simple as this distinction may seem, it transformed how people related to images of loved ones. To look at a miniature was to

look at a painting. The medium acted as the connection between the viewer and the sitter; it was the paint itself and the skilled hand of the artist, so expertly able to convey the likeness of the sitter, that moved the viewer to reflect upon the depicted person. The causal nature of the photograph – the fact that the image is made from the light that reflected from the sitter – lent itself to a more convincing portrayal of reality than had been achieved before. This is what Kendall Walton, professor of philosophy at University of Michigan, referred to as the transparency of the photographic medium, suggesting that we see through photographs when we look at them.\(^\text{20}\) The subject’s presence at the initial moment of production was essential to the creation of the image. The photograph is directly linked to the subject and acts as a trace or impression of the subject, rather than a representation of it. Therefore, the experience of viewing a photograph is to view the subject, not a photograph. Walton illustrates this distinction with Chuck Close’s *Self-Portrait*, a hyperrealist painted portrayal of the artist (figure 9). At first glance, one might think that he or she is viewing a photograph. Upon learning that this is in fact a painting, the realization significantly changes one’s perception of the image.\(^\text{21}\) A kind of barrier materializes between the viewer and the subject: a tangible wall of paint and artistry, skill and wonder. The focus is no longer simply on the person portrayed, but on the artist and the medium used to bring this representation (re-presentation) into being.

To see an image as a representation meant attention to the process of production; such was the case with painted portraits. But, the lack of consideration for the properties that bring a photographic image into being (man, camera, chemicals) are what led to the understanding of the


\(^{21}\) Walton 1984, 255.
photographic image as reality. The photographic image, with its ability to simply present the subject (rather than re-present the subject), was ideal for the creation of an intimate portrait of a loved one, serving as a substitute object or stand-in of a particular person, living or dead. French philosopher Hubert Damisch asserts that all photographs are deceptive in this way – as if the photograph were a discovery rather than an invention, the subject inscribing its own likeness onto the photographic plate. The physical interaction with the daguerreotype imbued the photographic image with the ability to evoke sensory responses in addition to sight, suggesting that the photographic portrait in the nineteenth century was conceived as a tangible, if not bodily, representation of the subject. This sensory perception of the portrait-object is experienced through visual conventions that direct the viewer’s seeing, but the image remains a physical object conceived through technological means.

Though daguerreotypes were not considered works of art, today they are valuable and collectable objects. Though the subjects and makers remain anonymous, daguerreotypes are found in history museums, special collections, art museums, and the private collections of independent enthusiasts. Many factors contribute to the transition of the daguerreotypes from personal family heirloom to sought-after collectables, most of which come with the passing of time. Daguerreotypes were the first form of mass-produced photographic images, and were unique, irreproducible objects. Thus they are valued for this social and historical significance. Having only been made during a short time (and compared to the production of photographs today), relatively few of them were produced. This rarity furthers their value and collectability.

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Additionally, they are very fragile. Over the course of 160 years many daguerreotypes have been poorly handled or stored in unfavorable conditions and have thus suffered damage: perhaps the latch has broken or fallen off completely, keeping the case from closing properly; the case may have become warped, the binding stressed or torn as the leather breaks down; the protective glass might have broken, or perhaps the entire image has become detached from the case. Thus, those daguerreotypes that have been cared for and are still intact are highly sought after by those concerned with the collecting and preserving of these historical objects.

While daguerreotypes might be the oldest, most precious, and fragile of the early forms of photography, many museums also take pride in collections of tintypes and ambrotypes—additional forms of early photography which were also quickly replaced with more affordable and reproducible technologies, thus making them more collectable. Cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards are also included in the hierarchy of museum collectability. Essentially, the older the photograph, the more rare it is; and the more rare, the more collectable. Thus, many photographs of today do not seem collectable— they are not rare, nor do they represent any outdated technologies. In addition to their historical significance, the desire for collecting daguerreotypes or other cased images over paper prints is similar to the reason Americans initially preferred the daguerreotype over Talbot’s paper print: they are precious, three-dimensional objects. They are well-crafted, small, and meant to be held, touched, or carried in one’s pocket. The tangibility of the materials (leather, wood, brass, glass) literally builds upon the meaning of the image. Technological advancements have reshaped the way we interact with photographs in the twenty-first century. While today’s photographs, if not digital, are paper prints glanced at every once in a while (much like the 1983 Christmas snapshot), a nineteenth century daguerreotype, was more than a *picture* – a word that is used today synonymously with *photograph* – it was a precious
object. To today’s collectors, daguerreotypes seem even more precious, aided by the reverence that comes with the passing of time. Perhaps photographs such as the 1983 Christmas snapshot have not amassed enough history to be granted this sort of retrospective deference. As technologies continue to change, perhaps we will eventually see these unexciting objects in a new light. In the meantime, their meaning is still taking shape as they are used, shared, stored, and slowly replaced by photographs of other technological means.

In reviewing the public’s ardent and profound response to the invention of photography, and the relationship that quickly took shape between people and photography, we can see from a new perspective our twenty-first century inclination to surround ourselves with photographs. As consumerism increased, and this special phenomenon became more and more available, families amassed more and more photographs of their loved ones. Perhaps the emotional and bodily connection of the nineteenth century has been inherited in a sense – passed down through the generations along with the photographs. As photography is more accessible today, perhaps it is this subconscious wonder and desire for images of loved ones that results in the abundance of photographs created every day. The telephone, the automobile, the railroad… each of these advancements in history was met with wonder, and this wonder has eventually evolved into what is today commonplace and quotidian.

Enthusiasm for affordability and convenience eventually led the American people to prefer the inexpensive, reproducible paper print method of photography, which went on to embody that which gave photography advantage over painting. The popularity of the daguerreotype waned during the 1850s with the arrival of the ambrotype, which also produced a unique and crisp image housed in a hinged case but was more affordable and more quickly produced. Additionally, the ambrotype always appeared as a positive image, regardless of the
angle of light. By the 1860s, however, Americans preferred the convenience, affordability, and reproducibility of the tintype and the carte-de-visite, rendering both the cased images of the daguerreotype and the ambrotype obsolete. This was at the cost of quality, however, as neither of these photographic forms displayed the clarity of the daguerreotype. The tintype was derived from the ambrotype process, but it had a more limited tonal range and was printed on a thin sheet of iron. Some of these were as small as a modern-day postage stamp, while others were similar in size to daguerreotypes and ambrotypes. The carte-de-visite consisted of an albumen (paper) photograph, approximately 4 1/2 inches by 2 inches, mounted on a piece of cardstock. The reverse usually carried an advertisement for a photography studio. In addition to portraits of loved ones, cartes-de-visite displayed celebrities, tourist attractions, scenic landscapes, and works of art.

These changes served as a transition from photographs being precious and delicate, to being easily produced, reproduced, and collected. By the 1880s, Americans were already surrounding themselves with photographs displayed on walls, arranged in albums, and propped on mantels (figure 10). Photography was becoming a part of everyday life. By the turn of the century, photography changed from a professional craft to an industrialized operation. Over the next 100 years, as photographic technologies were further refined, the abundance of photographs grew. Photographs continued to become more and more affordable, cameras less and less expensive and cumbersome, and the market for photography flourished. Kodak and other companies introduced roll cameras in the late 1880s, and people began making their own photographs – capturing their own images – at home.

Domestic life and familial relationships were very important at a time when many were moving from the countryside into single-family homes or apartments in the city, where they were
surrounded by strangers. Additionally, as ease of transportation improved with the development of the railroad, streetcars, and eventually automobiles, American cities were spreading out into what would become the suburbs. As a result of these dramatic changes in lifestyle, Americans turned inward and embraced family life as the richest source of happiness. The camera became a way to indulge in the desire to depict personal narratives, and it helped secure a sense of identity.\footnote{Diane Waggoner, “Photographic Amusements: 1888-1919,” The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art in association with Princeton University Press, 2007), 11.} Though professional photography studios still existed and portraits were still made to mark the growth of a young child, a graduation, an engagement or marriage, the practice of family photography gradually evolved into the snapshot, which was practiced at home, entirely within the family and other social circles, largely removed from the hands of the professional market.

Because of the intimate relationship between people, their identities, and their photographs, as social conventions and lifestyles evolved over time, photographic technology, and the photographs depicting those times, changed as well. As the forty-hour workweek became the norm, and a clear distinction was drawn between work and downtime, depictions of family and leisure time became the subjects of most American snapshots. Additionally, photographs began to depict more relaxed (or even playful or theatrical) subjects – the result of shorter exposure times, and of the comfort of home and family rather than a professional portrait studio (figure 11). The availability of multiple exposures and affordable prints encouraged more experimentation and creativity in the behavior and poses of the subjects (figure 12). People were able to shoot photographs more spontaneously as cameras became more and more lightweight, and the development of the eye-level viewfinder replaced the waist-level ground glass that
required a bit more patience. This furthered the likelihood of subjects appearing more casual and informal in their pose. Kodak developed Kodachrome (color slide film), followed by color film for print processing. Flash attachments became available, allowing for more indoor or night shots. Additionally, Americans became further exposed to images via television, newspapers, and magazines, all of which saw the popularity of photography as a way to communicate and advertise. As Sarah Greenough, Curator and Head of Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art, states in *The Art of the American Snapshot: 1888-1978*, “Seeing became believing in the 1950s, and, more than at any other earlier time in American history, people saw through the filter of photography.” Advertisements targeted women as being responsible for documenting their families. Women were encouraged to develop a personal narrative, to take photographs of anything and everything they wanted to – not just what had traditionally been photographed. Kodak urged that photographs would be more accurate than memories, and thus, family photography grew ever more narrative, and the number of snapshots continued to increase.

In considering the history of photographic conventions, family photography, and the intimate relationship forged between people and their photographs, we can see the 1983 Christmas snapshot as more than a single moment in time, a personal history. It is also part of a social practice with a wider cultural significance and a traceable history. The plethora of similar Christmas snapshots speaks to the importance of these photographs in everyday life. Just as the invention of photography was the product of a particular time and place, brought into being due

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26 Greenough 2007, 171.
to the skills and strategies available to those who were pursuing it, this 1983 Christmas snapshot would not exist today without the developments in technology, social practice, lifestyle, and snapshot conventions that took place over the past 150 years.

The photographic medium became so instantly popular in the nineteenth century because it was accessible to the masses. It was a democratic medium from the start, extending the privilege of portraiture to people outside the upper class. As the technology was refined and perfected, photography eventually became something that was created by the consumers, furthering its democratic nature. The photography market began as a business of professionals and studios and has since evolved to a means of image-making that is composed, created, produced, and consumed by the masses, not only by artists and professionals. Today, the practice of photography is practically as commonplace an activity as grocery shopping or going to work. People take cameras with them when going out, spending time with friends and family, or on an afternoon walk in the park. Photography is just something people do. Like cell phones (many of which also function as cameras and computers), the act of photography accompanies the average person every day. Consequently it is highly personal, yet this does not exclude it from being affected by social norms and conventions. Though distinct from portraiture, the family snapshot serves to further the intimate relationship that was established between people and photography. An entirely new set of conventions has developed around this practice – the photograph is used to create visual narratives of everyday life.

Today, people are accustomed to viewing photographs on a regular basis. They use these common, everyday objects regularly and unconsciously. Photographs are so engrained in daily existence that they are hardly noticed. This is not to say, however, that the magical experience of looking at photographs has been lost; it has simply become commonplace. Like architecture,
roadmaps, social conventions, and the design of the objects we use daily and without contemplation, photography quietly affects the way we move through time and space. What was once a dizzying and bizarre experience to view a familiar face in two-dimensional form, knowing that the image in one’s hand was created from the actual light that bounced from the person’s body, has now become normalized and unexciting. As with any groundbreaking technological advancement, at some point it loses its luster; the revolutionary inevitably becomes common and overlooked. This commonness of family photography is largely what contributes to its being overlooked – both in everyday life, as well as in museums and the academic study of photography. Though this indifference might be of little consequence in our personal lives, there are far-reaching repercussions in the professional and academic worlds.
Beyond the Domestic: The Study of Photography

The study of the history of photography reflects the subject’s complicated nature: Photography has been studied in terms of practice, theory, and history; a variety of books and exhibition catalogs exists, presenting varied perspectives and theories. Photography plays a role in a number of disciplines and fields of inquiry (e.g. sociology, art history, anthropology, communication studies), and has been written about in terms of philosophy, semiotics, technology, and art history. The photograph has been regarded as a work of art, a social practice, a material object, and a transparent image. Despite the variation in fields and subjects, photography is ripe for consideration from any of these avenues of inquiry. Thus, from the beginning, photography and the study of photography have defied categorization. The medium is simply paradoxical by nature.

Very little scholarly inquiry has closely regarded the photographs that remain most abundant in our world, those that exist outside any study of the history of the medium or academic discourse. Though photographic technology has continuously evolved and changed, people have remained steadfast in the practice of surrounding themselves with images that reflect a sense of identity, convey personal narratives, and keep loved ones close. Photographs are made, held, and their meaning is furthered through the use of frames, lockets, scrapbooks, or albums. They are placed with other objects and photographs to craft stories. They are used to cast our identities and to document our histories.
Over the past thirty years, there has been an increase in academic attention towards vernacular forms of photography, which have historically been excluded from scholarly discourse. Today, scholars such as Geoffrey Batchen, Professor of Art History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, and Elizabeth Edwards, Head of Photograph Collections, Pitt Rivers Museum, and Lecturer in Visual Anthropology at the University of Oxford, are broadening the scope of the history of photography to include vernacular photographs through close academic attention to the interpretation of them – Batchen, from the perspective of art/photo history, Edwards from the perspective of visual anthropology or material culture. Additionally, there have been several recent exhibitions and catalogs devoted to creating a revised and inclusive history of photography, with direct attention paid to these historically underrepresented photographs, such as *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998; *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000; and the National Gallery of Art’s 2007 exhibition, *The Art of the American Snapshot: 1888-1978, From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson.* The snapshots included in these exhibitions could be described as anonymous, amateur, or vernacular. They are all seemingly banal. Yet, each of these exhibitions was organized around the principle that a close look at these photographs reveals compelling aesthetics.

Photography became of interest to art museums in the late 1930’s, following Beaumont Newhall’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition, *Photography: 1839-1937*, which surveyed the history of the medium. Newhall had been a librarian at MoMA and was invited by

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27 For a more comprehensive list of scholars, authors, and exhibitions that have studied vernacular photography from the 1980s to the present, see Stacey McCarroll Cutshaw and Ross Barrett, *In the Vernacular: Photography of the Everyday* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 2008), 11-25.
the director to curate a show that would serve as a retrospective of the many functions of
photography since its invention. Following the exhibition, Newhall went on to become MoMA’s
first Director of Photography, and later, curator at the George Eastman House. He is credited
with being the first to secure photography’s status as an art form. Another major photography
exhibition took place at MoMA in 1955: The Family of Man. The photographs exhibited were
selected by photographer Edward Steichen to demonstrate the strength of universal human values
during a time of emotional and political conflict after World War II and during the Cold War.

Both of these exhibitions mark a time during which photography was undergoing a
transformation in the American psyche. While marking its emergence in regard to art and
museums, these exhibitions still reflect the complexity of the medium. Newhall’s Photography: 1839-1937 secured the style of ‘straight photography’ as Modern Art, but the valued qualities were remarkably similar to snapshots or photographs produced by amateurs. With ‘straight photography,’ photographers such as Paul Strand, Imogen Cunningham, and Edward Weston embraced the camera’s objective nature, privileging realistically depicted subjects (figure 13) to the painterly manipulation and soft focus of pictorialist photography (figure 14). They were concerned that as photography became more accessible to the masses, and more and more photographs were produced by amateurs, photography’s status as an art would be diminished. Thus, they reclaimed the objective nature of the medium as a true art form with no aspirations to imitate painting. This movement is indicative of the blurred lines that divide painting, fine art photography, and snapshots. Furthermore, despite Steichen’s Family of Man being exhibited in an art museum, the exhibition looked to photographs to serve as visual documents of the human condition. Thus, the multifarious nature of photography was unavoidable during this transformative period.
While photography entered the discourse of art, it continued to gain momentum in popular culture as well, as high-speed film and user-friendly cameras became more and more available and affordable. Photography was also becoming of further interest in academic circles, and the study of the history of photography has greatly increased since the 1970s. Though photography has been studied by scholars of many fields, snapshots and family photographs have often been missing from this academic study. Today, canonical boundaries are being blurred and questioned, eliminating what was once considered a clear distinction between art and non-art, historical artifact and everyday object. In many ways, it is useless (and sometimes impossible) to sort snapshots from the work of artists, amateur photography from the work of skilled professionals. Artists employ conventions similar to those used by amateurs, and many well-known works of art resemble the clumsy snapshots one might find in a common family photo album. Considered as a whole, photographs – regardless of their function or maker – are made and read according to a common photographic language. In vernacular snapshots we can see the influence of art, and likewise, the development of the everyday snapshot has informed the way artists use the photographic medium. A closer study of vernacular photographs brings rich insight to the discussion of the way we relate to imagery, objects, art, and to one another.

This push for intellectual engagement with seemingly banal everyday photographs has not, however, been (and perhaps cannot be) reflected in many museum or library collections – institutions that house collections sorted according to strict classifications. Photographs are found today in any number of museums and other institutions, but the photographs most near and dear to us are not – at least not with the same sense of meaning that they hold in the domestic sphere. Snapshots contribute to (and speak volumes of) cultural identity, but these conventions are somehow not recognized by or represented in the museum setting. These photographs are
regarded in everyday life as physical objects, and their presence holds a great deal of meaning. The importance of their materiality is evident in the ways in which they are cared for, displayed, or used. However, the irony of the photograph’s materiality is its indexicality. They are everywhere, and yet we look past them – perhaps through them. We are sometimes blind to their physical properties, seeing the physical as simply a vehicle for the image.

**The Placement of Meaning**

A photograph may be valued for a particular reason in one type of institution, but valued for an entirely different reason in another. Meanwhile, neither institution may be fully engaging with the meaning that the photograph might have held for its original owner or maker. As a result of strict collection criteria and limited methods of classification, some photographs are excluded from consideration altogether, while others might be classified according to a limited set of information or meaning. For example, Art Historian and Curator of Photography Glenn Willumson traces the shifting meaning of a series of photo albums in his article, “Making Meaning, Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum.” The set of seven albums was compiled by a man named Seaton as he traveled through Europe from 1898 to 1902. The albums consist of commercially purchased photographs and handwritten recollections pasted into composition notebooks. These albums have moved from New York’s Swann Gallery, which collects book arts, to the Getty institute where they spent time in both the Getty Museum and in the Getty Center special collections. While the Swann Gallery valued the albums for Seaton’s crafting of the contents of the books, the Getty Museum valued the photographs (though not for

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long, as they were not considered fine art prints), and the special collections valued the
interaction of photographic image, photo history, and written travel journal. Thus, the meaning
of these complex and vernacular albums became mercurial, changing shape from one institution
to the next.

How is it that these objects, with which we are so close and familiar, present such a
problem to institutions that largely aim to record our cultural traditions and preserve meaningful
objects? Perhaps it is due to the prolonged period in the scholarly study of photography during
which vernacular photographs were not considered culturally significant or intellectually
engaging. Ironically, these photographs are absent (from academic study and museum
collections) while ubiquitous in everyday life. The result is that these photographs tend to
become invisible. While they were being excluded from academic study, American culture was
absorbing them into everyday experiences and routines. Elizabeth Edwards suggests that the
invisibility of the photograph in everyday life, as well as in academia and museums, may be due
to the person:non-person dualism which historically has framed the relationship between people
and things. She states:

Photographs are, in such analyses, detached from [their] physical nature and
consequently from the functional context of that materiality. The way in which
people construct themselves and are constructed by others through the cultural
forms of their consumption has been underestimated in relation to photographs.29

The distinction between person and non-person is complicated by photography in that the
photograph is often seen as being transparent – one can look at a photograph and state, “This is
my mother” rather than, “This is a photograph of [or an object representing] my mother.” Thus,

29 Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory,” Material Memories, Eds. Marius
Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (New York: Berg, 1999), 225.
the photograph is not quite regarded as just a *thing*, or a non-person. This transparency then makes the materiality of the photograph less apparent, despite its having a history of use as a functional object of cultural, familial, and social significance.

*Click!*

In 2001, the Smithsonian Institution launched the *Photography Initiative* with the intent of embracing the democratic nature of photography by creating broader access to the wealth of photographs that are available for research, general interest, and insight. The Smithsonian Institution consists of a vast network of nineteen museums and nine research centers, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, American Art Museum, The National Museum of the American Indian, The National Museum of Natural History, National Museum of American History, National Air and Space Museum, and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. Photographs are relevant to each of these distinct museums, but may not be considered objects worthy of collection or exhibition. The *Photography Initiative* includes a website called *Click!: Photography Changes Everything*. The purpose of *Click!* is to explore the ways in which photography not only documents our lives and experiences, but also how it shapes and changes who we are, what we see, where we go, and how we remember. These topics are explored from an array of perspectives: history to journalism, political activism to environmental science, forensics to art history. The site consists of interviews with Smithsonian professionals, as well as essays submitted by invited contributors and general visitors to illustrate the many functions of photographic technology. Professionals from a variety of backgrounds – curators, horticulturalists, actors, filmmakers, educators, critics, architects, academics, and psychologists –

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30 National Gallery of Art, Photography Initiative. “Click!: Photography Changes Everything.” http://click.si.edu/
explain how photography is not only a useful tool in their field, but how it has changed their field, allowing it to evolve and expand to new measures. For example, John Cottington, Curator of Spiders at the National Museum of Natural History, explains how photography has advanced the study of spiders: a series of photographs are taken, each with a very narrow depth of field (which controls the amount of the subject that will appear in sharp focus in the photograph), which is adjusted slightly – up or down – for each image. Stacking software is then used to discard the unfocused information from each image, and compiling the remaining visual information into a single, sharply focused composite image, allowing for a level of detailed study that would not be available without such technology.

Though not directly addressed, in delving into these various professions to uncover the role of photography in each, the Smithsonian Photography Initiative also serves to highlight that photographs are present in and used by many museums and institutions. In addition to being in museum collections, photographs serve a number of functions in the museum – and elsewhere. But they are only deemed worthy of museum collections and exhibitions when they can be classified as important historical artifacts or fine art. The value and importance of a photograph can vary from one institution to the next, depending on the context through which it is being interpreted. However, few of the photographs in these institutional settings bear much resemblance to the abundant supply of photographs that are found in everyday life – snapshots, portraits, photo albums. The museum most likely to house vernacular photographs of this sort would perhaps be a history museum whose scope of collection focuses on community life, local history, fashion, genealogy, and the artifacts, customs, and traditions of everyday life.  

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museum is distinct in mission, collection size, and storage capacity, and all of these factors will contribute to determining collection policies and criteria.

**Identifying Meaning**

Many history museums use a standard cataloguing system, such as Robert G. Chenhall's nomenclature. With this type of reference tool, museum professionals are able to designate a specific term to each object within the collection. The use of a standardized nomenclature is just one of the many “best practices” encouraged by the American Association of Museums (AAM), an organization which exists to support, educate, and connect museums. Streamlining the vocabulary used in various museums simplifies general communication and cataloging processes, and eases research and database queries, as well. Chenhall’s system allows for two classifications of a photograph: Communication Artifact: Print, Photographic: Art – or – Communication Artifact: Print, Photographic: Documentary Artifact. There are also separate classifications for tintypes, daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, etc., but these all fall under the category of Documentary Artifact, not Art. The photographs assigned to the category of Art would consist of those made by people who might be considered artists, hobbyists, or amateurs – basically any photograph that was created with artistic aspirations, with the intention of aesthetic appreciation. These photographs may be made by well-known or anonymous persons, and they may be portraits, landscapes, or still-lifes. The photograph deemed a documentary artifact is considered

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a record – of an event, person, place, or time. Here we might find photographs that are of value to the institution because they depict a notable person when he or she was younger, or we might find photographs that were taken strictly for the sake of posterity – to record the damage withstood by a city after a flood or hurricane. There might be photographs of geographical landmarks, tourist attractions, inauguration parades, or the construction of a new hospital wing. In these instances, the photograph is valued because of the subject of the photograph – for what is portrayed in the photograph. The photograph is simply a vehicle for information – thus it becomes a document. According to a visual culture analysis of the distinction between documents and objects, a document is simply a bearer of textual or visual information, while an object is a three-dimensional material entity with a physical presence. While people relate to photographs as objects in everyday life, institutionally, photographs, if not considered fine art, are reduced to documents, perhaps documents of objects, rather than being considered objects in their own right.

The arrangement of photographs is another stage of museum processing that can have problematic repercussions in regard to the interpretation of vernacular photographs. Photograph collections can be arranged and catalogued in a number of ways, and this too will depend upon the scope of the museum’s collecting policies, space, etc. Sometimes photographs are sorted according to size, subject, chronology, format, function, or any combination of these characteristics. If a photograph is sorted according to its informational value (rather than its physical qualities), it may be worked into an arrangement of subjects such as People, Things, Events, and Places. Under each of these subject headings, there are often further categories, such

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as employee photographs, family members, and friends under *People*, and anniversaries, conferences, and parades under *Events*. Some collections, on the other hand, might be sorted according to function, a photograph being classified as having been intended for advertising, landscape, portrait, or public affairs.

The ambiguity of these classifications is evident in the difficulty that arises when we try to define a single photograph and relegate it to a singular field or category. Many well-known photographers such as Weegee and Robert Capa were shooting photographs for newspapers, magazines, or tabloids. Their approach to subject matter is documentary or journalistic in style, yet they are considered notable artists today and their work has been exhibited in art museums and galleries (figure 15). Should these photographs be classified as art or documentary photographs? Other artists such as Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander intentionally embrace a more haphazard and snapshot-like aesthetic in their work, using abrupt or awkward cropping, slanting horizons, and blurred subjects, or allowing their own shadow to appear in the frame (figure 16). These photographs would be classified as art because of their makers, but nearly identical photographs taken by an amateur would be classified as a documentary photograph (if not disregarded entirely). Furthermore, an anonymous amateur photographer might create a portrait employing conventional studio props, backdrops, softening filters, and classical poses, but the photograph is of value to the collection because of the person *depicted*, not because it is considered a successful work of art.

Because of photography’s multiple functions, interpretations, and manifestations, a single photograph is difficult to classify. When considering these methods for the arrangement, classification, and description of photography collections, it becomes apparent that many

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35 Ritzenthaler 2006, 149.
vernacular snapshots would challenge and perhaps strain the entire system of organization and interpretation. The majority of vernacular photographs are neither art nor simply documents. The photographs with which people surround themselves are meaningful because of their personal relationship with them. And their meaning is contingent upon the framework through which they are viewed and interpreted.

Different types of museums will have an interest in some photographs, while seeing little worth in others. Those produced before the 1880s, for example, are considered more valuable simply because fewer photographs were produced during that period, and even fewer remain in existence today.\(^3\)\(^6\) Meanwhile, a clean and crisp photograph might be considered more valuable than one that is faded, torn, creased, or worn around the edges. However, these omissions can have adverse consequences. A clean and crisp image might remain so because it lacked meaning or function and was deemed unimportant, while the worn and creased photograph might have a more robust history of use and meaning, made evident in the wear and tear of the object. Though earlier photographs are more scarce and thus considered to be of more value, if we turn a blind eye to the wealth of photographs that surround us now, they too might become scarce and anonymous. Though the rarity of earlier photographs does make them worth preserving, they are often lacking in informational details (who is depicted, where, and when) that result in faulty and incomplete descriptions. Meanwhile, we do have access to this sort of detail in regard to more contemporary photographs. Naturally, it is not practical for any museum to consider taking in every available photograph with the hope that something interesting might one day materialize, but these instances beg us to wonder about the consequence of omission. Some museums are addressing this problem, which certainly extends beyond the topic of photography, by employing

\(^{36}\) Ritzenthaler 2006, 105.
foresight and collecting more contemporary objects, rather than only those that have acquired meaning and importance with the passing of time.\textsuperscript{37}

A snapshot’s meaning changes according to the viewer’s relationship to the photograph. Thus, one photograph can mean many things to different people and in different contexts, and its meaning can change over time as well. To classify this sort of experience and meaning is therefore impossible. The meaning of a photograph of a loved one, for example, is rooted in intimacy, relationships, personal history, memory, and emotion – fluid and intangible things that do not translate into the discourse of institutions. Thus, museum practice currently allows for a limited interpretation of a limited array of photographs, while the abundance of vernacular photographs that surround us is charged with complex and changeable meaning. They are intimate and personal, but also culturally ubiquitous, and risk being problematically misinterpreted by the museum – or left out of the museum collection entirely.

\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, Simon J. Knell, \textit{Museums and the Future of Collecting}, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004).
The Family Snapshot: Reconsidering Banality

Critic and Professor of Culture Gillian Rose interviewed a number of women on the subject of family snapshots for her book, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public, and the Politics of Sentiment.* She spent time in participants’ homes and together they looked through boxes and albums of photographs. Rose’s intention was to inquire about the meaning of such photographs, but she found that the women were less able to articulate what the photographs meant as much as they expressed how they made them feel and what they did with the photographs. Thus rather than arguing for the photograph to be considered a material object or a transparent image, Rose argues that the act of making, displaying, and caring for family snapshots is something that people do – it is a social practice.

Many of these women were embarrassed and dismissive of how boring their photographs were – for others. During her study, Rose explored many conventions of family snapshot photography. She discovered that all of her interviewees were most concerned with the truthfulness of the photographs, yet all were interested in recording happy memories in particular. They recorded family visits, growing children, happy moments, special occasions… but took few or no photographs during difficult times such as illness, death, or divorce. Thus there is a slight contradiction in that the women were all concerned that their photographs be truthful, yet some truths were omitted from the practice of family snapshots. The memories that

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these women were most interested in revisiting in the future or preserving for future generations were strictly happy ones.

The women had boxes and albums brimming over with an admittedly excessive quantity of photographs of babies. Other family snapshots depicted families spending time together during holidays or special occasions. Rose also found that family photographs generally include at least two family members in the frame, and rarely show a single individual (with the exception of babies). Additionally, the mothers she interviewed were almost always the ones that took on the household responsibility of taking, making, placing, framing, sorting, arranging, and displaying the family snapshots. Consequently, they were rarely pictured in the family snapshots, as they had generally been behind the camera when the photograph was taken. The story being recorded and/or constructed was, quite literally, from the mother’s point of view. The mothers rarely took photographs in which at least one child was not depicted, and often the child was with another child or other family member. The most successful family photographs – those that were framed, arranged into albums, or mailed to relatives – depicted family unity. The women were combining the truthfulness of photography with images of family members together to project their desired family story: a happy history of family togetherness. As much as they were concerned about their photographs depicting a truthful record of their family history, they were concerned that the proper sort of history be told. The camera was being used to record and document, but it was also being used as a tool to construct a slightly embellished sunshiny

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39 Rose goes on to assert that perhaps these mothers used the camera most during the earliest years of a child’s life because the child was so entirely dependent upon them, that the mothers were unable to really stop and look at their child. Thus, the camera acted as a more objective eye, while the mothers were consumed with caring for the child.

40 Rose 2010, 41.
narrative. The women all trusted in the camera’s ability to convey truth to tell their story of family togetherness.\(^{41}\)

Thus, the 1983 Christmas snapshot is likely less one of a type than we might have first imagined. It diverges from many of these typical characteristics in that despite several indicators that this woman is a mother of young children, the children are not included in the image. Additionally, the woman is alone, rather than with another family member. Some typical snapshot conventions are employed (the occasion, setting, and pose) but some key conventions are missing. Though it appears to be a sentimental, cliché snapshot, the ways in which this photograph differs from the ideal family snapshots of Rose’s research reveals it to be a slightly more complex and curious image.

The Christmas Snapshot

There are many occasions during which cameras are used to document special occasions and traditions – among them are birthday parties, vacations, music recitals, weddings, graduations, and holidays. Evidence of this can be found on the Internet, where many of today’s photographs reside. A search on Flickr.com for “Christmas tree decorating” returns more than 24,000 results (figure 17).\(^{42}\) There is some variation from one image to the next – there are children, cats, dogs, men, and women. In some the subjects visually engage the camera, while others, like the 1983 snapshot, depict people as they face the tree, his or her back to the camera. Some of these Christmas trees are outside, while others are indoors, placed in living rooms quite similar to that of the 1983 image. Some of the shots appear to capture a moment genuinely

\(^{41}\) Rose 2010, 29.

plucked from live action, while others are more obviously posed or theatrical. The quality of the lighting and focus varies from picture to picture, and some are more tightly cropped than others.

Despite their differences, when viewed collectively – the Flickr search results and the 1983 Christmas snapshot – there is no doubt about their similarities. As a whole, they represent the widespread traditions of both vernacular snapshot photography and of Christmastime. Families across the globe spend the weeks (sometimes months) before Christmas decorating their houses in red and green, adding lights to trees, wreaths to doors, candles to windows, snowman knickknacks to mantles. Adults spend money on gifts for children while the children become consumed with the notion of Santa Claus bringing them toys in reward for this year’s good behavior. When viewed en masse, Christmas snapshots reveal a widespread cultural convention of taking such photographs. The photographs are not carefully crafted or particularly aesthetically pleasing. As Rose’s interviewees were aware, if the viewer has no personal ties to the people depicted in the photograph, the image seems boring, if not meaningless. There are so many of this sort of image with so little variation in subject matter, that they appear redundant, empty, and insignificant. The 1983 Christmas snapshot serves as an example of how a close analysis of one of these seemingly banal photographs can reveal it to be complex and meaningful (figure 1). The photograph was taken in 1983, something the average viewer might be able to intuit from visual information alone. Firstly, the photograph consists of a 3 1/2 by 5 inch print, which has more recently been replaced by the 4 by 6 inch print. The photograph appears washed out, yellowed, its colors faded. The woman’s hairstyle is one that has not been worn in a quite some time, and the style and palette of the sofa are no longer popular. A view of this setting a few months earlier might reveal more temporal clues – books and toys in place of presents, everyday decorative objects in place of Christmas decorations, etc. In many ways, some of these
signifiers are partially clouded by the visual presence of so many yearly traditions: a typical living room at Christmastime. Per the very definition of tradition, this living room scene resembles what it and others looked like in the years before and after 1983. The Christmas tree and the activity of decorating it, the green and red gift wrapping, the stockings and poinsettia… these objects are acquired and/or brought out of storage each year. Knowing that this photograph was taken in the 1980s gives it a recognizable history based on collective social practices and traditions, placing it in a particular time and place. These details imbue the photograph with the weight of history, of the change and loss that come with the passing of time.

This particular snapshot of the woman decorating a tree embodies a specific history – she is an individual with a particular life experience, and this scene was taking place at a distinct address, during a specific year. But it is also only one instance of a type – it is one of many such photographs. While this photograph is being used to document a particular family’s Christmas experience, the photograph, just like the decorating of a tree, is a conscious participation in a larger cultural phenomenon. Thousands of such photographs were taken during the same year by many families, and thousands of such photographs were taken in the years prior and since. These photographs are a source of personal narrative and singular identity, yet collectively, people use photography to construct similar – if not parallel – narratives.

For me, however, this Christmas snapshot stands out among others of its kind. This is because I know that the woman in the photograph is my mother. My mother has kept it in an album – one of a series of albums that hold all of the snapshots she has taken since the 1970s, in chronological order. In 1983, my brother and I would have been ages nine and two, respectively, and our absence from the scene is curious. Surely my mother would not have taken a photograph of herself alone if her children had been around. Abiding by one of the conventions Rose
observed in her research, we would have been included in the picture, as we are in plenty of the neighboring images from the same photo album. And my mother surely would not have trusted my brother and I to use her camera, and if she had, it surely would not have resulted in such a well-composed image. And as Rose’s research suggests, women take photographs of their young children, not vice versa.

This would have been my mother’s third Christmas since my father left her, and she was still somewhat reeling from a divorce, managing the responsibilities of a single parent with two young children. The average viewer might hold the assumption, unintentionally or even subconsciously, that someone, perhaps a husband, sister, other relative, or friend, took this photograph of my mother. But, no one else would have been there; she took the photograph of herself. According to my mother, she did not yet own a tripod, and likely placed the camera on the antique pump organ we have always had in the living room. She set up the camera, manually adjusted the focus (in fact, it is not her but the tree that is in the sharpest focus), cropped the image to include the necessary elements (herself, presents, tree), hurried to her position and undoubtedly held her pose for a few seconds before the timer triggered the shutter release, the flash flooding the room with even light.

Another twist in the story occurs upon turning the snapshot over to view the back. If the gifts are not enough of an indication (especially the larger, unwrapped ones), a note on the back of the snapshot reads “Xmas Eve ’83” (figure 18). Our family has always decorated the tree together, usually weeks before Christmas. This leads me to the realization that this photograph is far more posed than one might think – even after realizing that she set the shot up herself. What originally seemed like just another photograph of a person decorating the tree – a snapshot taken by someone else – is really an entirely constructed self-portrait of a single mother on Christmas
Eve. Presumably, my mother had just arranged all the presents around the tree in preparation for the following morning’s festivities. My brother and I must have been upstairs, asleep. And in a moment of self-reflection that must have been a combination of regret and nostalgia for a more ideal family holiday, and pride for being able to manage the parental responsibilities of Christmastime in the absence of a spouse, she set up the camera and took a photograph of herself as if she were hanging an ornament on the already-decorated tree.

The circumstances of the time and place of this photograph significantly alter the banality of this snapshot, and complicate many family snapshot conventions. Her taking this photograph of herself overturns several of Rose’s observations that the maker and taker of the family snapshots was rarely in the photographs, that children were always included in the picture, and that there was rarely only a single person depicted. If Rose’s participants were using photography to record that their families were not only intact but happily together, my mother employed these photograph conventions to project her own image of normalcy. She surely knew that she was recreating a quintessential sort of image usually taken under very different circumstances – the sort of photograph that is taken by a family member or friend, and usually depicting a child. In a sense, the ways in which this photograph challenges the usual conventions illustrated by Rose’s research, symbolizes the ways in which my mother’s reality differed from the universally desired, truthful record of happy family-togetherness. More intriguing is that she constructed the sort of image that is usually taken of a child, by a mother. But in this instance, knowing of her emotional state at the time, she perhaps saw herself as both. In the absence of normalcy and stability, she constructed an image of normalcy and stability. And the projected banality is somewhat convincing so long as the photograph remains mute.
Reclaiming Meaning

This image now stands out among others of its kind. If it were included in the series of thumbnails retrieved from the Flickr search, it would seem to leap out from the crowd. It is dense with meaning, emotion, and history. It embodies not only family traditions and cultural conventions, but also how important it is for one to strive for those traditions and conventions in the absence of ideal circumstances. Likewise, there are many other complicated and emotional stories embodied by other banal snapshots. Of the images on the Flickr page, one cannot tell at first glance what might lie just beneath the surface. Despite photography’s history of being used to construct identity and to project one’s image (both literally and figuratively) into the future for generations to come, an unfamiliar viewer is often unable to sort record from document, fact from fiction.

The 1983 Christmas snapshot and others of its kind might be of no apparent value to museums – it is in fact just one of many, many photographs of people decorating trees. The personal narrative and significance of the memories embodied by these photographs will fade as they make their way through time. Historical photographs in museum collections are often valued as signifying broad social and cultural shifts (e.g. occupational portraits of the late nineteenth century signifying a time when one’s social status depended upon the ability to craft products, rather than one’s ability to consume products). And though the 1980s are still relatively fresh in our collective cultural memory, this photograph does serve as a sign of the times, pointing to a twentieth century shift in the structure of the American family: increased rates of divorce, single-parent homes, and working mothers. Perhaps this significance will become more apparent in the future, thus making the photograph more useful or valuable. But for now it remains, at first glance, a typical snapshot. Such snapshots might become part of a
collection housed in a box or a photo album, perhaps valued for generations to come as an artifact of family history. However, it is quite likely that they will be forgotten and stored away. People find it difficult to throw away photographs, an indication of our reverence for them. Often photographs are kept but stored away until they are finally thrown out or – oddly – given to a thrift store, permanently severing their connection to their original meaning.

Not only do museum collections overlook this kind of photograph and its significance, they are also unequipped to interpret such forms of photography. With a classification system based on sorting art from document, object from artifact, people from places, and places from other places, these photo-objects whose meaning depends on memory, intimacy, and love do not translate in this institutional setting. Collection criteria depend upon aesthetic qualities or informational qualities. Vernacular snapshots may have little information to convey and they may not be aesthetically interesting, but a close understanding of them often reveals them to be anything but banal. In focusing on a formal analysis and the image-content or documentary function of photographs, the museum is overlooking a ubiquitous cultural practice in which many people take part.

Museums struggle with a history of representing only the wealthiest people and their objects, which are then interpreted from a Western perspective – sometimes at the cost of disrespecting or actually harming those outside of this socioeconomic bracket.\(^\text{43}\) In addition to the collecting of finely crafted objects made by important and powerful people and consisting of valuable materials, early museum collections were also populated with objects that had been plundered against the will of their original owners. The meaning and use of these artifacts were

often disregarded or neglected completely and the stolen goods were prized for being objects of
curiosity and wonder. As museums redress these practices that have plagued their history, it
might be of benefit to broaden the methods of interpretation to make room for these vernacular
forms of photography and the intangible importance they carry. The act of collecting, preserving,
and displaying some objects, while excluding others gives a museum the responsibility of
identifying culturally relevant artifacts. Embodied by these photographs is a widespread,
popular, and socially relevant history and practice. People want to see themselves in the
museum; they want to see their own histories reflected in the objects on display and on the walls
of the galleries. The intimate relationship between people and photographs could be put to use in
the museum, enabling more insightful interpretations that would be familiar, engaging, and
meaningful for visitors. It is the intention of many museums to document, record, preserve, and
interpret cultural traditions for the benefit of the public. By denying this sort of object and its
meaning a place in the museum, an important component of everyday life is by default deemed
unimportant.

Selecting the 1983 Christmas Snapshot

While some museums have attempted to incorporate vernacular photographs into their
collections and exhibitions, this has often been done by elevating the vernacular to the status of
art, which sometimes comes at the cost of the photographs’ original meaning. I chose to use the
1983 Christmas snapshot in this paper for this reason, and partially in response to the National
Gallery of Art’s exhibition The Art of the American Snapshot: From the Collection of Robert E.
Jackson. To state the obvious, the National Gallery (NGA) is an art museum, thus, its

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44 Willumson 2004, 77.
exhibitions consist of works of art. The vernacular snapshots displayed in *The Art of the American Snapshot* are thus treated and interpreted as art. Firstly, the exhibited photographs belong to a private collector and were acquired through a dealer. This business of dealers, collectors, and curators seems an odd setting for such personal and familiar objects, but it is in this way and this way only that such photographs could be exhibited at the NGA. According to the catalog, the cohesive idea behind the selection of photographs in the exhibition was the display of creative and artistic conventions that were built up around the practice of taking snapshots. Sarah Greenough, NGA curator and head of the department of photographs, describes the exhibition as tracking the evolution of what she refers to as a popular art.\(^4\) The purpose of the exhibition was to trace the history of this popular art form. The photographs reveal the changing shape of snapshot conventions – the way that people responded to technological advancements and thus the changes in interaction between subject and camera, in terms of behavior, occasion, pose, and level of creativity, sometimes to the point of making theatrical or comical images.

The catalog addresses this popular art perspective in several places. In the director’s forward, Earl A. Powell III states:

“… in the years since 1888, when George Eastman and others made it possible for anyone to make a photograph, billions of snapshots have been made in this country alone. Most of them poignantly remind their makers of a person, place or event with special meaning or importance to their lives. But some, whether by

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intention, or accident, soar above their purely personal associations to reveal more fundamental aspects of American photography and American life."  

Indeed, when one considers American snapshots as a whole, insights of great value are revealed. But as for his claim that some snapshots are distinct from others for their ability to soar above a strictly personal narrative, I disagree. What is most striking when considering such snapshots is the very notion of personal narrative. From one snapshot to the next, regardless of location, personal circumstance, or background, people across the globe use photographs to document and construct their personal narrative. It is a collective yet deeply personal practice. Too examine such photographs as a whole, as if they were one big anonymous photo album, reveals collective values and conventions, a shared sense of meaning embodied by the making and keeping of these photographs. This collective meaning may be revealed in some snapshots more than others, as Powell suggests, but it is most striking when such photographs are considered en masse. Additionally, Greenough writes in the introduction:

“Curators, too, have recognized that some snapshots, once they are removed from the personal narratives that impelled their creation and endowed them with their original meanings, are immensely satisfying visual objects, worthy of careful scrutiny.”

What point is careful scrutiny if the intention is to remove the photograph from its original meaning? I can think of no other instance in which this is a suitable process of meaning-making executed by curators and historians. To deliberately trivialize and cast aside the information that

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47 Greenough 2007, 3.
gave any given object its original meaning and purpose seems anachronistic to the museum’s role in the interpretation of history.

However, the photographs in *The Art of the American Snapshot* were viewed, read, and interpreted not as vernacular photographs, but as art. The exhibited snapshots were transformed for this exhibition – translated into the discourse of art exhibitions, collectors, dealers, art historians, and curators. Consequently, they were viewed from an objective, distanced and detached perspective, to allow a more formal interpretation akin to the interpretation of art. The exhibition was developed based on the idea that vernacular snapshots become more worthy of consideration over time as they lose their original meaning. Furthermore, curators and collectors are then able to identify that some of these images are worthy of being elevated to the status of fine art. These worthy snapshots are the ones purportedly populating the walls of *The Art of the American Snapshot*. I would argue, however, that upon viewing the exhibition or perusing the catalog, the NGA’s popular art theme is not readily apparent. Though it is there, it is secondary to the viewers’ appreciation of the images due to their familiarity and sense of personal connection, relating them to the people and places of their own histories.

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*The Art of the American Snapshot* was displayed chronologically but ended with the 1970s. The reason for this is skirted throughout most of the catalog text, but is most directly addressed in the afterword, wherein the collector states that the distance of time is imperative to
the process of critically viewing and collecting snapshots.\textsuperscript{48} He writes that it may take several years for a photograph to personally resonate with the collector’s memory, or aesthetically resonate with his or her knowledge of art history. Jackson’s own requisite period of historical distance consists of about 20-30 years, he says – which, he adds, conveniently coincides with the amount of time it generally takes for these photographs to make the journey from the personal domestic setting to the public sphere (presumably having been thrown out, lost, given away, or sold). He explicitly states that for now, he is “too close to the 1980s and beyond to be able to see a good snapshot objectively.”\textsuperscript{49}

I would argue that it simply takes 20-30 years for objects to become charmingly aged to the point of being aesthetically pleasing. People like old things: vintage clothes, cars, furniture; photographs are no exception. Photographs from the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s are often used in advertising or on greeting cards. People enjoy the way these photographs look, and the way they are unlike the photographs that we create and use today. Such objects tap into a nostalgic reverence for the past. Over time, common and seemingly banal objects acquire an attractive patina of age, and become visually interesting. It is for this reason that the exhibition stops in the 1970s. The galleries were beautifully designed, subtle, contemplative, and sophisticated. To imagine that The Art of the American Snapshot continued through the 1980s, 90s, and into the 2000s is nearly laughable. Such recent and familiar photographs surely would have looked out of place in such elegant galleries. Clearly some selective measures were taken in order to make vernacular snapshots worthy of hanging in the National Gallery of Art. And this question of art


\textsuperscript{49} Jackson 2007, 274.
as distinct from personal object was skirted by keeping the selection of photographs at an aesthetically pleasing and temporal distance.

For these reasons, I intended to use a personal snapshot from the 1980s with which to write this paper. In a sense, I wanted to pick up where the NGA left off, while also illustrating my criticism of the interpretation of the photographs included in *The Art of the American Snapshot*. Originally, I intended to choose a family portrait of my mother, brother, and I, possibly in front of the Christmas tree, or some such festive setting – a quintessential family photograph. I asked my mother to send me photographs from Christmases of the 1980s, and received several pages taken from her collection of three-ring photo albums. I had a wealth of material to choose from at my fingertips – pages upon pages of Christmas, no other time of year represented. I was first taken by a portrait of the three of us; my mother had set up the timer, and we were seated before the camera on the living room floor, Christmas decorations visible in the background. I had nearly settled on this image when I kept coming back to the photograph of my mother decorating the tree. It seemed more compelling for several reasons. It was a less typical use of the shutter-release timer. (A casual viewer might have guessed that it was used in the portrait of the three of us.) Additionally, all of the elements that I was looking for in the first photograph were present in this image of my mother, but more subtle and hidden. My brother and I are implied, though not actually present. In many ways, this photograph represents the conventions that the NGA was touching upon in *The Art of the American Snapshot*. There is a great deal of acting and posing going on, the composition is well-considered, and the photographer is obviously conscious of (and going to great lengths to comply with) snapshot conventions. But, the real significance and what makes this photograph most meaningful for my mother, me, and for the casual viewer, is the personal meaning and narrative that the NGA was
explicitly working against. Because a casual viewer might not realize that the shutter-release
timer was used, or that the gesture and occasion are completely posed, a close study of this
particular snapshot not only touches upon the cultural importance of complying with snapshot
conventions, but also the reading of such photographs, and it serves to illustrate the shortcomings
of a formal, objective interpretation.
Conclusion

The history of photography’s use as a representation of intimacy and love is a story as old as the story of photography itself. Upon the release of the daguerreotype process, photography was immediately seen as a tool for connecting with loved ones, including those of generations to come. From the first pocket-sized daguerreotype portraits housed in precious cases, to today’s digital image of one’s girlfriend that appears on one’s cell phone upon receiving her call, the physical presence of the photographic image has been used as a meaningful representation of relationships, intimacy, and family. It is the indexicality of the medium – the transparency of the image – that enables us to so closely identify with and cherish photographs of loved ones, but it is through its material presence that people construct further meaning through the practice of sharing, sorting, and displaying these objects.

People today are so inundated with photographs that they are hardly noticed, and a single photograph is able to move from one capacity to another, changing its meaning and the manner in which it can be interpreted. Yet, because photographs are filed away in museums according to subject matter or type, through standardized practices and methods that make these objects easy to retrieve, they are often reduced to a single interpretation or function. What may appear to be a simple documentary image to one person may hold deep emotional value for someone else. Snapshots are complicated objects with profound cultural content. While they record cultural practices, the production of and care for them constitutes a cultural and social practice in itself, thus making them engaging subject matter. Because snapshot photography as a social practice is
culturally widespread, and because of the socially-formed conventions practiced, snapshots are relevant and relatable to a wide audience. Additionally, as we have seen with the 1983 Christmas snapshot, sometimes these conventions are disrupted or altered, and this too is a social practice worthy of attention. The engagement with or departure from such snapshot conventions results in readable narrative imagery consisting of social signifiers that make such photographs meaningful. Yet, only when we make the effort to think of photographs outside of simplified classifications of museums and consider them as objects in their own right – objects with multiple and changing meanings – can we see the myriad ways in which they can be interpreted and exhibited. By embracing the fluidity of photography and its personal meaning, rather than merely sorting art from documentary imagery, the museum could tap into a wealth of information and meaning housed within photography collections. I make these suggestions, as Elizabeth Barrett mused, “[not] in respect (or disrespect) to Art, but for Love’s sake.”

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50 Quoted in London and Upton 1998, 348.
Bibliography


Cutshaw, Stacey McCarroll and Ross Barrett. *In the Vernacular: Photography of the Everyday.*


Figure 1
[Christmas snapshot depicting woman decorating Christmas tree], 1983
Chromogenic print
Collection of Carolyn Wolfe
Figure 17
Screenshot, Flickr.com, keyword image search, “christmas tree decorating”
http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=christmas_tree_decorating&w=all#page=2
Accessed October 28, 2010
Figure 18
[Verso of Christmas Snapshot], 1983
Chromogenic print
Collection of Carolyn Wolfe
Vita

Kimberly Shea Wolfe was born on April 17, 1981, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her family moved to Frostburg, Maryland in 1986, and she remained there through her undergraduate study at Frostburg State University. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2003 with a focus in Photography. In 2008, after several years of experience in the museum field in Richmond, Virginia, she began her study at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she focused on museum studies and the history of vernacular photography.