Re:Visions: A Mother's Secondary Images

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Re:Visions : A Mother's Secondary Images

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Informed by photographic history, theory, and various studies and practices that surround human memory, this study examines the ways that sequential pairs of snapshot photographs both inform and influence the content of memories. The study is firmly grounded in the practice of snapshot photography, examined through an investigation into Kodak’s history and the use of the photographic archive in the narratives surrounding collective memory within the family. This study is informed by artists working with sequential images, a reflection on the role of the photographer as the documentarian of family life, and the arguments surrounding the snapshot’s authenticity and fidelity to the past that it represents. A reflection on a collection of personal sequential snapshots calls the reliability of both memory and the snapshot’s ability to “capture” it into question. Ultimately, the transformation that occurs as the past is recorded through memory or photography inevitably alters its contents.
[Photographic doubles] place their emphasis less on the sufficiency or insufficiency of the clock mechanism than on exploring the process of correlating photographs in reference to the human sense of time – all kinds of time…they demonstrate that there are distinct time-spaces we can point to and contemplate through the photographic process, as we blend short-term memory, long-term memory, and history in an attempt to bridge the two photographs. These photographic doubles start with one of the more fundamental human perceptual tasks: how do we distinguish between similars? Beginning there, we base our distinction on reference to time but in terms of memory, and neither mathematicians nor mechanical engineers have yet arrived at a meaningful calculus of human memory.¹

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Janet Place, and her years and years of snapshots.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to Dr. Jennie Klein for her extensive support, feedback, and encouragement throughout this process. Her valuable suggestions and generous offerings of her time and her ideas made this project possible.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epigraph</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: A Selection from <em>The Memory Yields</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Photograph as Historical Testimony</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: A Mother's Double Vision</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Memorial Implications</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Re:Visions 1A</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Re:Visions 1B</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Re:Visions 2A</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Re:Visions 2B</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Re:Visions 3A</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Re:Visions 3B</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Re:Visions 4A</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Re:Visions 4B</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Scanned image. From: “lost &amp; found in America” from the collection of</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Nicholas Nixon, <em>The Brown Sisters</em>, 1985, Gelatin-silver contact print, 8 x 10</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Nicholas Nixon, <em>The Brown Sisters</em>, 1988, Gelatin-silver contact print, 8 x 10</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>William Henry Jackson. 1873. White House Mountain, Elk Lake. (United</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>States Geologial Survey). From: <em>Second View</em>, Albuquerque: The University of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mark Klett and JoAnn Verburg for the Rephotographic Survey Project, 1977</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snowmass Mountain Geneva Lake, Colo. From: <em>Second View</em>, Albuquerque: The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Timothy O’Sullivan, 1868. Virginia City Comstock Mines. University of New</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexico. From: <em>Second View</em>, Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mark Klett for the Rephotographic Survey Project, 1979. Strip Mines at the</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>site of Comstock Mines, Virginia City Nev. From: <em>Second View</em>, Albuquerque:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Eve Sonneman, <em>oranges, manhattan</em>, date unknown. From: screen capture,</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="http://www.evesonneman.com/diptychs.html">www.evesonneman.com/diptychs.html</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Re:Visions 5A</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Re:Visions 1A
Figure 2: Re:Visions 1B
INTRODUCTION

My family photographs have served as the basis for a large portion of my artistic practice, providing me with a seemingly endless source of imagery that acts as inspiration and reflection on the nature of the photographic image, the archive, and how we use images to supplement our memories. Beyond that, this study has allowed me to explore how the practice of family photography influences our understanding of the individuals that make up our personal histories, recognizing the way that the image can shape the past as we understand it from the present. These photographic pairs are immersive, dreamlike, and seem to lend themselves towards an active viewing that both animates and transforms the act of recall. I have always been intrigued by the ways in which people remember a specific moment differently – especially when there is a discrepancy that neither individual can dismiss as an inaccuracy in their own memory. These photographs and their accompanying essay serve as a testament to the subjectivity of memory, which snapshots so often are used to dispel as they are understood to be a reliable and indisputable document of our lives.

This project has grown out of a previous painting study titled The Memory Yields, acting as a natural extension of the themes of memory, absence, and the snapshot explored in a series of paintings. I began noticing sequential pairs of photographs while working on that body of paintings – while their commentary on absence was much different than the approach that I took in The Memory Yields, the content of the message was very similar. Thus, I embarked on a venture into this photographic survey and accompanying research and reflective essay.
CHAPTER 1: A SELECTION FROM THE MEMORY YIELDS

My family has an exceptional collection of family photo albums that span from my grandmother’s childhood all the way through my own, containing snapshots that collectively represent three generations of my family. They were not all kept together; rather they would show up sporadically throughout my childhood, each bringing its own peek into a decade of family history. I can’t remember when I saw them for the first time – I just remember looking through the albums and wondering how no one had ever shown them to me before. How had I been a part of this family for my whole life and not seen what they looked like in their home, growing up like I was right now? Where had these pictures – these clues – been hiding? It was the first time that I was really able to understand the fact that people have personal histories, leaving little traces behind them as clues to the lives they once lived.

For a period of my childhood, my Grandma Dot was moving through different stages of Alzheimer’s disease, from moments of confusion and ‘forgetfulness,’ through the heart-breaking progression that causes wonder at the complexity and frailty of human memory. While there were a range of signs that marked the advancement of this disease and its effects on her health and safety, there was one development that had a particular impact on the way that I understood what she was going through: the way she handled and referenced photographs. We lived in the same city as my grandmother when I was growing up and I was incredibly fortunate to have her as an active part of my childhood. As she began showing early signs of the disease, there were a large number of

photographs turning up on her coffee table. Each time we came in, there were new photographs from her childhood or my mother’s. I was never really sure where they had come from, but they usually showed up around events like birthdays or times when you might want to find an old photograph to share with others. Some had names on the back, while others had dates or cities. Around this same time, my grandmother began buying disposable cameras – little plastic Kodak cameras that she could get developed at the grocery store. Each time we came to visit, there would be a few cameras for us to have developed. At first, I was very excited to see what the prints were going to look like: the ability of a snapshot to freeze time seemed magical to me. My mother had the philosophy that photographs belonged to the everyday – that a snapshot of my sister and me at the kitchen table told more about our childhood than a formal picture from a moment that seemed “special” or elevated from the everyday. I always found snapshots to capture images most beautifully and honestly for this reason; in my family, they sought to capture the imperfect beauty of daily life.

The photographs that my grandmother had started taking confused me; I did not pull the prints out of their envelope to look at fun moments she had photographed. They were pictures that I found unexciting: most of them were empty or of things in her house, often featuring her little mongrel terrier named Pepper. I remember thinking: “Why does grandma want pictures of all of this stuff?” Her coffee table, which had been accumulating older snapshots pulled from family albums, now began to fill up with new photographs, the old and new images mixing together to form large stacks. When I picked up a stack to look through them, I would find many snapshots that I had seen
before and a few that I didn’t know existed. It was always a collection that did not give any thought to organization, other than the possible label of “Images from Dorothy’s Life.” As her memory began fading, she liked looking through photographs of old times and accumulating new snapshots from her everyday experiences as a way of remembering with a little help. I had failed to understand the significance of her new photographs when I was younger – they seemed haphazard, insignificant, and frankly like a waste of film. After studying the role that the snapshot plays in our personal histories, I have come to understand the photographs she was referencing (from both the distant and recent past) as tools that used the past to help her understand herself in the present. These seemingly insignificant photos created a personal history, each photograph serving its purpose as a representation for different periods of her life.
CHAPTER 2: THE PHOTOGRAPH AS HISTORICAL TESTIMONY

Generally speaking, the snapshot provides a family with images that represent a collective history. I must stress the term represent, for there is an important difference between revealing the past by copying it and the more holistic understanding that photographs reveal through suggestion. Many still believe that the photograph is exempt from the subjective as we practice snapshot photography for (what feels like) documentary purposes:

For the average person, photography has not yet lost its founding metaphysics: we still believe in the actuality of the things that our snapshots show us, stare longingly at the image of a lost love, reverentially safeguard the portrait of a deceased relative, and tell ourselves, These things existed. 3

While we believe that photographs preserve our past, it is important to acknowledge photography’s limitations. Celebrated photographer Minor White gives us a good starting point for unpacking this misunderstanding, emphasizing the role of the photographer as a curator of the present, deciding how to frame unfolding events in order to selectively represent them for later recollection. 4 White points out that the photographer brings his or her vision to the image – “completes the whole,” so to speak. There is an aspect of “recording” involved, in the sense that family snapshots serve as evidence, as Kuhn investigates in Family Secrets:

…[the family’s] members have gone through the passages conventionally produced in the family album as properly and necessarily familial…But recording

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is the very least of it… The photograph’s seizing of a moment always, even in that very moment, anticipates, assumes, loss.  

Kuhn stresses the inability of the photograph to capture everything that its photographer perceives in the moment that they take the photograph. It would be an oversight to deny the photograph its evidential qualities; though they give insight rather than fact about an event from the past, and should not be taken as duplications of an objective reality. As Kuhn explains, photographs serve as material that we can use to reinterpret the past, a type of evidence that can lead to revelation through what it reveals or put up roadblocks through what it excludes. Though snapshots can offer truths about the past, there is no single truth that will emerge from any and every reading.

Facticity

As I have interpreted it, we can understand the contents of the photograph as finite, and what it represents can be potentially infinite. This is why one struggles to draw the line between reading the image and taking it as fact – how we read the image is not necessarily how the action unfolded. When it comes to understanding how we read these photographs, we can often get caught between the idea of it representing the facts of a moment and conveying the representation of a moment – an interpretation beyond what is there. The idea of the continuum, as outlined by Paul Berger, is especially pertinent when recognizing how the intentions of a photographer do not limit its meanings:

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6 Ibid., 13.
As an image, the photograph can be both document and picture, artifact and art, visual map and carrier of cultural meaning. Although some photographers may place their concern at one extreme or the other, all photographs are necessarily situated somewhere along the continuum between the two poles. But where a viewer “locates” any particular photograph along this continuum, that is, how he understands it, is determined by more than just the photograph itself. 7

Why, then, do we so adamantly continue to collect family images as if they are able to nail down our past? We want photographs to tell us something that we don’t already know, hoping that they will show us something that we didn’t see before. The photograph itself won’t always (will it ever?) have the ability to do this on its own, but it can be used as a tool for understanding what we do with photographs, rather than what they do unto us. Marianne Hirsch walks us through a this-or-that approach that unfolds a wealth of possible strategies ranging from question versus fact, fluid versus fixed meaning, and beyond that to more personal interpretations:

I can read it against other images, against other narratives, I can read it with and against my memories and desires, my longings and fears. I can read it alongside those other photographs…and I can produce a dialogue between these images, separated by eighty and thirty years yet strangely mirroring one another. 8

As Hirsch has pointed out, the information that comes from outside of the frame has the potential to come from other, similar photographs, separated by any length of time.

Often in photographic practice, we find ourselves wanting a picture to “capture something” – the likeness of a person (portrait), or a moment (snapshot) to convey something beyond the photograph itself. Photography actually seeks to capture beyond what is there, contrary to what I had always thought, as explained by Annette Kuhn in her

7 Berger, “Doubling: This Then That,” 45.

book *Family Secrets*. It “points away from itself…” to show more than just how the past appeared, but expanding to act as a prompt that can evoke memories that are not actually grounded in the content of the snapshot, “having little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture” ⁹ Considering the common understanding that photography has the capacity to capture what is physically present, ¹⁰ we might assume that the distinction comes with what is considered a successful image – a good photograph goes beyond what is there. Is this a question of quality? Or of the clarity of its translation?

Kodak and the Family Narrative

The notion of “envisioning” one’s familial history seems like a grand gesture of creative liberty, but everyone who has taken a family snapshot has participated in this behavior. The photographer’s role is to capture images as they are *seen and interpreted into an image*, rather than how they occurred. Important, here, is the influence of perception. The desire to document the daily lives of one’s children has existed since the beginnings of amateur photography – products that facilitated snapshot photography were marketed as ways to document moments worth remembering that otherwise might disappear into history. Beginning in the 20th Century, Kodak began offering the snapshot as an aid to memory, suggesting that by taking photographs one might safeguard against the fogging of memory with the passage of time. Kodak promoted photography, and thus


¹⁰ “In analogue photography memory takes on the form of the material negative, an image held in an emulsion on celluloid.” Allan Trachtenberg, “Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory” in *Social Research* Spring (2008), 111 – 132.
their product, as “…a form of memory” after World War I, as they capitalized on the absence created by war and emphasized the ability of an organized collection of photographs to “provide a more effective means of recording or remembering and interpreting events than a consumer’s own fallible memory.”\textsuperscript{11} The Story Campaign, Kodak’s effort to brand the snapshot as a narrative memory device, promised that the photograph had the ability to displace memory, circumventing the threat of absence and disappearance affecting the typical post-war American family that stood as their target audience.\textsuperscript{12} The Kodak practitioner could turn to the (supposedly) reliable photograph, instead of their own fallible memory, for an accurate portrayal of their experiences. This transformed the idea of the consumer into the role of “maker,” giving the family photographer incredible agency in the portrayal of their own lives; “photographs are products, commodities, and yet they are still revered as magical relics of the past somehow produced by the past itself rather than by us.”\textsuperscript{13} The camera is commonly viewed as a passive tool, serving as a means of documentation that records “the objective fact of family integration;” but Rosalind Krauss points out that its role is much more active as it transforms the past and allows for the creation of a curated narrative through the archive.\textsuperscript{14}

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Nancy Martha West, \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia} (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Shanks, \textit{The Memory Yields}, 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Rosalind Krauss, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral” in \textit{October} 31(1984), 56.
\end{itemize}
With more and more cameras in the homes of consumers following the growing popularity of Kodak, the sense of longing and nostalgia associated with personal photographs became focused on life lived rather than life lost, as it had done in the Victorian era. Your average man and woman began practicing snapshot photography, transforming the sense of nostalgia associated with images of one’s past into a vision of overarching happiness, void of life’s tragedies or even the banality of the everyday. Kodak’s practitioners had the ability to collect images of smiles, celebrations, and life’s milestones in order to construct an ideal narrative past, composed of “‘timeless’ pleasure and affection, thus striving to secure a future that will remain untouched by pain as it looks back on what seem to be moments that have somehow escaped sorrow and loss.”

By recording one’s experiences through snapshots, the photographer is seemingly able to edit the past through selective inclusion. The snapshot draws on a different qualifier for nostalgia than the Victorian practice of personal photographs that came before it – it focuses its attention on the happy past rather than our inevitable mortality, although it still seems to hint at mortality through its evidence of time’s passing. Snapshots allow us to choose from what seems like an endless bank of memories and compile them into what one might consider a highlight reel as manifested in the family photo album.

The family album, though often championed as a documentary archive stocked with moments that surely occurred as we see them now, serves its main function as a tool

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16 West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, 143.

for personal narrative. From the outset, the practice of family photography is one of framing and curation – as soon as the photographer decides what to include in the frame, he or she has begun a selection of what constitutes a “good” picture, in an effort to construct an “accurate” representation of the moment. Yet, how do we judge the accuracy of a snapshot and what could this possibly be measured against - memory? The past as it occurred? As we tell stories about our families, we give an account of the family as we perceive it and as we would like others to view our familial unit. It is a matter of controlling the content associated with the family’s past and an effort to direct its reception. The photographer plays the role of family documentarian while simultaneously taking part in the action of the narrative, weaving a story about the past from the perspective of the present by compiling the snapshots in the album. This foundation, upon reflection, gives a fictional quality to this autobiographical work, though perhaps the better term might be fabricated or “envisioned:”

As a social institution, American photography commemorates a popular struggle to envision – and the struggle to be visible in – a modus vivendi for American lives. The right to see and be seen, in one’s own way and under one’s own terms, has been the point of contention.18

The role of the photographer is not to communicate the truth of what has already happened, but to offer a visual representation that can be used to interpret the past. The family album is an autobiographical tool that allows the photographer to curate an image of the family history, being classified as autobiography for two main reasons: family

snapshots attest to an event that “really” happened, and they are captured by narrator who is both present in the past action and in it’s retelling.¹⁹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, well known for his photojournalistic approach, expresses the responsibility bestowed upon any photographer who aims to represent life as it is as being one of perceiving reality: “We must neither try to manipulate reality while we are shooting, nor muse we manipulate the results in a darkroom.”²⁰ He poses the mission of the photographer who practices in his or her own personal life to be an undertaking of truth-telling and integrity to the experienced reality.


Figure 5: Re:Visions 3A
Figure 6: Re:Visions 3B
CHAPTER 3: A MOTHER’S DOUBLE VISION

The Maternal Gaze: Photographer Mothers

The role of the photograph in the collective memory of the family takes on an interesting dimension in the case of my albums, which are heavily gendered towards the feminine. There is a pattern in my maternal lineage that both my mother and late grandmother were tickled by, one is still a source of solidarity within my family – my grandmother, Dorothy, was one of two daughters; my mother was one of two daughters; and I am one of two daughters (along with my sister, Molly, who is two years older than me). My parents divorced when I was a very young child, so many of my family albums were photographed and compiled by my mother from start to finish. If she is pictured in any of these snapshots in this collection, then it was her mother or her sister, Ann, who took the photograph. While this might at first seem like a minor detail, it becomes especially interesting when we consider the maternal gaze and the role of the photographer-mother. This is a rare instance in which we can look into the family unit through a wholly feminine visual representation. I can think of few media more appropriate for such a task than the snapshot, whose position as “common” shares characteristics with this example of feminist narrative:

Knowledge from below, common knowledge, is often dismissed as superstition, ‘female intuition’, ‘old wives’ tales’; or at best patronized as ‘folklore’, the quaintly earthy wisdom of the unlettered. Looked at from a different standpoint, though, it can be seen as the knowledge of those who understand that the world does not belong to them, but who see themselves as belonging to the world.21

21 Kuhn, Family Secrets, 120.
This elevation of the common and the everyday into the realm of the revelatory and profound stems from the snapshots dual characterization as ordinary and precious: these personal artifacts surround us, and are simultaneously disposable and treasured. As Douglas Nickel puts it, “How are we to take seriously something every one of us has all around…? Then again, perhaps for the same reason, how can we not?” They derive their poignancy through their ability to convey experience through the eye of the photographer, and their ability to rouse emotions and memories that may or may not find their basis in the reproduced image. The ability of a viewer to feel as if they have experienced a moment by looking at a photograph and relating it to their personal past bestows the everyday snapshot with great power: “For experience is not infrequently played as the trump card of authenticity, the last word of personal truth, forestalling all further discussion. Let alone analysis.” The everyday is, at its purest, experience. As Kuhn points out, the authenticity of the snapshot can inhibit its analysis, but I believe that the double image, with its repetitions and inconsistencies, calls this notion into question – for every snapshot moment in this study, there is an alternate view. Once we have interpreted the snapshot (commonly understood as an indicator of truth) through our own experience, it is impossible to refute its impact. The everyday finds its weight in what it represents, not in what it reproduces.

When I read these photographic pairs, I am reading what my mother sees when she looks at her children. Am I not trying to reimagine myself through my mother’s eyes,

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23 Kuhn, Family Secrets, 33.
for she has provided the material? Does the family album give its photographer the ability to not only curate photographic evidence, but also to control how we revisit and recall memories? My photographs don’t feature a mother daughter pair that allows us to analyze the relationship through their dual presence in the image – by looking at how the duo interact in the image, or through body language, as we find in collections such as *Mothers and Daughters.*  

In the case of my survey, the relationship is one that we can examine by looking at how the mother *views* the daughter, how she hopes to represent her in the album and how she hopes that her daughter will see herself through the photograph. It is a relationship that we have to evaluate based on the photographer’s familial gaze, putting us in the shoes of the mother photographer and pictured child (as both subject and viewer) all at once. It is important to establish that when I speak of the maternal in this study, I am referring to the female caregiver in the case of my own albums, but there exists a wide range of mother figures, including mothers who identify as heterosexual, LGBT, and celibate. For the sake of simplicity, the “mother” I refer to is the maternal figure, which is not necessarily the sole *female* caregiver. Mothering “is a set of ongoing organized activities require discipline and attention,” while pregnancy “can appear as a condition, a state of physical being.”

All pregnant women do not become mothers, and all mothers were not necessarily pregnant. First wave feminists

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26 Ibid.
have established that motherhood is an option, not a requirement, and that to be a mother is a choice.  

This emphasizes the selfhood of the woman, one that can be seen in those who choose to mother as well.

Understanding this maternal gaze and its impacts on how we read the image requires a level of appropriation of the snapshot’s content, requiring that the viewer place themselves within the family photo to interpret its meaning. Marianne Hirsch explains this associative viewing in Family Frames: “Recognizing an image as familial elicits a specific kind of readerly or spectorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative.” In order to unpack these images, we adopt the familial gaze and incorporate the imagery into our own understanding of familial relationships and history by reading it through our experience with our own precious family photographs. This type of association is what Mieke Bal would call heteropathic, understood to be based on going beyond the self, enabling the viewer to move beyond their personal identity in order to react to an image more empathetically, rendering it more socially productive. We are trying to identify with the photographer to understand what the desired outcome of the photograph might be: in many cases, the more “ideal” version of the family. This elevates

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28 Hirsch, Family Frames, 93.

the mother’s perspective of the family by making it the only perspective we are looking through – the practice of family photography, which has often been paternal (though not always), has taken an exclusively feminine exercise in the case of my family albums, opening it up for a unique critical reading. In the introduction to her book *Mother*, photographer Elinor Carucci discusses her drive to photograph her own children:

> The need to photograph became even stronger when I realized how painfully apparent the passage of time is in the life of a child. The stages they go through simply fly by. Moments that will never come back have passed before my eyes… I felt compelled to preserve those moments somehow. It is a need every parent shares – whether or not we are professional photographers, we all take pictures of our families. It is as if we’re consoling ourselves, counting our days in this world with our children.\(^\text{30}\)

The practice of family photography, as practiced by the mother, can be understood through this description – as an effort to nail down the present as it disappears into the past, chronicling the lives of one’s offspring.

There have been many debates about the role of mothers behind the lens. As Hirsch asserts in her work on the familial gaze, the photographer-mother reveals aspects of her own identity through her depictions of her children: “Mothers are always exposed by and through their children. Mothers’ stories and children’s stories are always intertwined: only theory can try to keep them comfortably separate.”\(^\text{31}\) The relationship between mothers and daughters reveals its own, unique set of insights into the feminine by acknowledging the different nature of a mother’s relationship to her female offspring, rather than children more generally. Hendricka C. Freud suggests that a special solidarity


is fostered by the possibility of the shared fate of being a daughter that becomes a mother, leading mothers and daughters to “emulate each other.” We must wonder, then, what can be revealed through a mother’s images of her daughter? In her essay “Mothers & Daughters,” Tillie Olsen poetically (and perhaps a bit simply) suggests that the mother’s mission, if you will, is first and foremost the wellbeing of her children:

The hours of caring, of mediating, of making our world more safe, manageable, joyous; the sheer physical work of mothering; carrying, lifting, balancing a child on one hip, groceries on the other, running after the little ones; the sleeplessness; the myriad of details to attend to; the piece of the brain that no matter what else eclipses it, is always concerned with the well-being of the children.  

This sentiment is one that I noticed in many of the books about the mother/daughter relationship, but not as often in books of photography where the photographer is viewed as “artist” as well as “mother.” How does a collection of photographers photographing their families differ from my mother photographing hers? Photographer-mothers range from the highly-criticized work of Sally Mann, who is seen as compromising her job as mother to achieve her professional goals; to Elinor Carrucci, whose photographs offer a highly orchestrated staging of the poignant moments of motherhood; and beyond to Jane Gallop, whose writing and photography explore what it means to expose the private

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33 Olsen and Olsen, Mothers and Daughters, 17.

images of motherhood.\footnote{Jane Gallop and Dick Blau, “Observations of a Mother” in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996).} It seems as if both the amateur and professional photographer-mother take on the stance that everyday life is profound, and *to be captured*, rather than my stance that the everyday, *once captured*, carries meanings beyond itself. Isn’t the everyday profound because it is an eloquent and simple explanation for the larger meaning of our lives? There is a power behind these everyday images, and whatever that power may be it is clear that it becomes a driving force in our understanding of the past. Perhaps it becomes a question of intention: does the photographer wish for them to become public? And at what level, for what ends? It seems that the amateur thinks about showing the family idealistically but only intended for the private audience, while the photographer seeks to share the private with the intention of reaching an outside audience. My mother seems to be a hybrid, falling somewhere within this spectrum: she sought to show the private, the everyday, rather than the ideal, but she also had no intention of showing them publicly. She was sharing the private with the private: freeing the snapshot from its associations with idealistic imagery without the concern about outside criticism. Could my mother be a “great photographer” if she had snapped with intention, with the intention to release her photographs from the private?

**Absence in Abundance**

While my mother felt that she had to “snap – snap” so as not to miss the moment, the attempts are futile if the photograph still merely represents only that – a temporal moment. The photographs most pertinent and revelatory in my study are those that seek
to capture this more cerebral “moment” in which we were all there, with this double snap approach revealing more about the split-second by giving the moment a logical course of action, filling in one gap while creating another. A viewer can hope to find the likeness of a person or the representation of a memory – both require the image to carry more than what it shows, specifically catering to the subjective (how Barthes remembered his mother, how you remember a day at the beach\textsuperscript{36}). Perhaps this takes the snapshot from split-second to second split – alluding the moment it aims to capture by fracturing it in two. In most cases, I am not interested in looking at how well a photograph captures a person, though this can happen by accident. I am more concerned with looking for pairs that convey, however subtly or blatantly, the significance within the everyday/anyday, the everymoment/anymoment, driven by the accidental. What might the impact be on a moment’s recollection if one member of the family is taken out of the frame? How does the unfolding action between two snapshots agree with, or likewise counter, the way we might recall the said moment in our own memory? These pairs and the differences that they illustrate can capture a complex likeness of an individual, but I find they often offer more insight into familial relationships, the monumental in the miniscule, and questions about familial and collective memory practice. There seems to be no better way to end a family dispute about how the past occurred than by referencing our snapshots, although we have found the family snapshot, as with much photographic evidence, to be less matter-of-fact that first imagined. In many of the publications on family photographs that I have studied, I have only come across two that include images that appear in sequence.

Figure 8: Re:Visions 4B
The first, Peter Hendricks’s *Good Copy*, we are presented with a collection of images that, more often than not, are images that other collections might have excluded for their apparent lack of content, clarity, or quality. The title of the book refers to a term that is used in English radio language: “there it serves as confirmation for a message clearly received and understood, and spares the repetition of an incoming message.”37 In most cases, one might assume this would pertain to a single image that effectively communicates the “essence” of its content, but this collection seems to suggest that the double image, with its gaps and shortcomings, can reveal even more than the “good” snapshot can. A ‘good copy’ is what the snapshot aims to be – and yet, this collection features double images that seem to work together, acting as one in order to achieve this status (Fig. 9). You hope that it can be contained in one image, though these pairs show that a moment can’t always be contained in such a way. What we should take from this idea, therefore, is the notion that a photograph that is candid, out of focus, poorly composed, or any other number of disqualifications for a “good” image can still yield a “good copy.” The photographs in this book give me a sense of the nature of my family albums – they are fairly inclusive as they seek to communicate the everyday, with images ranging from naked babies in a backyard pool, lunches on the lawn, or scenes from family excursions. Hendricks includes image sets that convey a narrative as well, perhaps suggesting that the album does not rely on single images but that pairs can be read dually.

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Figure 10: Scanned image. From: “lost & found in America” from the collection of Lenny Gottleib, Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2004.
Lenny Gottleib’s collection of snapshots in *Lost and Found in America*\(^\text{38}\) offers a few double images as well – its photographs from the Vietnam War Era are far more candid than any published collection of family photographs that I have studied while writing this essay (Fig. 10). Its frames include a wide array of content, from soldiers to children to sex and (most prominently) unguarded humor. I feel the same way about these as I do about my family snapshots, and I am incredibly excited by the evidence of difference as we see image pairs that clearly contain an image that is more ideal paired with one that could easily be thrown out.

In the case of Douglas R. Nickel’s catalog for the 1998 “Snapshots” exhibition held at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art\(^\text{39}\), not a single photograph has an accompanying second image – the snapshot being again held to our ideal of the split-second click that captures the moment. They were selected for their ability to stand on their own and to speak to more than just what fits within the frame. Suppose, however, that one of these images has an almost-twin image, like we find in the case of my family albums. What have you missed out on by only seeing the image that the photographer/curator deems as the “stronger” image? Wouldn’t you know more if you saw the “weaker” image, too? This speaks to the larger mission of snapshot photography to capture the every day – it is painfully limited. When you consider the second image as the disposable image, it actually seems to take on even greater importance than the image we understood as the “better” one in the first place. It might be the “weaker” of the two


\(^{39}\) Nickel, *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life*. 
images in that it is less compositionally dynamic or aesthetically appealing, but when it reveals a detail that the other photograph leaves out, it becomes a precious clue.

It can seem as if the photograph loses its facticity as we underscore the fallibility in the supposed clarity of a single representative image, presenting two nearly identical images that have the potential to contradict themselves as they show an unfolding action. The multiple image undermines the originality of the moment it aims to capture by suggesting that it might be repeatable, that its slight variations all add up to the same representation. Photographs are read as fact when they isolate a moment: when you believe that an amount of time can be contained within the frame of the photograph, you assume all of its contents to represent more than they show. Assuming what is pictured within the photograph doesn’t leave anything out allows the viewer to wonder what happened before or after, based on present content, and interpret the image thus. This assumes that these photographs actually do just that, represent the past truthfully and wholly. However, these pairs of images seem to suggest the opposite by relying on the imagined moment that neither photograph actually shows. In this case, you are given the next movement in the action— if you ask yourself “I wonder what happened next?” you would have an answer. And yet, the most interesting parts of these photographs are exactly the parts that they don’t show – their value and weight in our inquiry into memorial study hinges on the revelation that having a start and a finish for the action is arbitrary. As they reveal, so they also conceal. The meaning we gather comes from what we assume about everything that isn’t shown. Reading these pairs requires a very delicate balance that draws from both accepting the photograph as some level of factual evidence.
and yet questioning the outcomes of the unfolding action – you must accept the two images as a reliable point A and point B, but what order did they occur in? Which image is more accurate to the memories of the people who were present? The alternative to this would be a consistently singular collection of snapshots, edited to contain stand-alone images of particular moments that, in my opinion, do not lend themselves so easily to interpretation; by eliminating the second view, one representation is given precedent. The photographs I have selected tend to capture a moment supported through the use of two consecutive images, characterized by their haphazard, accidental, and candid attributes. Is it “easier” to recognize these qualities, or to capture them in a photograph? Does this make them “truer”? Or just less accomplished?

Discernible Difference and Unfolding Action

It was the absence of the space between images that first compelled me to move forward with this project, spurred on by the limitless possibilities of suggestion and imagination. This study grew out of a painting project, The Memory Yields, and its accompanying extended essay on the relationship between photographs and memory. The body of work consisted of miniature oil paintings based on my family photographs, characterized by their air of intimacy and contrast between detailed figures and flat color fields. By removing most of the snapshots’ information, I created a scene from which one might recognize settings or situations based on the figure, drawn in by its delicate details. The images asked for interpretation by removing information that the snapshot had contained, and my goal was to point out memory’s hazy, fragmentary nature by
intervening with the imagery through process. While it had been a project focused wholly and completely on the singular snapshot at its conception, I found that any series of sequential images offers this same invitation to fill in the gap as the viewer navigates the time that has passed between images. While I had previously felt the need to remove information, I found that the sequential photographic pairs, which gave even more information than a single image could, actually led to its own form of ambiguity. This gap serves as a very concrete manifestation of how we read family snapshots—by looking at what isn’t shown. An important distinction must be made between the staged family photograph and the “snapshot”—we concern ourselves here with the snapshot, disregarding studio portraiture and the less-candid photographs associated with ceremony. Mieke Bal illustrates the difference between these two effects, taking into account the image’s content and how it is communicated, carrying the content of the snapshot beyond that of the more general photographic image:

The photographic effect combines flattening, blowing up, isolating parts of the image… the snapshot effect constitutes a subset of the photographic effect, and comes about when the representation takes the form of an album of multiple ‘takes,’ and moves in the direction of photographic seriality.40

The desire to document the action as it unfolds results in these narrative, play-by-play series of snapshots, brought together in the family album. This approach functions much like the moving image by freezing it, revealing what had previously been unseen due to the compact timeframe in which motion unfolds or our inability to notice them due to their automatic nature, much like the revelation experienced with Edward Muybridge’s

40 Bal, “All in the Family,” 225.
series of still images of horses running.\textsuperscript{41} Through the adoption of snapshot photography into the collective vision of its practitioners, which include families from around the globe, we have come to recall the past as if it were in motion – reliving its events moment by moment, as they exist in short term memory – calling on things experienced almost exclusively in the present unless otherwise “captured,” as in the case of these photographs and sequential photographs generally. They act like a daydream does, asking us to logically connect the moments in real time, adapting them to fit your best understanding. It makes the reading personal and intimate, its temporality giving it the poignancy of the lived, human timeframe.\textsuperscript{42} The potential for the interpretation of meaning hinges on this temporality. One example of this can be seen in Nicholas Nixon’s photographic project \textit{The Brown Sisters: Thirty-three Years}, which chronicles time through changes in the appearance of its four subjects (Figs. 11 & 12).\textsuperscript{43} We look for changes between these portraits, comparing one photograph to its prior or subsequent image, quantifying temporality through visible departures in the dress, attire, and attitudes of these four women. Time has passed, and something has changed. \textit{They} have changed.

This is the challenge of the photographer who tries to capture life as its actions unfold before the eye: the photographer must include enough information, but not too

\textsuperscript{41} Hirsch, \textit{Family Frames}, 117.

\textsuperscript{42} Berger, “Doubling: This Then That,” 50.

much. Time presents constraints, and the moment is original and fleeting, passing before us only once and taking the image with it. The challenge of achieving this balance is met by any photographer faced with photographic narrative, as described by Henri Cartier-Bresson:

> Sometimes you have the feeling that you have already taken the strongest possible picture of a particular situation or scene; nevertheless, you find yourself compulsively shooting, because you cannot be sure in advance exactly how the situation, the scene, is going to unfold. You must stay with the scene, just in case the elements of the situation shoot off from the core again. At the same time, it’s essential to avoid shooting like a machine-gunner and burdening yourself with useless recordings which clutter your memory and spoil the exactness of the reportage as a whole.44

It appears that one might capture multiple images, but miss the “one” that captures the essence of the event; or, through over-inclusion, the field of content that we draw from can become crowded and inhibit our ability to read the image’s meaning. Cartier-Bresson even goes so far as to equate this process with memory. It is a balance of managing the gap: too large of a gap, and one misses the moment; too small and he limits the interpretation of its meaning.

This temporality is a tension between stasis and non-stasis that is characteristic of modernist photography, as outlined by George Baker in Photography’s Expanded Field: “it is either that object that attempts to produce narrative communication only to be disrupted by the medium’s forces of stasis, or it entails the creation of a static image concatenated by the photograph’s inherent war between its own denotative and

44 Cartier-Bresson, The Decisive Moment, v. (emphasis added)
connotative forces." This tension suspends the meaning of the image between two ends of the spectrums: narrative/non-narrative and stasis/non-stasis. Baker refers to this kind of image as the “cinematic photograph,” whose investment lies “not in the closure of the photograph tout court, but in an expansion of its terms into a more fully cultural arena.”

The way we read these pairs of photographs can be boiled down to the ways that we recognize and interpret difference. They reach beyond their time frame, by implying and visually representing change. This transforms the snapshot from the “frozen moment” we associate with the “factual” photograph, and calls to mind the perpetual moment before the moment, that we cannot access and, when imagined, that is inevitably different from what really happened. There is always a change of course, a way that the everyday strays from what is considered mundane. The pair circumvents the mortality of the single image by offering life outside of the frame, open to fresh meaning each time it is viewed. *Second View*, an extensive photographic survey that sought to rephotograph geological sites to observe changes in the western landscape, serves as a thorough and valuable body of work for studying photography’s attempts to track change. Presented in the form of a photo book, the accompanying collected essays focus heavily on the process that the photographers underwent to produce the survey – detailing methods, tools, personal stories, and findings. They investigate the goal of reproducing existing photographs in order to compare differences, an altogether different project from trying

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45 George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field” in *October* 114 (2005), 127.

46 Ibid., 132.
to capture the landscape through their own artistic understanding.\textsuperscript{47} This differs even further from the role of the photographer in the case of my family albums, whose goal was to capture the likeness with each release of the shutter, allowing for changes in content, perspective, and composition, to be edited for content afterwards. The former captures an image; the latter, a likeness. This book looks into vantage point, changing environment, technical advancement, etcetera, all of which our survey does not concern itself with: our pairs take place within moments of one another, on the same role of film even, taken by the same person. It removes all difference but content, zeroing in on difference found in detail. Mark Klett, in describing the photographs in the Second View rephotographic project, emphasizes the relationship that two sequential images foster:

It enabled the rephotographs to engage their earlier counterparts in such a way that both would necessarily be interpreted as a pair rather than two separate images. As a result, the details which distinguished individual photographs became paramount, and we were free to address the most subtle differences between photographs.\textsuperscript{48}

Photographic pairs call attention to small and large differences, placing value in one of the most important strengths of the snapshot photograph - its ability to preserve the everyday through its details, made profound through this transformative photographic process. When we give these everyday particulars such paramount importance, the details

\textsuperscript{47} “Unlike our predecessors, we did not take what we thought would be appealing shots. Instead we did a survey of a survey.” JoAnn Veburg, “Between Exposures” in Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project, ed. Mark Klett et al. (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 9.

of the everyday are transformed, giving them their own paramount importance by association.

In the case of the rephotographs in the Second View survey, a century spans the gap between the first and second image, allowing for over 100 years of suggested movement: “the growth, development, and dissolution.”49 The surprise comes in discovering the two ends of the spectrum – the dramatic absence of movement, or a violent departure caused by more vigorous strides. The latter is the more obvious of the two, with a drastic increase or absence of human and natural impacts on the landscape. These pairings naturally beg for a back-and-forth comparison, in a “spot the differences” manner. Through addition, subtraction, and transformation, the passing of time is somehow evident and measurable. What I find interesting, however, are the images that challenge us to find a difference. In a span of a century, one might only see a boulder move out of the frame (Figs. 13 & 14) or the addition of a road sign. In these images, time seems compressed – somehow, a lack of change suggests timelessness and impenetrability. Despite the size of the gap, it is the severity of the visible movements that impacts the way we interpret the time between photographs.

Measuring the Temporal Gap

The size of the temporal gap causes us to think about how we quantify time and perceive its passing. How do we understand the passing of time when the evidence is reduced to such tiny details? It seems as if we just understand them as split second, even

if it took a few moments for the two images to be captured. How do we handle the unpacking of the time between? The foremost tool that we can utilize would be the content that doesn’t change – what remains constant gives the viewer important clues such as setting, subject, and context that serve as evidence for constructing meaning. Much as we saw with the types of changes present between photographs, which may be drastic or hardly discernable, we assume that big changes imply a larger passage of time than smaller ones. This can be easily observed in the case of the Second View rephotographic survey. In some cases, we have drastic changes such as a town’s disappearance, which are immediately evident and consume large portions of the photograph’s perceived meaning and content (Figs. 15 & 16). But even the case of a small monorail that appears in the corner of one frame, dwarfed by the colossal landscape, a detail that barely even registers in the viewer’s search for difference can carry more significance for its technological and metaphorical value. So understanding a change between images as “big” or “small” complicates our ability to interpret the passage of time and degree of difference. It seems to be so difficult to classify the reactions we have to these changes and comparisons because they all seem to insight awe: on one hand it seems that everything changed in a snap, while at the same time we are just as amazed when nothing has changed at all (imagine - a boulder didn’t move from its place on a mountainside for 100 years!). To me, this realization emphasizes the human timescale. The photographs in my study, which showcase two snapshots taken a few moments apart, hopefully one capturing the likeness of the moment better than the other, document changes very similarly to these rephotographic survey images, although
the landscape photographs cover a vastly larger temporal frame. We must then consider that these are both time spans that we can live to understand. They both give us a sense of wonder at The ability to compare moments that seem so close to one another, and yet so obviously different. They are really both snap-snap, when compared to the bigger picture of the history of time, but both function as manifestations of this vast concept that bring it to a level that we can grasp and begin to unpack. Eve Sonneman’s double images function very similarly, operating in “the free-floating time zone of short term-term memory.”50 The main focus of her double images is to move between the two scenes, which clearly depict sequential moments in a fragmentary, split-second manner (Fig. 17). They function similarly to the family album in that they picture the everyday, ordered into a natural timeline of unfolding action that allows the viewer to practice the movement between images that is “subjective, but not arbitrary or surreal.”51 When these pairs occur in the family album, however, we begin to recognize reoccurring characters, using these fragmented moments to compose a more complete sense of time to visualize a timeframe within a family history.

The gap that separates the photographic pairs, that temporal void that opens the image to a much wider breadth of interpretation, both conceals and exposes. The double image concerns itself with an unfolding action, and it seems that this gap can grow to encapsulate quite a large span of time, anywhere from a few moments to a century; perhaps even longer, assuming the images still reference one another. In this regard, the snapshot shares a lot in common with allegorical work: “In allegorical structure, then,

50 Berger, “Doubling: This Then That,” 49.
51 Ibid., 50.
Figure 17: Eve Sonneman, *oranges, manhattan*, date unknown. From: screen capture, www.evesonneman.com/diptychs.html
one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest.”52 We read and understand meaning in these pairs through our understanding of the passage of time. The act of reading meaning *through* the photograph has established an ongoing association between photography and the allegorical.53 If we understand allegory to concern itself with “the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete,” could we not extend this understanding to the snapshot pairs that are used together to produce a new representation, previously hidden by the gap and revealed through the search for meaning?54 It is its own miniature allegory, breaking time down to help us better understand its representation and rupture of continuity. Craig Owens uses the term palimpsest, which Merriam Webster defines as “something that has changed over time and shows evidence of that change.”55 The moment between images acts the palimpsest does, with a first image that is wiped away and replaced by a second image – both showing different representations while drawing from the same source, the idealized


moment of the family snapshot. Each reading adds a new meaning – the pairs supplement understanding, but cannot claim to reveal truth, for they are built on its evasiveness.

There are a number of artists beyond those already mentioned that are working with the challenges of this complex and fluctuating spectrum of narrative and stasis. Another example can be found with the notion of the film still - perhaps, more appropriately referred to as the ‘still film’ by Douglas Crimp in the 1970s when describing similar work.\textsuperscript{56} While the film still carries the implication of motion in a singular still image, it functions similarly to the double images that we are concerned with in this study by reaching outside of its frame for narrative content. Cindy Sherman’s \textit{Untitled Film Stills} are perhaps the best-known (and widely written about) example from contemporary practice. The photographic images, which seem to evade their status as “still” images, situates them within the realm of “non-stasis,” and they function as a firm example of the photographic image that contains larger cultural content beyond its fractured narrative.\textsuperscript{57} Breaking down the moving image into its building blocks, multiple stills in sequence, finds many manifestations within the history of photography, as can be seen in Edward Muybridge’s studies of the horse-in-motion. I believe snapshot photography works in much the same way, but through the album it collects these still frames into an even grander story of collective memory through family history.

\textsuperscript{56} Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” 134.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 128.
Picture Perfect: Pairs

I’ve got…
Two Girls! And I love them both the same.
Molly and Sarah
That is their names. 58

My mother sang these words to my sister, Molly, and me when we were growing up, a little girl perched on each hip. In the case of the photographs in this study, the double image serves two significant purposes that speak to the practice of snapshot photography and the influence of the maternal gaze. While they provide us with an abundance of information, these photographic pairs seem to leave just as many questions unanswered. Because these are my personal snapshots, I have the luxury of judging these representations against the memories that I have of the moments as they occurred. This gives me the ability to provide some personal insight into the analysis of my mother’s hand in framing these images. My small, tight-knit family structure has armed me with a point of view that is rooted in personal reflection to a noteworthy degree. As mentioned earlier, femininity within my family has a basis in sets of two.

I have found two cases that, I propose, have resulted in these pairs of photographs – often influenced by the pursuit of something that might be easy to miss or misrepresent. In some cases, it was an effort to safeguard against missing the moment. In others, it was the recognition of a particularly poignant moment or some form of representational equality; the desire to show both daughters equally and just as often. The aim did not seem to be that my mother was trying to include more information, as I first hypothesized when I began research for this project.

58 Personal observation, from the author’s childhood
Figure 18: Re:Visions 5A
Figure 19: Re:Visions 5B
Figure 21: Re:Visions 6B
with the vibrancy that my mother remembers – looking at the photographs after they have been developed and picked up, neat and new in their paper envelope. These images are the ones with the slightest changes between them – they seem to attempt to document time as it unfolds as they aim to capture that illusive moment. These are the photographs that demand that we look back-and-forth as we compare and track difference between one image and its pair. They make me wonder how much time has passed between images, or what action produced the change. Did my mother put down her camera and raise it again, resulting in a slightly altered composition? Or did one of the subjects simply exit the frame, a child no longer interested in the charade of picture-taking and picture-posing? Questions such as these relate to the relationship between the photograph and memory, between the practice of family photography and the desire to preserve the image of the child as the material for future recollection. The quality of these photographs that I like best is this stepping-out or stepping-in and the way that, upon recollection, it can introduce the presence of a family member who I might have otherwise just assumed wasn’t present. It underscores the impact that the second, seemingly redundant photograph can have on our understanding of the moment unfolding in the snapshots.

The second instance has to do with the complicated dynamic between two daughters and their mother, the sisters so close in age and in possession of very different personalities. This becomes evident in a few of these pairs, where I (the younger of the two girls in the pictures) seem lost in the action while my sister is more attuned to the presence of the camera. In some cases, it seems clear that if a photograph did not include
both daughters it was not complete – that the second photograph existed to be sure that both of us were there. The second case is a sort of trade-out, the same image with one little girl replaced with the other. A Kodak moment for one, so to speak, but with two daughters you would have to have two pictures. However, in this case the actions can sometimes even seem continuous, as if my sister and I are actually interchangeable, able to fill the subject roles within the action equally without changing much of the image’s meaning. My mother has always been big on equality between my sister and me. It was her goal to provide equal attention, love, and opportunity for each daughter, although I never felt as if this meant that we were the same. She always acknowledged our differences, which perhaps gives another clue to the prevalence of these sequential snapshots. We were not interchangeable to the point that only one photograph was capable of representing the moment as she (or we) experienced them; for many photographs that featured Molly, we needed one that included Sarah, too.

As we find in the accompanying analysis, I consider the “everyday” details in the photograph as indications of difference, the seemingly mundane objects or matters of setting that tend to stand out in our side-by-side comparisons. As I study these photographs, the everyday details serve as the photograph’s punctum in most cases; the “…sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”59 The punctum speaks to the individual viewer, but in these images where difference is measured in the slightest shift, the introduction of a hand that rises into the frame or the look that the

59 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 27.
model gives from a poster in the hair salon, begin to carry the weight of the mundane that is almost instantly removed from the moment as it exists in our memory. They prick me in this way – these photographs contain so many details that I find so valuable in the resulting photographs, but that are never included in my memories.

The measurable difference between pairs even becomes a punctum for me on occasion – as in the case of the photograph at the dog’s birthday party, where my grandmother appears to have noticed that the dog wanted the cupcake and moved it closer. The movement of her hand from the table’s edge to the plate, and the effect it produces in the dog as she licks her chops, transports me to that moment. More personally, I can’t help but notice that all of the other cupcakes have chocolate icing except the one reserved for the four-legged guest-of-honor, and I can hear the echoes of my grandmother’s voice lamenting that “chocolate isn’t good for dogs.” Not only did my family throw a birthday party for the dog; they went even further to consider her canine dietary restrictions when they bought dessert. The nostalgia this arouses is almost painful.

It can be a more general interpretation of a pictured event, altered by the information provided by the second photograph, that gives it so much memorial value. Take, for instance, the pair of photographs that depicts a “breakfast with the Easter bunny” type of event at an Elder Beerman department store in Ohio. One photograph pictures it more as I remember the event – my sister adjusts her paper ears that read “I’m an EB Bunny!” as a puppeteer visits the table to entertain the children. The second image appears to show the same scene at first, but it is framed to include more of the store that the Easter breakfast is set in. I had never really considered the strangeness of an Easter
breakfast in a department store before looking at this image. Past the sparsely adorned hangers of the coat rack, the image includes the shadowy figure of a child bathed in green fluorescent light. He seems to have escaped the unfolding events, standing behind an adult who looks out of the frame. It looks like the beginning to a horror story, the child on the outskirts being drawn into the racks and rows of lights as they lead toward the eerie green glow of the Women’s Fashions department. I’m the child in the bottom right corner: it doesn’t appear that I am aware of his presence, nor of the overall slightly unsettling atmosphere of the secular celebration of a religious holiday in a department store. As I look back onto my memory of that event, all I really remember is that puppet dog, which I presume is where my gaze and attention really lies in this photograph.

These photographic pairs exist on different levels of interest for these reasons – their differences underscore different aspects of photographic practice and its effects on memory, where the simplest change in frame can either include an object that reminds us of the mundane or change the way we approach a memory entirely. Bodies flow into and out of the frame constantly and without hesitance. It can sometimes feel like one photograph captures the moment as the photographer might have wanted it, while the second captures it as the subject might have felt it (I often find that when a child’s gaze confronts the camera in one of the two images, it feels as if they acknowledge the process of being photographed). The moment of action and the moment that follows; the moment before an action and the moment after; it is impossible to pin down exactly what the photograph is trying to capture when we are presented with such abundance.
Figure 22: Re:Visions 7A
Figure 24: Re:Visions 8A
Figure 25: Re:Visions 8B
CHAPTER 4: MEMORIAL IMPLICATIONS

The power of photographs as cultural memory, the memory of events or persons we could not have experienced firsthand except through photographs, derives from ingrained belief that every photograph portrays at least the raw material of memory, shows what memory is.\textsuperscript{60}

Characterizing memory is a slippery task, intertwined heavily with the methods that we use to represent the past as they become tools for recall that produce the effects of memory. In his comprehensive work on the nature of memorial practice after modernism, Richard Terdiman stresses representation as the essence of his analysis, shrouded in uncertainty and contingency:

The essential element of memory is the unforeseeable \textit{productivity} of its representations. Thus the contrary of memory as a theoretical system is the crystalline abstraction of logic. This is so because, however much a logic may transform its material, in a deep sense such a system can produce nothing \textit{new}.\textsuperscript{61}

This reliance on representation explains the almost inseparable relationship between memory and photography. If both the snapshot and a memory can be understood as representations for an event in the past as it is re-evaluated from the present, what is the nature of the relationship between the two? Our own memories can even become reformed through the snapshot images that we have often referenced. Geoffrey Batchen underscores this complex and inseparable relationship by asking his reader to think back to his or her childhood and question whether or not one’s memories are reflective of experience or if they reference photographs that depict our youth: “Can you remember it? Or do the images that come to mind resemble the photographs you have been shown of

\textsuperscript{60} Trachtenberg, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 124.

It is not a matter of replacing a memory with a snapshot, but rather understanding both memory and photography as representations and coming to the realization that one is no more accurate than the other. Family photography often seeks to supplement memory, hence its objective to capture a moment with perceived accuracy in the face of the fleeting present: “We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory.” It is interesting that Cartier-Bresson has stated that we cannot reproduce a memory through photography, somehow elevating memory to something that cannot be mimicked or touched – it is as if photography aims to act as our memories do, but only if the photograph gets it right the first time. We must wonder, though, is photography even an accurate way of remembering things?

**Collective Memory**

By recognizing this shift in how we reference, record, and frame history as it becomes isolated from its means of production, we can try to understand the nature of collective memory. Collective memory varies in the breadth of its reach, ranging from the shared memories within a family to the identities of entire nations as they recite their celebrated histories. The family serves as a basic, relatable scale within which we can study this phenomenon, offering a model for a community that shares a large portion of

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its memory content. We remember within the family and, likewise, choose what will be forgotten – all based within a cast of shared characters composed of the family’s members and within a common set of scenes structured within family homes, vacation spots, and events attended by most, if not all, persons within the family. Its members are bound together in the present by the common thread that stretches through the past and continues to expand forward into the future.\(^{64}\) Thus, this collection of family photographs aims to explore both collective memory and collective forgetting, looking into a small cross section in the microcosm of the family unit.

The objective that this project burdens itself with is the recognition of this subjective representation, that even with two sequential images we are still left with a less-than-complete version of the past. Much of this study has been informed by Annette Kuhn’s writings on the snapshot, her studies on collective memory, and her theories on memory work that present themselves throughout numerous publications. She presents the photograph as I have, as a prompt for recollection rather than an infallible document. We must understand the nature of these pretexts, which mimic oral history more than the objectivity we associate with historical writing; taking from oral history’s “historical, poetic and legendary forms of speech, whilst still expressing both personal truths and a collective imagination… [to] create, rework, repeat and recontextualise the stories people tell each other about the kinds of lives they lead.”\(^{65}\) To read these images, we must be able to relate to their content from some sort of shared, common stance, to take the

\(^{64}\) Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 167.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 165.
position which grants “the clarity of vision of the outsider who understands, because she or he has been there, what is being looked at and put into words” or, in our case, snapshots.  

This is the objective of memory work, a technique theorized and promoted by Kuhn in some of her more recent writing, with an aim to:

seek fresh insights and new ways of conceptualizing and understanding the ways in which people’s personal or individual memories relate to, intersect or are continuous with shared, collective, public forms of memory – and ultimately how memory figures in, and even shapes, the social body and social worlds.

The family photograph becomes the perfect medium through which we can practice memory work: it works within the realm of collective memory by tying recall to the family unit, something almost all of us have experienced. The snapshot is a constant within the family – it is the vantage point from which we tend to base our visual understanding of family history. Family photographs are simultaneously relatable and foreign; when we view them, they are made unfamiliar through their ability to seemingly freeze time, and yet this fresh context for their familiar content (the family) increases their potential for an insightful, emotional reading. Therefore, what they contain can reach far beyond their significance to the singular family, speaking to broader themes within social, cultural, and historical experience and operating as a more general cultural text. Memory work recognizes the subjective quality of photographs that my analysis has sought to establish, calling for:

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68 Ibid., 285.
an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory. Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful staging of memory.69

Through the practice of memory work, family snapshots are tools that give enough information so that an interpretative reading might reveal greater meaning.

Intersubjectivity versus Universalism

It is important to make a distinction between the compromise and intersubjectivity that allows the reader to find meaning within someone else’s family snapshots and the universalist stance that one family’s snapshots can speak to “the family” at large. Recognizing one’s family snapshots as tools that can be used for a creative memory productivity of sorts distinguishes this work from the notion that one family’s snapshots speak to every family’s snapshots. This was the main objection to Edward Steichen’s 1955 exhibition The Family of Man, which aimed to explore the role of the photographic image in family life. The exhibition sought to universalize notions of the family and serve as a representation for human experience as a whole, a mighty task that resulted in a reductive understanding of widely “recognizable” and “exportable” images of familial relations.70 Steichen sought to draw from photography’s associations with the illusion of “truthful” representation to speak to the truth of a human family experience. One might be quick to assume that, by generalizing the album as a tidy collection of snapshots

69 Kuhn, Family Secrets, 186.

70 Hirsch, Family Frames, 48.
understood to represent a family’s foundations and histories, we can come to the conclusion that everyone shares a similar family experience. In another survey of snapshot photography titled *Private Life*, Martin Mlecko takes a similar stance, stating in an accompanying interview:

> The beauty of the project is that the pictures could be of any one of us. You and I – we all have photographs of ourselves like these tucked away in drawers. I know only a small fraction of these people, the rest are strangers, who nevertheless somehow seem very familiar. That’s what makes it so exciting.71

This stance gives me pause, and I find myself asking, *could* this be any one of us? Or can it be just the middle class, white nuclear family? Mlecko has put a haze over each of the photographs, yielding them out of focus and readable only by generalization (Fig. 10). The artist has “processed” the images in order to make them more adaptable, according to his statements – aiming to give the reader enough evidence to identify with and interpret the image while maintaining distance. I read them with just as much attention as one reads a family photograph – I find myself leafing through them, reading their content, without even needing the images to be in focus. They are successful in this regard, but to suggest that they can be *anyone’s* images requires his pool of viewers to be narrowly defined. Although I have pointed out that we share the experience of the familial, I do not aim to assert that these specific experiences are uniform in their content. By examining difference rather than denying it, we can observe the role that the familial gaze plays in these constructions in order to observe diverse representations of the family to expose “the relationship between family photography and the ideological structures of – in

Figure 26: Scanned image. From: *Private Life*, Martin Mlecko, Munich: Prestel, 2002.
this case – the American family romance with its ever shifting meanings. 72 This being said, it should be understood that my family photographs do not have the ability to carry
the same meaning, importance, or truthfulness as anyone else’s personal histories. I am
not trying to suggest that, by examining my family albums, I am able to reveal truths
about the familial as a universal concept; rather, I aim to showcase the cases in which I
have been able to re-imagine my perceived personal history by examining small changes,
and suggest that this is a characteristic of snapshot photography’s documentary
tendencies. While identifying with a family history and having experience the familial
narrative are widespread holdings for many people across the world, I don’t believe that
the family photograph itself can be read as universal. The associations we have with the
practice surrounding family photography – why we photograph, who the pictures show,
how they are handled or displayed – are widely shared practices. There is something to be
learned from these photographic traditions, which are far more universal than the
experience of family life itself. My photographs show the potential embodied in the gap
between these snapshots, and suggest that by coming to conclusions about this gap I have
completed some form of memory work. However, I must further stress that even when
we have a tool as seemingly reliable as the photograph, our understanding of the past is
all based on subjective perceptions. I am not trying to speak to recognizable “familial
relations” that are constant throughout universal family experience, but rather explore the
recognizable uses of the snapshot in memorial practice.

72 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 47.
Now that I have established the goal of this project to be one that highlights subjectivity and distance rather than the universality of a particular family experience, one might ask: what is the significance in making public the private family image if it is not to speak to some common truth? The truth it reveals aligns itself with the experience of family photography, rather than family life. Perhaps it is a matter of bringing the universal into the personal, drawing from the ways that we use and relate to familial imagery and adapting the reading of an image on a level that allows for a form of self-identification. There is no doubt that by removing the snapshot from its album we have changed its meaning – family snapshots are often meant for private viewing by an audience of intimates. After all, it was not my mother’s original intention to have our family snapshots published and circulated publicly. What does it mean for others to look at these photographs “meant” for my family? By freeing the snapshot from its association with people whom we can identify as members of our own families, we sever it “from its original, private function,” opening up the photograph to a wider range of readings: “The snapshot, like other photographs, suffers an excess of potential meaning, but when removed from conditions that normally limit its polysemous nature, it may offer itself to the pleasure of our active, creative imaginations.”73 Thus, I do not ask my viewer to decipher the photograph’s meaning and implication within my family narrative – though valuable conclusions can be drawn based on the viewer’s personal reading. More, I am asking them to interpret it alongside its pair, hoping that by providing them with these tools I can incite creative reading. This liberation from the urge to decipher an objective

meaning from the snapshot frees the photograph, allowing it to be read more publicly, and reveals the possibility of these images to:

operates as free-floating signifiers, open to diverse meanings and available to many different political agendas. They retain the status of personal, but their shifting meanings are evidence not only of the malleability of the image but also the fraught role played by the family as a signifier in contemporary politics.\(^\text{74}\)

The family and childhood both serve as signifiers. By removing them from their personal context, the photographs become open to interpretation. This openness, a permission to transform by the removal from the personal, encourages the viewer to take creative liberties. This is what defines my project, and understanding its purpose fully hinges upon the clarity of this idea. This is why it is not about my family photographs (although the content and point of view can be compelling and revelatory). It is about how photography and memory work together, to keep the “truth” veiled by persistently requiring creative speculation.

Absence and Memory: I’m Drawing a Blank

As the viewer deconstructs the gap separating correlating pairs, absence plays a key role in deciphering meaning. What has been removed from the frame, and what does it leave out entirely? Historically, artists have used absence as an instrument that allows for interpretation by a wider audience as it attempts to make the photograph and any

memories one might associate with it more unique. In the case of American tintypes and Indian painted photographs, portions of the original image are altered or removed in to create a space for creative liberty. By painting over or removing portions of the photograph, the image is no longer as concretely situated in a specific moment or setting (a technique I used heavily in the paintings for The Memory Yields). The act of “painting over” to allow for adaptation through exclusion acts similarly to the time that separates the two photographs functions as the “painting over” of the photographs described by Batchen. It seeks to remove some of the information, allowing the viewer to bring his or her own experience to the image. There is a magic felt as we are reminded of all that remains concealed, and you must read the other images to fill in the gaps. Leaving a blank space gives the image the potential to tell a story – absences refer to unseen periods of time and can only hint at the interventions that could have occurred. The theme of absence runs deep throughout the theory that surrounds the snapshot and the family album: the absence that remains when a photograph is removed from its place within the album, a family member missing in a photograph related to a memory that we associated them with, or even the feeling of unease when you misplace a photograph that you hold particularly close.

These absences are rich ground for the artist/curator by manipulating already existing images, rather than the revelation present in a closer study of the photographs in all of their detailed richness; absence can “erase, invent, or reframe them so as to discover fissures and absences within them, contesting the plentitude promised by

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75 Batchen, Forget Me Not, 24.
photographs.” The sense of loss that it can stir can be found even when we are provided with substantial photographic evidence: in the case of photographic pairs, the space between two detailed images becomes a total absence where we can construct an intermittent image using clues from the information present in the photographs. The goal is not to break down the photographs through techniques like enlargement in order to reveal more about the subject, but rather to question the abilities and limits of the photographic medium as we see in Second View: “we were interested in which things in a photograph could be selected and repeated at another time, and which could not. We were photographers interested in actually seeing the results of a visual experiment.” The snapshot depicting unfolding action acts similarly – both sets of photographers share the goal of trying to reframe a photographic representation with the hopes of one capturing something the other did not, produced through temporal circumstance. How we interpret the visual products of this investigation of constancy and difference is largely impacted by and reflective of the processes behind memory. By studying our methods of producing personal and collective memories, we are able to better understand how these images function in the history of the family and larger culture. Memory work is a process of discovery that looks towards the family photograph as a cultural practice, helping us to understand how to look beyond not just our own family photographs, but photographic representation more generally by giving this inquiry a tangible, relatable manifestation on

76 Hirsch, Family Frames, 193.

Figure 27: Re:Visions 9A
Figure 28: Re:Visions 9B
an intimately human scale. It calls for an intentional participation in the reconstruction of past events in a way that relies on drawing assumptions, underscoring the role of the individual who watches the past unfold and tries to understand it as the viewer is positioned in the present. What it boils down to, in the case of this study of sequential family snapshot pairs, is the ability to measure difference and track how it came about. As we have found, being firmly grounded in modernist practice, this reflection and search for meaning is concealed through process, and any constitution of meaning can be considered speculative. The reader contributes initial understandings, assumptions about the unfolding action, and exploratory conclusions about meaning. Photography, Seigfried Kracauer postulates, gives too much information to function as memory does, for memory “is selective, fuzzy in outline, intensively subjective, often incoherent, and invariably changes over time,” qualifying it more as “…a conveniently malleable form of fiction.” Memory work allows us to take the snapshot from its perceived role as a non-fiction document and understand it more through the interpretive lens of recall. These pairs of images give you two points that establish things such as subject, setting, and point of view. They provide a starting and ending point for the unfolding action, the movement that separates the image. To fill that gap, you can assume the subject or photographer moved a certain way, and that loose, speculative interpretation seems to fit Kracauer’s understanding of memory as selective and malleable. In this vein, memory work can be understood as a creative process much like the action of memory might be

78 Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 16.
considered, compelling the viewer to take on the authorship of adaptation in order to
engage meaningful discussion about memory texts. It is a productive practice.

Recollection: Modernity’s Amnesia

Recall disrupts the sequential timeline of events, requiring a myriad of
combinations of past, present, and future that often carry their own implications. In Past
Present: Modernity and the Memory Crisis, Richard Terdiman credits the renewed
careless concern for historiography in nineteenth-century Europe as the beginning of the memory
crisis, which he characterizes as an historical disaster: “a sense that their past had
somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with
consciousness… the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated.”79
This development seems to be characterized by any number of applications of the notion
of “mass” or collectivity – mass production, mass consumption, mass media, and
collective memory spurred on through shared experience as it manifested itself in post-
Revolutionary society in Europe. As we fix history by recording it, visually and through
written records, we suggest the existence of an objective understanding, and our capacity
for “natural” or “organic” memory became compromised.80 This separation is one that
many theorists have worked to clarify, and it can be put quite simply: history is
experienced continuously (it is very difficult to recognize the true significance of
“historical” events as they happen) while written history, in practice, creates a divide

79 Terdiman, Present Past, 3.

80 Ibid., 31.
between past and present that alienates the “facts” that historiography aims to solidify. This realization gives way to a new understanding: “nothing is natural about our memories, that the past – the practices, the habits, the dates and facts and places, the very furniture of our existences – is an artifice, and one susceptible to the most varied and sometimes the most culpable manipulations.”81 This interpretation of recorded history seems reasonable enough to theorists, and yet for some reason it seems that the American mindset would like to deny this state of affairs – it is almost as if, as a culture, we do not recognize that this realization ever occurred. I think many people still hold onto the idea of proof that we associate with photographic evidence – that because we have been shown that history occurred one way, we hold onto that evidence and propel it forward as unwavering testimony to one representation of the past. Because photographs give us more detail than our memory could hope for, we believe that the photograph is more accurate. Yet pairs of photographs separated by a few seconds, or even a century, remind us of photography’s inability to completely capture the present. To read the photograph you must look beyond its frame, and as soon as this is done you remove that sense of certainty. We can begin to realize the extent of the past’s evasiveness with Marita Sturken’s poignant observation: “American culture is constantly referred to as a culture of amnesia, a nation with little sense of history, a society that identifies with the future rather than the past.”82 Process becomes an illusion – modernism has isolated us from the conditions that lead us from origin to endpoint, leaving only the product of the process as

81 Ibid.

82 Sturken, “The Image as Memorial,” 180.
a representation for the work that yields it. One might give the championed capitalist formation as an explanation, as Gerald A. Cohen has hypothesized, for “although certain forms of social relations are perfectly overt…what becomes occulted are the crucial elements of transformative practice – essentially forms of time.”

These are precisely the ideas that Kodak exploited to sell their cameras: they sold the idea of the infallible memory, and modern mentality aligned itself with this advertising tagline. We snap the picture, send away the film, and the images from the events that are the basis for our memories appear before our eyes; the products and their implications for memorial practice are understood as tangible and true records. It is the process that “just happens.” When we invest our histories in the process of this invisible writing, the problem then becomes one of representation: “What is at stake is nothing less than how a culture imagines the representation of the past to be possible, for the problem of representing the past is really the representation problem itself, seized in its most critical locus in experience.” As we begin to unpack this idea, it becomes quite clear how the family snapshot feeds into this crisis, acting as a means for writing our history by relying on a process that is concealed from its supposed practitioner: process nestles itself neatly into the territory of illusion and we arrive at the conclusion that our past has been magically captured by the photograph rather than transformed by it. I cannot place enough stress on the role of subjectivity in these transformations from reality to representation: the processes of writing memory as history, taking photographs, reading

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84 Terdiman, *Present Past*, 32.
and understanding them, and revisiting the past through recollection are not objective. What I seem to be getting at is *it is all representation* – history, remembrance, memory, photographic practice. None of it is isolated, each part touches the other – therefore, we are dealing with a complex system of dependent representations.

Although it seems as if analog photography is on its way out of the public consciousness, I think this is a critical time to analyze the ways in which these snapshot photographs illustrate our visual representations of a recalled personal past. The manner in which we take personal photographs has been transformed by digital photography, and even further by high-quality cell phone cameras. This practice of digital photography and computerized archives provides seemingly unlimited numbers of photographs, endless storage of the photos in incredibly compact devices, and a nearly-complete removal of the physical print from the practice of personal photography as the images remain largely on electronic devices. Digital images are immediately available for recall, allowing us to pull them up for review and decide if the image captures what we had intended.

The subject of this study, the sequential pairs of photographs that give us a narrative sense of personal, lived moments are largely erased in digital practice as we decide which photograph is better within the camera. Growing up in the mid- to late 90’s, I am a part of the last generation whose childhoods were documented using analog photography. It feels as if the opportunity to examine this practice and its relationship to memory and recall is fleeting – the rich history of the snapshot’s relationship with memory as promoted by Kodak; the transformation light undergoes through the lens, onto the negative and reproduced through the print; the physical archive of the photo album;
these are all relics of the past, dooming them to a similar fate as the moments that they depict. The desire to capture these moments, although by different means, still seems to be of paramount importance to contemporary society. One might even argue that we document the everyday to a degree unlike any in history as technology allows us to expand our archives to previously unimaginable levels of breadth and quality.
Figure 30: Re:Visions 10B
CONCLUSION

As I have worked through this study – the process of selecting photographs, compiling research, writing and editing – I have been keenly aware of the appearance of my central themes as they have emerged in contemporary literature. Perhaps I am drawn towards literature that pertains to my area of study, or I am always on the lookout for fragments of content that support my hypotheses; either way, I have found numerous authors that share my sentiments towards the transience of memory.

Rachel Kushner in *The Flamethrowers*:

I felt alert to every granule of time. Each granule was time, the single pertinent image, the other moment-images, before and after, lost, unconsidered.\(^{85}\)

Teju Cole in *Open City*:

We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float.\(^{86}\)

W.G. Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn*:

And yet, what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere neverending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past. How wretched this life of ours is! – so full of false conceits, so futile, that it is little more than the shadow of the chimeras loosed by memory.\(^{87}\)

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Hilton Als in “Ghosts in Sunlight:”

Nostalgia is one thing, but making art out of the past is another thing altogether, a Herculean effort in that known and unknown landscape we might as well call the metaphysical. It’s the land where all artists dwell… by now you have developed the stamina of Hercules, or Sisyphus, as you do the joyful, maddening, and true work of artists, those sometimes whistling and sometimes wretched builders and destroyers of truth and memory, makers who take from the past—their memories—to create a present that shimmers with veracity and poetry. 88

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We are faced with a revolution in the ways that our personal photographs are captured, stored, and revisited, but the motivation for these processes remains the same. The irretrievability of the past is unnerving; the unreliability of its recall even more so. The goal is not to prove that the past is lost forever, nor that history is doomed from the start. Rather, our goal is to recognize the transformation that experience undergoes as it is transmuted into memory and recognize that images of the past will always be incomplete as they draw from subjective reading, association, and analysis. While photographs serve as our faithful aids to memory, providing us with the comfort of a concrete image that we can relate to our personal past, we must recognize that what they show (and exclude) can mislead or even hinder recollection itself.

Figure 31: Re:Visions 11A
Figure 33: Re:Visions 12A
Figure 34: Re:Visions 12B
Figure 35: Re:Visions 13A
Figure 38: Re:Visions 14B


Sonneman, Eve. oranges, manhattan, date unknown. Screen capture from artist’s website. www.evesonneman.com/diptychs.html


