Digital Photography as Experience Artifact

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Digital Photography as Experience Artifact

By

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Experience Artifact:
Noun
1. a form replicating the sensorial affects of a past experience created at the time of the initial experience; a photograph, an audio-visual recording

Memory Artifact:
Noun
1. a device created at the time of an experience that serves to remind those involved of the experience; a memento, a token

Since the onset of digital social media, the passive consumer has been socially emancipated by hyper connectivity causing momentary experiences to be shared as immediately as they occur. Through the screen interface, the boundary between personal and collective experience is being redefined both spatially and temporally. Here, memories are given independent mediated existence, taking form in digital photographic artifacts that can be communally shared and manipulated into a synthetic continuum. Concepts of identity are being reinvented as media-sharing-technology influences personal behavior in self-reflection and self-projection. The photographic record has become more than an extension of memory, it is an agent in the construction of identity.

The power of the photograph comes from its duality in being perceived as objective while simultaneously facilitating the use value of subjective manipulation and interpretation. Historically we regard the photograph as a record of fact. Its mechanical eye appears to capture a reflected image without bias. It is a tool we utilize when constructing notions of objective truth such as evidence in a courtroom and security surveillance. Nevertheless, the photograph possesses a special dichotomy by which fact and fiction unite to become potent narrative communicating devices.
Since the invention of the camera, the consumer has been capturing fragments of the visual world and preserving its impressions as mementos of time that allow recollections to run parallel with photographic artifacts of experience. With this in mind, the actual experience, the photo of the experience, and the recollection of the experience are all accessed simultaneously. Patricia Pisters refers to this in her writing on Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze:

“According to Bergson and Deleuze, all images are situated on a plane of immanence where past, present, and future coexist and can be ordered in various ways…images are there; they do not represent some other-worldliness but constantly shape the world and its subjects…with Deleuze is the question concerning the difference between real and unreal (dream, fiction, memoirs). As Deleuze has argued, the distinction between virtual and actual offers a more adequate way to think in images. Virtual and actual are not opposed to each other; both are “real,” but only the actual is in the (physical) present.”

The photograph consequently operates as evidence of the past, evidence of experiences we deem worthy to memorialize, distinctive from experiences we consider mundane. Family photo albums and home movies are examples of experiences imbued with significance. With social media, this personal record has no allegiance to any moment in time and, if wanted, can freely serve a myriad of subjective operations.

In the Installation, *In the Wild*, video footage originally intended to serve as a memento of a family vacation is utilized to reveal a subtle yet profound moment caught on camera that speaks to family roles and tradition. Short segments from two videos, one of the father and one of the son, taken from original vacation movies, were altered into a two channel video installation. In the videos both father and son are recording each other simultaneously. This action creates a recursive dual presence that emphasizes the denaturalizing mediation of the cameras’ affect on the actual experience. In the installation, the footage from both these cameras are edited, synchronized and projected
onto opposing walls. Both the father and son spin around, suggestively switching roles alluding to the passing down of tradition. The father, now grandfather, handing the role of family videographer to his son while the next generation, the grandchildren, are captured in the background. The youngest plays the harmonica; the sound fills the room becoming a subtle signifier of the lineage to come.

1. *In the Wild* (still frames)

Expanding on the subjectivity of the value of memory artifacts, a photographic record of any kind is subject to any number of alterations. For instance, in photomontage it is understood that images have a cultural, communicative significance and their alteration, combination and arrangement can elicit a wealth of new concepts. In a photomontage, each image possesses a unique value and a relative value, the value of the individual image and the value of its correlation to the whole. This artificial combination is further compounded into a new artifact by uniting imagery that is able to merge disparate histories of past and present.

In *Team Spaceship*, a woman is seen in the living room of her home showing a vacation video to her husband. With his camera, the husband impulsively zooms in on the television screen and the image of the original vacation video, making a new recording.
Two moments in time converge, the perceived time on screen and the literal time experienced in the living room. The camera attempts to capture the original footage, thereby subsuming the initial experience within the later experience, creating a new memory artifact. This new version of the experience is then uploaded online marking another transition. The passage from a personal memory device into a social device makes the imagery vulnerable to infinitely more appropriations. Each time the original image is reframed, the conceptual identity of the original memory is changed. This act of re-recording coalesces three distinct moments in time into one memory artifact.

2. Team Spaceship (still frame)

These ideas are framed in the context of one’s life as windows into the actual world, defining one’s identity within the social network. A complex web of shifting roles and values emerge within the social media economy. Social influences come in many forms and cultural trends. With applications such as Instagram, viewers are not only encouraged to instantly share images of their life but are prompted to hashtag these images with corresponding hashtags creating a
greater pool of images for the public realm

100 @ 1% explores this phenomenon using 100 photos found on Instagram with the same hashtag and digitally blending them together at 1% opacity to make one resulting image. The effect is a hazy version of the originally hash-tagged location as seen through the lens of 100 different people. Before digital social media, images like these would have been taken for their iconic view of the subject matter. Here, the valuation of the subject matter has been transferred from the depiction in the image to the image’s correlation to the social media community and, more importantly, how it portrays the author’s identity.

3. 100 @ 1% Series

The ability to instantly broadcast images of one’s life promotes the staging and premeditation of one’s experience to fit a desired fiction that crafts an online identity. A disconnect emerges between the actual and the virtual where contrived photographic representations of experience become the reality. The self favors the “selfie”, and immediate experience is molded for how it will exist in the virtual future. In Team Spaceship a young man’s vacation experience in Thailand, is uploaded onto YouTube. He is alone on the beach filming himself with a beautiful
beach view in the background. Directing his gaze to the camera he says “As you can see, I wanted to share all this with you…etc.”

4. *Team Spaceship* (still frame)

The photographic artifact has shifted from being a tool to capture the moments of his personal life to being a broadcast tool blurring the difference between the specificity of individual experience and one made public for an audience. The moment is used as a stage to transmit a composed fiction into the digital world where it can be instantly interpreted as a factual experience, anywhere but where the fictive experience was composed.

Personal documentary photography initially served to reflect the narrative of our experience, now our experience serves to reflect the narrative of our documentary photography. Just like the history recorded in textbooks defines the narrative of a society, the social media feed memorializes the photographic experience of our lives. Once the facts of the actual present fade in time all that will remain are the narrative artifacts of our experiences. In an age when the
influence of the photographic artifact impresses so profoundly on the present, investigating the implications of this influence is imperative in discerning the facts from fictions in the narratives left behind.

I am interested in the convergence of personal documentation and social communication. Making sense of this visual noise and attempting to orient oneself within it is the motivation behind my work. The plurality of the lived experience, the remembered experience and the photographically shared experience present an array of complicating connections. However, amidst the overwhelming media flow there exist subtle occurrences and trends that genuinely reveal the nature of the new digitally connected social condition. In these works I aspire to probe into how and why personal experiences that are broadcast to the world can migrate from the personally significant to the socially ubiquitous, and from the arbitrary to the profound.
Works Cited