



I.B. TAURIS

digital snaps

THE NEW FACE OF
PHOTOGRAPHY

edited by
JONAS LARSEN
and METTE SANDBYE

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‘Arguing that the digital snapshot represents a transformation, rather than the destruction, of the personal photograph, *Digital Snaps* provides convincing evidence that it is indeed in the practice of personal photography where all the various effects of digital technology have been most strongly felt. Comprehensive and provocative, the essays collected in this volume measure the shift in the photograph’s status from a static documentary record of a past moment to a ubiquitous mode of immediate communication that allows us to perform versions of ourselves for a vast new public. If you want to understand photography today, you must read this book.’

*Geoffrey Batchen, Professor of Art History,
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INTRODUCTION

The New Face of Snapshot Photography

JONAS LARSEN AND METTE SANDBYE

Maybe what's happening now for photography was always its destiny and fate. But it's not the end of photography. It's rather the end of photography as we know it. To understand this change, we need a new media ecology.

*Martin Lister at the 'Private Eyes' conference,
University of Copenhagen, 2009*

Photography, once again, is changing dramatically. Over the last decades, analogue snapshot photography has more or less died out as digital photography has become commonplace. Analogue cameras have quickly lost value. Many experience a humiliating trip to a garbage dump or cause clutter and dust in households and at flea markets. They belong to a family of technologies (such as the cassette player and the Walkman) devalued by digitization (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2007; Cobley and Haefner 2009). Few amateurs now take pictures with analogue cameras. In 2004 Kodak stopped selling traditional cameras in North America and Western Europe, and in January 2012 Kodak filed for bankruptcy. Digital technology has not only changed the way the images are produced, but also the way they are used, circulated and communicated. This book sets out to highlight these new social forms and uses of photography.

Photographs are now very widely produced, consumed and circulated on computers, mobile phones and via the internet, especially through social-networking sites. The digitization of images thus implies media convergence and new performances of sociality reflecting broader shifts towards real-time, collaborative, networked 'sociality at a distance'. In 2001 the first camera phone was put on the market, but they only really began to sell in high volumes in 2004, the same year that the Web platform Flickr was invented. At that time, 68 million digital cameras and 246 million camera phones (mobile phones with inbuilt digital cameras) were sold worldwide (Larsen 2008). Many mobile phones now produce high-quality photographs and mobile-phone commercials (such as those for Nokia and iPhone) increasingly highlight the functionality of their cameras. In the United Kingdom, '448,962,359 MMS picture messages were sent in 2007, the equivalent of 19 million traditional (24 exposure) rolls of camera film' (MDA 2008). So photography is indeed converging with the internet and mobile phones.

Whereas 'analogue photography' was directed at a *future* audience, pictures taken with camera phones can be seen immediately by people at a distance, using mobile phones with MMS service or uploading them to social-networking sites. Using Snapchat, the photo is meant to be seen by the recipient for only a few seconds; with this app millions of photos are being shared instantly every day. The affordances of digital photography potentially make photographic images instantaneous and mobile. And so we have a sheer explosion of photographs circulating on the internet. As Francesco Lapenta (2011: 1) reports:

According to the 1993 Wolfman Report, 17.2 billion analogue images were taken in the United States between 1992 and 1993. Today we can easily imagine the latter to be representative of the number of digital images taken in a fortnight by all the electronic eyes distributed around the globe. About 5 million pictures are uploaded to Flickr every day, around 2.5 billion photographs to Facebook each month,

and YouTube alone serves 2 billion videos a day to millions of viewers around the world.

This quote not only highlights the seemingly ever increasing number of private snaps that are taken daily, but also some of the new technologies and applications in which personal snaps are now embedded. The spread of all these new digital technologies, social-networking sites and photo communities with user-generated content exploded in the era that was recently named 'Web 2.0 – the Age of the Amateur', when the internet became much more open, collaborative and participatory. Web 2.0 affords an open online participatory culture in which connected individuals not only surf but make many 'products' through editing, updating, blogging, remixing, posting, responding, sharing, exhibiting, tagging, and so on (Beer and Burrows 2007). The sincerity of user-generated material is also recognized by many businesses such as tourist organizations. For instance, VisitBritain, the official website for travel and tourism in the UK, asks tourists to upload comments, photos and videos: 'This is your chance to share what you love about Britain with the world! Browse the reviews to see what other travelers remember about their holiday in England, London, Scotland or Wales and check out photos, videos and comments' (Urry and Larsen 2011). A site such as TripAdvisor invites tourists to share their private photos with other tourists in order to review hotels, implying that this kind of imagery is more 'honest' than the hotels' own photographs.

Snapshot photographs fuse our everyday lives as never before: on the internet, in mass media, within the art world and in everyday communication culture. They have revitalized the private photo album that so often collected dust on the living-room shelf, 'despite being the most mass produced photographic product, the snapshot has remained highly private, concealed from public eye, and quite often an invisible image' (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008: 12). Today, the private snapshot has indeed left its hidden home shelter. Now, personal narratives, represented by private snaps, are omnipresent and widely accessible by the general public.

This is also seen in the news media, where private snaps are shown as an alternative to traditional press photography. In response to the production and distribution of digital images becoming cheap and accessible enough for anybody to assume the role of a photojournalist, amateur recordings, often in the form of mobile-phone images, frequently turn into representations of 'breaking news' in the international media (Mortensen 2009). This is seen with the Abu Ghraib scandal (2004), Saddam Hussein's hanging (2006), the terrorist attacks in London (2005) and Mumbai (2008), the riots in Iran (2009) and the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, where mobile camera phones arguably have played a key role in organizing and communicating the revolts. As argued in the British newspaper the *Guardian* (Beaumont 2011):

Think of the defining image of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa – the idea that unites Egypt with Tunisia, Bahrain and Libya. It has not been, in itself, the celebrations of Hosni Mubarak's fall nor the battles in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Nor even the fact of Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, which acted as a trigger for all the events that have unfolded.

Instead, that defining image is this: a young woman or a young man with a smartphone. She's in the Medina in Tunis with a BlackBerry held aloft, taking a picture of a demonstration outside the prime minister's house. He is an angry Egyptian doctor in an aid station stooping to capture the image of a man with a head injury from missiles thrown by Mubarak's supporters. Or it is a Libyan in Benghazi running with his phone switched to a jerky video mode, surprised when the youth in front of him is shot through the head.

On the one hand, amateur recordings may grant us insight into situations the media have no access to otherwise. On the other hand, amateur footage challenges the ethical standards of journalism with its unedited format, let

alone the difficulties involved in tracking a clip's author, origin and routes through the global communication systems. The photographs of triumphant American soldiers staging and carrying out the brutal humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison, which circulated in the global media in 2004, highlight another ethical problem. It is telling that one of the first reactions from the US Department of State was to regret not the violence, torture and humiliation committed, but the behaviour of the soldiers, that they behaved like ordinary tourists by circulating their personal snapshots on the internet and through their camera phones (Haldrup and Larsen 2010). Their photographic practices reflect, as Sontag (2004: 26) observes:

A recent shift in the use made of pictures – less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated. A digital camera is a common possession among soldiers. Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers, recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities – and swapping images among themselves and emailing them around the globe.

Personal mobile-phone images of fun and conquest intended for friends and family members back home took wrong turns on their journey and became public images of disgrace on a global stage. As Nancy Van House (2011: 128) says more generally: 'Whereas printed images and negatives are under the control of the owner, digital photographs have slipped the bounds of materiality and may have a life of their own outside the control of their makers.' It is this new life of digital photography that this book is about.

Within the last decade, the material base of photography has been revolutionized to the extent that we can talk about 'old photography', the analogue, and 'new photography', the digital. All this indicates that digital photography is a constantly evolving complex of networks, technologies, practices and meanings embedded in people's daily lives. This digital

evolution is twofold, based partly on new digital technologies and image-based software applications and partly on new practices, social functions and meanings (Larsen 2008; Van House 2008; Lapenta 2011).

Rethinking Photography: Convergence

We need to rethink photography, and now is the moment to do it. The newness of digital photography relates not only to the digitization of images, but to media convergence and new performances of sociality, memory, history and identity. The future of the medium is inextricably linked to mobile phones and the internet, and, to a much lesser degree, paper images, albums and traditional cameras. Computer technologies, social-networking sites and camera phones are part of the sociotechnical system of snapshot photography, and so photographers need to have access to, interest in and some competence in using such systems (Van House 2011: 132). Increasingly, everyday amateur photography is a performative practice connected to presence, immediate communication and social networking, as opposed to the storing of memories for eternity, which is how it has hitherto been conceptualized. As José van Dijck says with regard to mobile-phone snaps:

When pictures become a visual language conveyed through the channel of a communication medium, the value of individual pictures decreases while the general significance of visual communication increases. A thousand pictures sent over the phone may now be worth a single word: 'see!' Taking, sending and receiving photographs is a real-time experience and, like spoken words, image exchanges are not meant to be archived [...] Because of their abundance, these photographs gain value as 'moments', while losing value as mementoes. (2008: 62)