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# The Public Lives Of Private Family Albums : A Case Study In Collections And Exhibitions At The Art Gallery Of Ontario And Max Dean : Album

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THE PUBLIC LIVES OF PRIVATE FAMILY ALBUMS:  
A CASE STUDY IN COLLECTIONS AND EXHIBITIONS AT THE  
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO AND *MAX DEAN: ALBUM*

by

Heather Rigg

BA, University of Victoria, 2007

A Thesis presented to

Ryerson University  
and  
the Art Gallery of Ontario

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

Master of Arts in the Program  
of  
Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012  
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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Public Lives of Private Family Albums: A Case Study in Collections and Exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario and Max Dean: Album*

Master of Arts

2012

Heather Rigg

Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Ryerson University and the Art Gallery of Ontario

This thesis uses Toronto artist Max Dean's performance *Max Dean: Album*, produced in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Ontario, as a case study to investigate the complex issues involved in the display and recirculation of private family albums in the public space of the art gallery.

A survey of the critical literature that addresses the placement of vernacular objects such as family albums and snapshots in the art gallery functions as a preamble to a series of interviews done with scholars, academics and curators in the fields of photography and art history. Drawing on the results of these interviews, this paper examines the challenges that arise when family albums are publicly displayed and exhibited. Terry Barrett's methodology of investigating the context of photographs is considered and applied to family albums and to Dean's *Album* project, analyzing how his public performance provides a creative solution to the issues raised.



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## 1. Introduction

[T]he age of photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.

- R. Barthes, "Private/Public,"  
*Camera Lucida*<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* provides a fitting account of the role of family photograph albums in Max Dean's performance installation *Max Dean: Album*, where once private photographic objects are offered to the public for the taking. *Album* was one of nine public installations done in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) for CONTACT Toronto Photography Festival 2012, an annual month-long festival that extends throughout the city. For this project Dean used his collection of more than 600 family photograph albums which he amassed over a ten year period. The aim was to find "willing new owners" for what he called the "orphaned" albums in a two pronged public gesture; a portion of his collection he donated to the AGO and dismantled the remaining collection of albums by giving them away to the public.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 98.

<sup>2</sup> Art Gallery of Ontario, *Max Dean: Album*, Art Gallery of Ontario, <http://www.ago.net/max-dean/album>, accessed May 8, 2012/

These objects, which vary in size and material, are albums with snapshots placed in them, mostly by unknown makers. The albums – created between 1890 and 1980, reveal numerous images of private family life such as: summer vacations, weddings, babies, Christmas dinners, graduations, new homes, new cars, summer camp and birthday parties. Although they often seem banal, mundane and repetitive, each album is unique – a product of individual selection. Created solely for the private space of the home, these family albums eventually lost connection with their creators and users. Relegated to the market, they entered Dean's private collection before transitioning to the public realm of the art gallery.

Dean's performance is used as a case study to raise questions concerning shifts in context as albums pass through private to public collections. To what extent does Dean's giving away of family albums raise questions concerning the value of these objects, their reception and their contextualization in private and public contexts? How can an institution such as an art gallery provide an appropriate contextual space for a private family album? These are the questions at the heart of this thesis and in answering them this essay uses Dean's performance *Max Dean: Album* as a case study in conjunction with a series of interviews conducted with scholars, academics and curators in the field of photo and art history. These interviews focus on issues of contextualization; when private photographic objects are brought into the public art gallery, as these

albums have been, a “complicated shift in meaning occurs when family photographs are moved from the private to the public sphere.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the responses of Geoffrey Batchen, Alison Nordström, Sophie Hackett, Elizabeth Smith, Vid Ingelevics, Daile Kaplan and Martha Langford,<sup>4</sup> the aim of this paper is to examine the issues regarding the contextualization of private family albums in the art gallery as well as in Dean's public gesture of giving his collection away.

Academic interest in family albums has produced careful analysis of how these photographic objects were used in the home and why they were created. Scholars including Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Hirsch, Marianne Hirsch, Geoffrey Batchen, Martha Langford, Gillian Rose and Alison Nordström have contributed in-depth studies to this growing field. They have stressed the importance of tactility and touch in understanding how photographic objects such as albums are used, understood and appreciated. Once ensconced in an album a selected snapshot photograph is granted special status and meaning; the albums' creator is telling a story through the selection and juxtaposition of images. Book-like in structure, these photo albums were designed to be held in one's hands or lap. They require the physical participation of the viewer who must touch and hold the album in order to turn its pages and experience the creator's narration, enacting an intimate ritual between viewer and object. Only through this intimate interaction

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<sup>3</sup> Nordström, Alison Devine, and Casey Blanton. *Telling Our Own Stories; Florida's Family Photographs* (Florida: Southeast Museum of Photography, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix - page 56 - for interview questions and transcripts.

can one begin to understand the full story each album creator has chosen to tell. The viewing of family albums is often accompanied by oral stories told by their creators. As Batchen has noted in his discussion on family photographs:

...these pictures were once regularly touched by their original owners. They were touched, fingered, fondled, turned over, perhaps written on or read, and then, in many cases placed in albums designed expressly for the purpose. These albums were a vehicle for storytelling, often conveying a bio-epic starring the maker of the album (who we know, from ink captions, only as “me”).<sup>5</sup>

The album as a 'vehicle for storytelling' is precisely what lead Dean to collect more than 600 of them. An artist known for his performative works that often include audience interaction, Dean began his collection of albums in 1992 when working on his sculpture *As Yet Untitled* (1992- 1995). This work, which is also now part of the AGO's collection, is an interactive work that offers viewers the opportunity to determine the fate of found family snapshots. Dean began collecting albums with the original intention to use them for the sculpture but realized that these photographic objects should not be dismantled. He became fascinated with them and continued to collect albums for over ten years.

The number of art galleries and museums exhibiting and collecting family photographs and vernacular photographic objects as exhibition material in their own right has risen considerably in the past fifteen years. Institutions such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the National Gallery of Art in

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<sup>5</sup> Batchen, “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn” in *Photographies* 1:2 (September 2008): 135.

Washington DC, The J. Paul Getty Museum and the AGO, among others, have produced major exhibitions dedicated to found family snapshots. This growing interest in vernacular photography, specifically anonymous family photographs, can be attributed to a shifting approach to photography and its history – an approach that moves away from the limiting art historical model that dominated the twentieth century, in order to embrace the greater territory that photography occupies within a larger field of visual culture.

The placement of vernacular objects such as family albums into the public space of the art gallery is cause for concern among many photo historians and scholars who have noted the difficulties in contextualizing these complex objects. In art institutions, where they are most often exhibited, family albums are frequently presented as static objects with accompanying textual information that emphasizes their aesthetic qualities rather than providing information on their social function and use. As art galleries are usually collecting institutions, their primary focus is the growth and public display of their collections and vernacular objects such as family albums often end up being interpreted using an aesthetic paradigm that is intended for works of art. How, then, can an institution such as an art gallery avoid these pitfalls and provide an appropriate contextual space for such an object? This thesis examines the nature of the AGO's collection, the cultural, historical and physical complexities of family albums and their treatment in Dean's public project.

## **2. Literature Survey**

This survey includes an analysis of literature concerned with the study of family albums from an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing work by sociologists, anthropologists and photo historians. Emphasis is placed on the creation, use and reception of such objects in their original context of the private home. This is followed by a review of the critical literature that examines the role of family albums and the display of vernacular photographic objects in public spaces.

### **2.a Private Use**

Numerous publications dedicated to the analysis of family photography from a sociological perspective emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as scholars analyzed the uses of family photography and the role of family albums in the private space of the home. Pierre Bourdieu's influential book *Photography a Middle Brow Art*<sup>6</sup>, surveyed amateur photography in the 1960s and argued that the medium has functioned to solidify class values, traditions and material pursuits. By focusing on the practice of photography itself, Bourdieu analyzes the conventional and stereotypical aspects of family picture taking where conformity reigns to solidify the high points of family life, as "[m]ore than two thirds of photographers are seasonal conformists who take photographs either at family

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography A Middle-Brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

festivities or social gatherings, or during the summer holidays.”<sup>7</sup> These photographs are used to record and document private life for the family album. The album then functions as an object that communicates memories of family life that are seen as important and unifying.<sup>8</sup> By referencing memories of the past, Bourdieu sees the family album as an object that functions as a sacred object, one that represents the 'physical body of a particular ancestor' that can be passed on to future generations to recall the memories of past lives.<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu presents the family album as a private object whose main function is to communicate memories of the past.

In Deborah Chambers' essay “Family as Place: Family Photograph Albums and the Domestication of Public and Private Space”<sup>10</sup> the author aims to understand the meanings and messages in family photo albums compiled in the 1950s in suburban areas of Sydney, Australia.<sup>11</sup> The albums reveal stories surrounding the colonization of space and place at a time when white families were moving to suburban areas of Australia. Chambers argues that the private values and meanings of these family albums reveal how families saw themselves in relation to the public world.<sup>12</sup> Chambers traces this back to the influence of the

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, *Photography A Middle-Brow Art*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Chambers, “Family as Place: Family Photograph Albums and the Domestication of Public and Private Space” in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* ed. Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Chambers, *Family as Place*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Royal Family in nineteenth century Britain where the family was presented as an ideal white family, with mother seen as a domestic caregiver and the father as ruler and protector.<sup>13</sup> Families wanted to link themselves to these national ideals and portrayed themselves in albums as living similar lives of 'domestic pleasure.'<sup>14</sup> Although families sought to align themselves with the wider community and public institutions, Chambers points out that the albums were never intended for public consumption but for a small and specific group of family members and friends. Upon seeing the albums Chambers notes that “[t]he similarities rather than the differences, between albums were immediately striking. Subject matter, poses, framing and sequencing were highly standardized.”<sup>15</sup> While her findings complement Bourdieu’s, she notes that regardless of their similarity the albums held meanings very specific and different to each family.<sup>16</sup> The albums she studied had little or no captioning or explanation. Information that was included was often in the form of anecdotes or jokes whose meaning would be lost to viewers outside of the immediate family. The interviews she conducted with album owners revealed that the albums were most often brought out at family gatherings of more than one generation and that their viewing was accompanied by oral storytelling and contextualization.<sup>17</sup> The connection between private family albums and orality is the main focus of Martha

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 113.

Langford's *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*.<sup>18</sup> By conducting an in-depth analysis of family photo albums housed within the McCord Museum, Langford argues that the albums acted as 'performative' objects dependent on oral presentation. She suggests that the ways in which photographs have been arranged and organized into albums is reminiscent of oral mnemonic functions and that to understand the original intention, reception and function of family albums one must address the links between traditional oral storytelling and photographic culture.<sup>19</sup>

Gillian Rose's essay "Everyone's Cuddled Up and it Just Looks Really Nice': An Emotional Geography of Some Mums and their Family Photos"<sup>20</sup> analyzes (through a series of interviews) what mothers did with their family photographs and their emotional responses to them. The essay reveals the emotional attachment mothers had to their family photographs, noting that interviewees often "spoke of a particular photograph as if it was the person it showed."<sup>21</sup> Further, Rose observed the mothers need to physically touch and hold their photographs, revealing the tactility associated with looking at family photos, something affirmed in the growing literature on the subject. One of the main reasons then that the art historical model is inadequate for family photographs is

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<sup>18</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Gillian Rose, "Everyone's Cuddled Up and it Just Looks Really Nice': An Emotional Geography of Some Mums and Their Family Photos," *Social and Cultural Geography* 5, no.4 (December 2004): 549-564.

<sup>21</sup> Rose, "Everyone's Cuddled Up and it Just Looks Really Nice," 549-564.

that they are not created for formal aesthetic reasons, but function instead as personal and private talismanic objects.

These publications provide insight into the complex, private and specific nature of family photographs. Created to document family events and evoke memories of the past, photographs are placed in albums created for the viewing pleasure of immediate family members and close friends. Viewing is accompanied by oral storytelling, explaining why many albums lack written captions. Understanding of such objects is lost to viewers outside of this realm, making them appear anonymous and enigmatic when viewed within the context of the public museum or library. How historians and curators have addressed family photographs in the public domain is the subject of the following section.

## **2.b Public Space**

The role of photography in museums has been analyzed in depth in two seminal essays from 1982: Rosalind Krauss's "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View"<sup>22</sup> and Christopher Phillips's "The Judgment Seat of Photography."<sup>23</sup> Although neither of these essays addresses family photography specifically, they question the categorization of all types of photography as art within the museum, regardless of their original functions. For example, while Krauss takes issue with the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA's) treatment of the

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<sup>22</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42 no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311 – 319.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Phillips, "The Judgement Seat of Photography," *October* 22 (Autumn 1982): 27 – 63.

historical and documentary photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan and Eugène Atget as art objects, Phillips argues that the MoMA's constant redefining of photography and its place in the museum has created a distorted view of the medium's whole history.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly analyzed the role of family photography's place in the museum. Alison Nordström's essay "Family Photographs and the Museum/The Dilemma of Display"<sup>24</sup> from 1997 provides an important analysis of such. Nordström acknowledges the inherent difficulties in exhibiting family photographs since such objects are entrenched in the private ritualistic events of daily family life and are associated with oral history and memory. Her essay is essentially a 'call to arms' for museums and curators to acknowledge that vernacular photographs are part of families' private history, valued for sentimental and indexical reasons.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, as Nordström suggests, such objects cannot be shown as 'high' art. In a similar vein, Joel Smith criticizes the recent wave of snapshot exhibitions put on by numerous museums and galleries. In "Roll Over: The Snapshot's Museum Afterlife"<sup>26</sup> published in *Afterimage* in 2001, Smith argues that the presence of snapshots on the walls of art museums seem to be serving a role akin to 'Outsider Art' as the objects have

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<sup>24</sup> Nordström, Alison Devine, and Casey Blanton. *Telling Our Own Stories; Florida's Family Photographs* (Florida: Southeast Museum of Photography, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, Joel. "Roll Over: The Snapshot's Museum Afterlife." *Afterimage* September/October, 2001.

been removed from their original 'real-world' context.<sup>27</sup> Although snapshots have influenced the work of many artists, Smith questions their position as exhibition material on their own, acknowledging that snapshots lose all of their complex and distinct meaning when assimilated "into the formalist narratives of modernism."<sup>28</sup>

Glen Willumson's essay "Making Meaning: Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum,"<sup>29</sup> found in *Photographs Objects Histories*, provides an important analysis of two interrelated themes integral to this thesis. The first is the shift or 'trajectory' of photo-objects from the private realm of the home to the public space of the museum, and the second is the lack of attention institutions give to the material aspects of photo-objects. Here, Willumson compares the original function of a sequenced photo album, by analyzing the Seaton albums, with its place in the public library. The Seaton albums are incredibly tactile objects that require careful, intimate handling, due to the inclusion of photographs, text, and maps located throughout their pages. The albums were created in such a manner that viewers have to flip back and forth throughout the reading of an album in order to fully engage with it.<sup>30</sup> However, once the albums were acquired by the Getty Research Institute, they were 'filed' according to image content alone, disregarding the relationship between the photographs, maps

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>29</sup> Glen Willumson, "Making Meaning: Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum" *Photographs Objects Histories*, ed. E. Edwards and Janice Hart. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 62 – 80.

<sup>30</sup> Willumson, *Making Meaning*, 65.

and text.<sup>31</sup> Willumson thus reveals the changing meaning photo-objects have in different situations and that they “can only be understood as products of a contest between their trajectories and their institutional frameworks.” Similarly, in “Making a Journey: The Tupper Scrapbooks and the Travel they Describe”<sup>32</sup> found in the same publication, Alison Nordström emphasizes the need to analyze albums as whole objects, because the “material form is what fixes the meaning of the photographs they hold...”<sup>33</sup> She also acknowledges the importance of studying such commonplace mundane objects as the Tupper Scrapbooks, as they provide insight into the complex social meanings surrounding their creation and reception.<sup>34</sup>

In “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn” published in the journal *Photographies* in 2008, Geoffrey Batchen analyzes the lack of attention snapshot photographs have received in previous histories of photography.<sup>35</sup> According to Batchen this absence is due to the creation of a history of photography produced in a formulaic manner that mimics the history of art. Snapshots, like all forms of vernacular photographs, challenge this history as they are personal and ubiquitous objects with repetitive subject matter. Further,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>32</sup> Alison Nordström, “Making Meaning: Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum.” *Photographs Objects Histories*, ed. E. Edwards and Janice Hart. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81 – 95.

<sup>33</sup> Nordström, *Making Meaning*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn,” *Photographies* 1:2 (September 2008): 121 – 142

Batchen argues that a new history of photography must be devised that attends to the sheer volume and banality of snapshots. He points to the field of Visual Culture as an ideal way to discuss and analyze “everyday genres of photography”<sup>36</sup> and “photography's relationship to life[,]”<sup>37</sup> because of its interdisciplinary approach which incorporates elements of ethnography, anthropology, literature, cultural studies and women's studies. Batchen criticizes museum exhibitions and publications of snapshot photography where selections of family photographs were chosen by someone trained in art history to look for those deemed creative, unusual and rare, qualities that are in fact antithetical to understanding snapshots. To Batchen, this exemplifies the problems that arise when private family photographs are presented “within the confines of an art historical narrative or an art museum”<sup>38</sup> as these public institutions do not consider the complex social functions of snapshots and their important role in albums. Batchen, like Willumson and Nordström, reiterates the importance of analyzing these once private photos in terms of their materiality, function, reception, trajectory and life cycle.

Sarah Parsons' essay “Public/Private Tensions in the Photography of Sally Mann”<sup>39</sup> explores the role of private family photographs in public spaces through an analysis of Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* series. In the essay Parsons argues

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<sup>36</sup> Batchen, *Snapshots*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Parsons, “Public/Private Tensions in the Photography of Sally Mann.” *History of Photography* 32:2 (Summer 2008): 123 – 136.

that the subject of Mann's photographs (her children at home) and the physical spaces that they are viewed within (galleries, museums and monographs) creates tensions and elicits anxieties as they challenge distinctions between private and public. In doing so Parsons analyzes the varied responses to Mann's series which ranged from laudatory to disgust. The author addresses the inherent subjective reading of family photographs as it is tied to "one's own experience of and relationship to the subjectivities and events in the photographs."<sup>40</sup> Although Parsons is focusing on the work of an artist whose photographs were intended for public display, unlike vernacular photography, the essay provides an important look at photographs depicting the private space of family life in the public space of the museum, making this text integral to any study of family photographs brought into public collections.

While Parsons' focus is on viewer reception to the *Immediate Family* series, Martha Langford's interest is in artists' appropriation or emulation of amateur photography, particularly the photographic album. In "Strange Bedfellows: Appropriations of the Vernacular by Photographic Artists"<sup>41</sup> Langford asks whether or not the 'private nature' of vernacular photography can "survive its transformation into a public work of art."<sup>42</sup> Here she analyzes the work of a number of artists such as Fiona Tan, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Michael Snow and

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<sup>40</sup> Parson, *Public/Private*, 130.

<sup>41</sup> Martha Langford, "Strange Bedfellows: Appropriations of the Vernacular by Photographic Artists." *Photography & Culture* 1:1 (July 2008), 73 – 94.

<sup>42</sup> Langford, *Strange Bedfellows*, 73.

Bruno Rosier who, like Dean, challenge the private nature of family albums by placing them in public contexts. Langford concludes that it is Michael Snow's *Scraps for the Soldiers* that best exemplifies an artists' reappropriation of the family album while maintaining allegiance to its original use and function. For this work Snow had his own family album (created by his aunt "Dimple" during WWI) digitally reproduced. The resulting work is entitled *Scraps for the Soldiers* –Snow's aunt had used a commercially produced scrapbook intended for those 'at home' during the war to compile and then send to soldiers overseas. The photographs in Dimple's album depict happy people at leisure, yet subtle reminders that a war is taking place do exist via images of soldiers and nurses that appear sporadically throughout the album.<sup>43</sup> Snow did not physically alter the album but had it digitally reproduced with an introduction he wrote. Langford praises the digitization (reproduction) of the album as it "captures the auratic qualities of the photographic object."<sup>44</sup> Rather than reproducing the album in a manner that disregards its materiality, specificity and original use, Snow, and as we will see, Dean, embrace the object's personal and private function by essentially letting the album speak for itself. Further, Snow foregrounds what Langford sees as the essential element of family albums –their deep seated roots in "personal, present based feelings and desires, the very opposite of Modernism's disinterest and universality, and just as foreign to postmodernism's ironic

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 89

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 91.

corrections.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, Snow provides insight into the ways in which vernacular photography is used in ordinary daily life.<sup>46</sup> By analyzing the work of Snow, Langford reveals one way that private vernacular photographic objects such as albums can be presented for public consumption without resorting to art historical tropes and principles.

The aforementioned texts reveal an analysis of family photographs that provide insight into the complexities surrounding their creation, meaning and function. Their place in the museum has most recently been contested due to the lack of consideration of the private nature and non-aesthetic purpose of these objects which have most often been replaced by art historical narratives. As such, this survey reveals the need for a greater understanding of how such objects can be displayed in public spaces without disregarding their specific private context.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

### **3. Context and the Public Display of Private Family Albums**

As family albums were never intended for the public domain, as evidenced by the work of numerous interdisciplinary scholars, how can an institution such as an art gallery provide an appropriate contextual space for a private family album? A series of interviews was conducted with scholars, academics and curators in the field of photo and art history in order to discover their views and ideas in regards to issues concerning the display of family albums in the art gallery. Geoffrey Batchen, Alison Nordström, Sophie Hackett, Elizabeth Smith, Vid Ingelevics, Daile Kaplan and Martha Langford were interviewed for their extensive knowledge on family albums, exhibitions and photographic history (see appendix). Two main questions that all of the interviewees were asked were: What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums? What problems do you think arise when such private objects that were created for the home are collected by a public art institution for display? These scholars identified three main challenges that arise from the placement or display of family albums in the public realm of the art gallery. The first is that of context, since, as Ingelevics put it - “the family album cannot be understood in the same way as an art object.”<sup>47</sup> Secondly, the inherent challenges that the physical forms of such objects present in being exhibited was commented upon by almost all of the interviewees, “because, like a book, one is

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<sup>47</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interviewed by the author, March 29, 2012

somewhat limited by the manner in which the album can be presented: it can be opened to a double page and it can be opened in such a way that a single page is featured.”<sup>48</sup> The third issue that was most prevalent in the interviews was that of privacy where “the possibility always arises that a viewer could see a family member in an album...I wouldn't say it's a problem so much but a consideration that is unique to albums.”<sup>49</sup> This third aspect will be explored in chapter seven's discussion on Dean's public project.

In regards to the physical challenges that family albums pose when exhibited, interviewees criticized the fact that these objects are often displayed in museums and galleries as static objects. Such limitations in modes of display have led to a loss of context for these objects. Exacerbated by the physical nature of family albums, their book-like structure makes it difficult to display their contents thoroughly, page by page, which reduces or eliminates altogether their narrative and tactile qualities.<sup>50</sup> As Langford emphasized in her interview: “the biggest problem is that the object cannot be displayed within the way that it was used within the family.”<sup>51</sup> Galleries and museums are limited to displaying a single spread or page of an album because the objects cannot be handled and therefore experienced in the way they were intended. Langford goes on to state that viewing family albums statically under glass “doesn't give you a sense of the

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<sup>48</sup> Daile Kaplan, interviewed by the author, March. 30, 2012

<sup>49</sup> Sophie Hackett, interviewed by the author, March 22, 2012

<sup>50</sup> Daile Kaplan, interviewed by the author, March. 30, 2012

<sup>51</sup> Martha Langford, interviewed by the author, April 11, 2012

familiarity or the banal experience of many *many* album spreads which is in fact the real glue of family albums. So there is definitely a loss there.”<sup>52</sup>

Langford's lament of the inability of viewers to handle and experience the haptic qualities of looking through a family album, which are intrinsic to experiencing such objects, was echoed throughout the other interviews. As Hackett said:

The biggest challenge in my mind is – how do we display these objects in a manner that is really satisfying to the visitor? By opening albums to one page in a museum case, you are denying visitors the opportunity to flip through its pages. Usually albums are touch stones for stories, you sit on a couch and the album sits on your lap and the album maker narrates, say, their travel pictures for you.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Nordström stated that one of the most important aspects to consider in the public display of family albums is the ability for viewers to discern the full contents of an album, or in other words - “the more of the album that is visible the better.”<sup>54</sup> This allows for greater insight and engagement with the album's narrative and original purpose. This is very difficult for museums and galleries to provide their audience with since objects cannot be handled. However, advances in technology increasingly provide curators with ways to reveal an album in its entirety to their viewers. For example, an album can be digitally scanned and transferred to an electronic device, where viewers are able to 'flip' through the pages by touching a screen, allowing for the full contents of the album to be

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<sup>52</sup> Martha Langford, interviewed by the author, April 11, 2012

<sup>53</sup> Sophie Hackett, interviewed by the author, March 22, 2012

<sup>54</sup> Alison Nordström, interviewed by the author,, March 19, 2012.

viewed in sequence. These devices (which are now often iPads) can then be placed alongside the original object.<sup>55</sup>

An example of this can be found in the exhibition *Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album* held at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery in 2006. This exhibition, which was dedicated solely to family albums created between the years 1890 and 1930, worked to emphasize the physical characteristics of the albums. Albums were displayed on specially made mounts in vitrines where viewers could gauge the three dimensional aspects of the objects (fig. 1-2). The textual information included in the vitrines described the full contents of the albums and the creative strategies used in making them, in regards to their form, content, design and layout. Information regarding the various photographic processes was also included in each. Touch-screen computers containing digitally scanned versions of several albums were placed next to the objects throughout the gallery, allowing viewers to look through the albums sequentially and fully.<sup>56</sup> Although the albums could not be physically handled they were displayed in such a manner that viewers were made aware of their physical qualities and the screens provided a way for the albums' full narratives to be explored. Further, the textual information gave viewers a sense of the object's internal structure. This example illustrates how text coupled with the use of

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, a travelling exhibition organized by The Art Institute of Chicago where it was exhibited from October 10, 2009 to January 3, 2010. It was also exhibited in Toronto at the Art Gallery of Ontario and in New York City at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>56</sup> Stephanie Snyder, e-mail correspondence with the author, January 15, 2012.

computers has worked to allow viewers greater insight into why the albums were created and how they may have been used and received.

The AGO's exhibition *Songs of the Future: Canadian Industrial Landscapes, 1858 – Today*, which ran from November 2011 through April 2012, included numerous photographic objects among which were several albums. Displayed under glass, the albums' pages were turned periodically throughout the run of the show and one album, J.C.M. Hayward's *Operations of the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company, 1912*, was scanned and placed online where viewers could peruse all 48 pages via the gallery's website.<sup>57</sup> While this was not a 'family' album, it is an example of another way that galleries can provide viewers with the opportunity to experience an album more fully.

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<sup>57</sup> Art Gallery of Ontario, "J.C.M. Hayward's *Operations of the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company, 1912*." Art Gallery of Ontario, [www.ago.net/hayward-album](http://www.ago.net/hayward-album) (accessed May 30, 2012).



Fig.1. Installation view from *Snapshot Chronicles* on view from May 24 – July 11, 2005.  
Images courtesy of Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery.



Fig.2. Installation view from *Snapshot Chronicles* on view from May 24 – July 11, 2005.  
Images courtesy of Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery.

While the use of screens provides viewers with a greater understanding of the whole album, there is, of course, always a loss of haptic qualities. As Batchen noted: “[d]igital media can help restore some of the movement to an album. But nothing can restore the sound of the laughing voices of loved ones to the experience of an album.”<sup>58</sup>

In regards to context, all of the interviewees were specifically concerned with how family albums would be valued, used and presented in the public space of the gallery or museum. In other words, interviewees were concerned with how the albums would be interpreted: “they are obviously going to be changed by being shown in an art museum, but HOW are they going to be changed, and to what extent?”<sup>59</sup> Ingelevics raised similar concerns asking:

How does an institution choose to contextualize that material? How are they framing that material? What kind of criticality is brought into the transformation of the album from domestic object and family heirloom and personal history and an icon of subjectivity to suddenly being in a space where it becomes an artifact of some sort?<sup>60</sup>

The concerns expressed by the interviewees regarding the contextualization of family albums and snapshots within the public art gallery are reflected in the academic literature on the subject where a number of studies criticizing the art museum's inability to contextualize family photographs beyond the confines of art have been written. While academics and scholars have widened

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<sup>58</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, E mail interview by the author, March 17, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interviewed by the author, March 29, 2012

the territory in regards to the study and analysis of photography, it has proven difficult for galleries and curators to escape the art historical tropes that such institutions are founded on. Since the late 1990s, numerous exhibitions dedicated to family photographs, particularly found family snapshots, have taken place. The SFMoMA's exhibition *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present*, as well as the The Metropolitan Museum of Art's (the Met) *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*, the J. Paul Getty Museum's *Close to Home: An American Album* and *Accidental Mysteries: Extraordinary Vernacular Photographs from the Collection of John and Teenuh Foster* on exhibition at the Sheldon Art Galleries in St. Louis, for example, have all received ample criticism for their inability to escape modernist art discourse. In the case of the SFMoMA exhibition, the snapshots were individually matted, framed and neatly spaced across the walls of the gallery and the images included in the publication accompanying the exhibition followed suit, each image placed in the centre of its own white page with ample border (fig. 3-4).<sup>61</sup> Because of how and where the photographs were displayed (the art gallery), viewers were encouraged to read the photographs as precious objects worthy of aesthetic praise, a stark contrast to the original function of these family 'snaps' where they would have been viewed alongside a close friend or family member, most likely in an album, where the photograph was valued for its indexical and

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<sup>61</sup> Douglas R. Nickel, *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998).

sentimental qualities.

A similar art historical treatment can be found in the publication produced by the Met for their exhibition of found family snapshots entitled *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*. Here, exhibition curator Mia Fineman refers to the snapshots from Walther's collection as “accidental” masterpieces taken by “photographic naïfs.”<sup>62</sup> Claiming that “each of these pictures, in its own irreducible and untranslatable way, teaches us what art can be.”<sup>63</sup> And in an attempt to bridge the gap between amateur family snapshots and modernist art historical discourse, Fineman goes as far as suggesting that “[t]he canonical master photographers of the twentieth century seem to haunt these pictures like a pack of jealous ghosts,”<sup>64</sup> and goes on to describe various photographs as “Alexander Rodchenkos, Man Rays, Robert Franks...”<sup>65</sup> etc. The approach taken by Fineman almost totally fails to account for the original context of these snapshot photographs. Instead, as in the case of the SFMoMA, her analysis of snapshots is based in art historical discourse, a method of analogy completely incompatible with objects created for private mnemonic and emotional reasons. This results not only in a limited understanding of the objects on view but also in a condescending attitude towards the creators of said objects, implying that they were unwittingly artistic and ignoring the possibility that they

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<sup>62</sup> Mia Fineman, *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Press, 2000) not paginated.

<sup>63</sup> Fineman, *Other Pictures*, not paginated.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

knew exactly what they were trying to achieve in their photographs, and that their criteria for doing so may have nothing in common with Fineman's. Batchen made similar criticisms in regards to the influence of art historical discourse in the Met and SFMoMA exhibition and publication where he wrote:

Isolated like this, removed from any sense of an original context, these pictures do become precious, even extraordinary. You flip from page to page, picture to picture, amazed at the luscious tones and formal invention of these otherwise ordinary photographs...Are these publications [and exhibitions] a tribute to the snapshot, or to the sharp eye of the collector/curator? Are they exercises in photo-history, or just in art appreciation and pseudo morphism? What do these publications [and exhibitions] actually tell us about the snapshot as a cultural or social phenomenon or even as a personal experience? Answer: very little. What they do tell us quite a lot about is the continuing influence of a certain kind of art history on the study of photography.<sup>66</sup>



Fig. 3. Installation view from *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life* organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 22 to September 8, 1998; photo: Ian Reeves

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<sup>66</sup> Batchen, "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," 130-131.

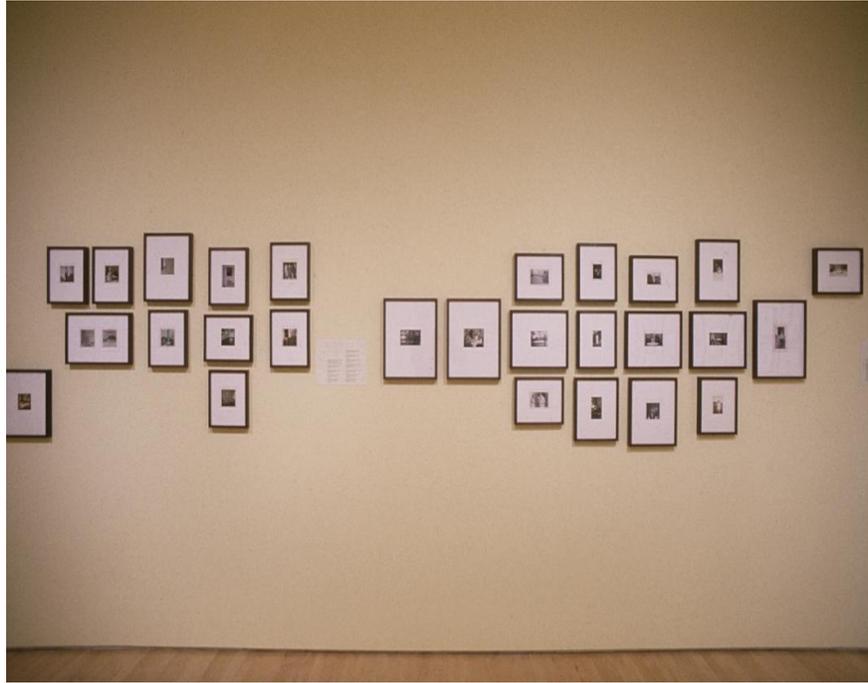


Fig. 4. Installation view from *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life* organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 22 to September 8, 1998; photo: Ian Reeves.

Catherine Zuromskis echoes Batchen in her essay “Exhibiting Snapshot Photography” where she states that:

...the museum seems a particularly ill-suited venue for exploring the everyday realities of snapshot photography. While museum exhibitions have put a wide range of intriguing and enchanting vintage photographs on display, the majority of recent snapshot museum exhibitions have revealed little, if anything, about the social and affective function of this pervasive yet surprisingly elusive image culture.<sup>67</sup>

Zuromskis goes on to criticize the 2005 snapshot exhibition held at the Sheldon

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<sup>67</sup> Catherine Zuromskis, “Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography” in *American Quarterly* 60, 2 (2008), 428

Art Galleries in St. Louis,<sup>68</sup> where snapshots from one private collection were selected and enlarged in order for viewers to focus on the “artistic qualities” of the photographs as stated by the collector in the exhibition publication.<sup>69</sup> “In contrast to the familiarity of paging through an album or rifling through an envelope of drugstore prints, the installation encourages contemplative distance,” a distance that is due to their anonymity, as “these photographs do not seem to belong anywhere or to anyone.”<sup>70</sup> The anonymity of such photographs seems to allow curators and collectors to feel justified in presenting such objects as being free of any specific social or historical context, giving them license to analyze such objects for aesthetic reasons.

Zuromskis and Batchen, like the interviewees, criticize these exhibitions and accompanying publications as they showcase the museums' adherence to the constructs of art history, showing no regard for the original function or context of the objects – which should be of central concern. If an exhibition really was dedicated to displaying family photographs as 'the photography of everyday life,' curators would have to favour the inclusion of photographs and albums that would reveal the banality and repetition evident in such a genre as well as make reference, textual or otherwise, to the original context in which such photographic objects are made and received. Photographic genres or practices rather than

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<sup>68</sup> *Accidental Mysteries: Extraordinary Vernacular Photographs from the Collection of John and Teenuh Foster.*” Organized by the Sheldon Art Galleries, St. Louis, September 24, 2005 – January 7, 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Zuromskis, “Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography,” 429.

<sup>70</sup> Zuromskis, “Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography,” 430.

'authors' or individual photographers needs to be a focus of concern.

Anthropological, sociological and archaeological questions need to be asked, as well as questions drawn from the study of visual culture and women's studies as a way of understanding how and why these objects were made and used.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Batchen "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," 126-129.

#### 4. Barrett's Three Modes of Contextualization

The methodology outlined by Terry Barrett in his essay “Photographs and Context”<sup>72</sup> and book, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images*<sup>73</sup> offers a way of asking and answering the multi-faceted questions that family albums require, as outlined in the previous section. Barrett – a professor in art education and art history at the University of North Texas and a professor emeritus at the Ohio State University – originally designed this methodology to investigate and interpret photographs taken by artists and photojournalists, the analysis of which may prove easier than that of a private family album since the psychological and emotional motivations and strategies employed in creating personal albums are rarely rational and therefore much more difficult to discern. However, by applying Barrett's methodology to family albums, it can be used to decipher the original function and context of these objects and of their journey through various social and historical environments, from the home to an auction house to an art gallery for example. Barrett's three part analysis calls for the questioning of an object's internal, original and external context. By considering these three forms of context we may analyze the original use and reception of family albums and note how changes in context have affected our understanding of them. This is a useful approach that effectively addresses the contextual

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<sup>72</sup> Terry Barrett, “Photographs and Contexts” in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* vol. 19, No. 3 (Autumn 1985), 51 – 64.

<sup>73</sup> Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images*, (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1990).

concerns with albums that were consistently raised by the interviewees.

Internal context examines an album's overall theme, story or narrative by looking closely at the subject matter presented in each of the photographs and their chronological sequencing; in other words, to examine the internal context of a family album requires a detailed analysis of the physical object itself.<sup>74</sup>

Analyzing the internal context of an album, therefore, requires studying the relationship between the subject matter of the photographs, the layout and any captions provided in order to understand as specifically as possible the maker's intentions. For example, some albums will present a chronology of family events extending a number of decades while others will depict one vacation, one picnic or one summer at camp. Studying an album's internal context will also mean considering any written captions and dates, as well as the title (if the album has one). Barrett writes - "they often, though not always, give us clues to what the [album creator] had meant us to attend to, what he or she may have had in mind in making the [album]: "A title is a *direction* for interpretation."<sup>75</sup> Therefore, titles and captions act as interpretive clues to the creator's intended story and to their potential motivations. For example, one of the albums the AGO acquired from Dean opens to the title "The Nutty Party Goes Nutting" and depicts photographs of a group of young friends on various adventures, picnics and trips. This gives the viewer the sense that the intention of the album's creator was to tell the story

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<sup>74</sup> Barrett, "Photographs and Context," 59-60.

<sup>75</sup> Barrett, "Photographs and Context," 60.

of the numerous experiences these friends shared and photographed together. The photographs in the album are captioned throughout. However, deciphering what is exactly going on in this story intended to be told in many of the photographs throughout the album's 60 pages proves challenging. As Ingelevics said:

There is a strange familiarity about [looking at family albums in the museum] but at the same time there is something odd about it because you don't know the people at all. That's why re-contextualization is odd, because you're put in the position of being one of the family members without any knowledge of who they were; because the albums were produced for someone to look at who knew the story. So when you're looking at them on your own, you don't have any context.<sup>76</sup>

Whereas some albums, such as "Miss. F. Stone's Travels Through Italy, 1954" clearly indicate through the captions, the subject matter of the photographs and their sequencing, that the album maker's intention was to tell the story of Stone's vacation in Italy in the 1950s.

Original context considers the "causal" or historical environment in which an album was put together. Taking into account the social, historical, psychological and emotional motivations behind its creation, including both the history of the individual who put the album together and the broader social context in which they did so. "To consider a [family album's] original context is to consider certain information about the [album creator] and about the social times in which he or she was working."<sup>77</sup> Research into the social, political,

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<sup>76</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interviewed by the author, March 29, 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 78.

intellectual and religious climate of the time and place in which the album was put together will provide a much fuller understanding of why it was created and how it was used and received.<sup>78</sup> Further, it provides a framework in which family albums made and used in different time periods, social strata and locations can be brought together intellectually. Without considering such context viewers are left with generic descriptions that are bereft of any specific information. Ingelevics summed up the importance of original context in interview, stating that:

Ultimately, if you don't go into the background and the social context [that the family albums] were produced in, it seems to me you miss an enormous amount of really interesting potential information...It doesn't deny the possibility of enjoying images, it just adds to them, it adds more levels of appreciation and understanding.<sup>79</sup>

Zuromskis makes a similar point in her analysis of the Sheldon Art Gallery's snapshot exhibition where she states that:

Without access to the original contexts of these images, the identities of their subjects, the geographical details of their settings, even the historical moments in which the images were taken are obscured. Yet the orphaned status of these images is central for the collector or curator who seeks to adopt them into the discourse of aesthetics. Curator Olivia Lahs-Gonzalez and collector John Foster demonstrate this by filling the void of concrete historical information with an abundance of their own interpretive context. A series of headings on the walls categorizes the images not by period, subject matter, or photographic process, but by abstract formal taxonomies of “the fantastic,” “posing” and “chance”... [that] seem designed to remove the photograph even further from whatever practical, social context they might have inhabited.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>79</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interviewed by the author, March 29, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Zuromskis, “Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography,” 430.

By seeking to uncover the practical and social context that Zuromskis, Batchen and others call for, a greater understanding of the objects original or 'true' purpose can be obtained. According to Barrett's methodology, original context is not only historical and social context but also an investigation into the psychological intent of the album creator at the time the object was made, as: “biographical and psychological information, including intent, may be useful for one who is attempting to gain an understanding and appreciation of the work in question.”<sup>81</sup>

Let us take as an example one of the family albums the AGO acquired from Dean's collection – *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City*, (fig. 5-10). By analyzing the internal context of this album – the subject of the photographs, the chronological sequencing, titles, dates and captions, one finds snapshot photographs depicting a family of four who, judging by the photographs, immigrated to America in the 1950s or 1960s from Europe. The album opens to a single photograph of the family with their luggage as if they are about to embark on a trip or journey. This particular album has no captions and no title. It contains predominantly black and white silver gelatin photographs with a few faded chromogenic prints. The first few pages include photographs taken from a ship's window photographing the land as the ship departs, followed by images of the family on board the ship, various aspects of the boat and then images of land

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<sup>81</sup> Barrett, “Photographs and Context,” 61.

and what appears to be the boat reaching its destination. The album then switches to snapshots of the family in a busy, large, American city. Judging from the buildings, parks and beaches that the family has photographed themselves in front of, one suspects that the family is now in New York City. The album continues to reveal snapshots typically found in a family album such as Christmas dinners, happy family leisure time such as fishing and picnics and the new car. Although there are no written captions or a title, by looking through the album itself (internal context) the snapshots appear to be placed chronologically giving the viewer a sense that the story the album's maker was telling was that of the family settling into their new home in America.

This seems fitting if we consider the original context of the time period the album appears to be from, as many Europeans immigrated to America after the Second World War. Considering this is of key importance because, according to Barrett's model, “[o]riginal context is history: social history, art history, and the history of the individual [album] and the [creator] who made it.”<sup>82</sup> Analyzing original context also means considering the *intent* of the album maker – that is, the motivations behind the objects' creation. One can infer, then, that the intention of the album creator was to document and narrate the family's successful move from Europe to the United States.

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<sup>82</sup> Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs*, 79.



Fig. 5. *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City*, c. 1950s.  
Album, 96 gelatin silver prints, 3 chromogenic prints. 24 x 21.4 x 25.  
Gift of Max Dean. © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.



Fig. 6. *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City*, c. 1950s.  
Album, 96 gelatin silver prints, 3 chromogenic prints. 24 x 21.4 x 25.  
Gift of Max Dean. © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.

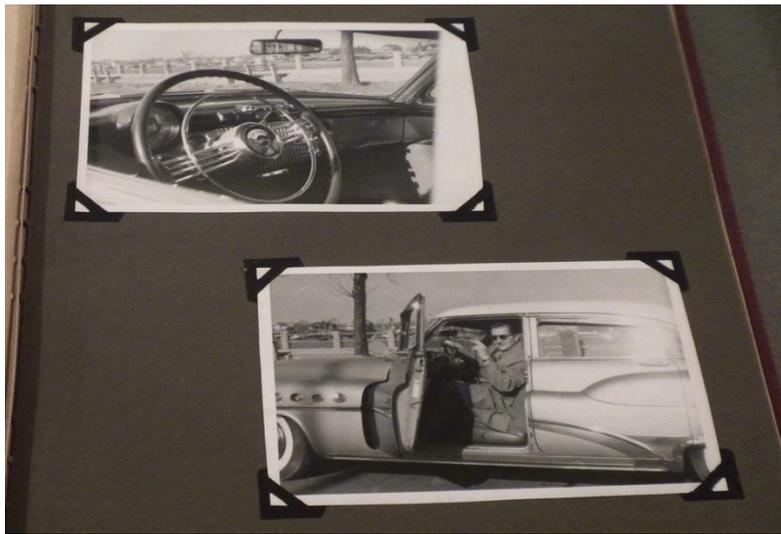


Fig. 7. *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City, c. 1950s.*  
Album, 96 gelatin silver prints, 3 chromogenic prints. 24 x 21.4 x 25.  
Gift of Max Dean. © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.



Fig. 8. *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City, c. 1950s.*  
Album, 96 gelatin silver prints, 3 chromogenic prints. 24 x 21.4 x 25.  
Gift of Max Dean. © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.

It is interesting to note that of the interviews I conducted for this thesis, only one of the interviewees brought up the relationship between family albums and women's history, which seems to be an important part of understanding their original context. It was Kaplan who stated that:

so many of the albums were actually created by women to preserve family memories and it's an increasingly important focus...And I feel that the museum, as a secular environment intent on promoting culture is in a very good position to reinforce the role of women...as creators and makers of beautiful things and records of family life. To me that is very very important.<sup>83</sup>

However, the importance of original context was brought up by many of the interviewees as an important distinction that allows for consideration of who created the album and why; because “it's no longer about the beauty of the object...the interest is about how [the album] was used and what it meant at the time [it was created], and how it reflects on the society that produced it. That's a richer territory.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Daile Kaplan, Interviewed by the author, March 3, 2012

<sup>84</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interview by the author, March 29, 2012.



Fig. 9. *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City*, c. 1950s.  
Album, 96 gelatin silver prints, 3 chromogenic prints. 24 x 21.4 x 25.  
Gift of Max Dean. © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.



Fig. 10. *New Immigrant Family Living in New York City*, c. 1950s.  
Album, 96 gelatin silver prints, 3 chromogenic prints. 24 x 21.4 x 25.  
Gift of Max Dean. © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.

This returns us to the third part of Barrett's model – external context, which calls for the analysis of the presentational environment in which a family album is viewed.<sup>85</sup> The value and meaning of any family album is altered or shifted whenever it is moved to a new location, losing and gaining points of reference along the way. To put it simply, “the meaning of any photograph is highly dependent on the context in which it is presented.”<sup>86</sup> The important thing to remember is that an album can be best understood as the sum of its contextual meanings. As the aforementioned snapshot exhibitions illustrate, to place family photographs into the context of the art gallery, cleanly matted and framed, and to describe them as 'teaching us what art can be' is an interpretation completely alien to the reasons for their creation. Placing an album statically under glass and labelling it simply as “Unknown Photographer, Portraits of an Unidentified Man and Woman, Gelatin Silver Prints, circa 1955” is an interpretation that seems to intentionally limit the album to being an aesthetic object. External context can be evaluated by comparing the current location (presentation) of the family album with internal and original contextual information as well as with previous external contexts.<sup>87</sup> In the case of the latter, consider the variety of external contexts many of the albums from Dean's collection may have circulated through: in the family home, at a garage or estate sale, a flea market, an auction house, a commercial gallery, within a private collection, and now at an art gallery. In each of these

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<sup>85</sup> Barrett, “Photographs and Context,” 59.

<sup>86</sup> Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs*, 79.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

places the albums were valued differently: as sentimental objects used to commemorate the past, as anonymous commodities, as a specific example of a type of photographic object and finally as objects worthy of preservation and public exhibition. Even once in the art gallery, a family album could be presented in innumerable ways; as we have seen, an album can be understood, to list a few examples, as an archive of personal memory, as an anonymous artifact, as a sociological case study, as an art object, or as part of a typological collection. Dean's collection for example, grew out of his fascination with family albums because:

the albums themselves are incredibly personal and they are stories that people had put together...probably the only story that people ever put together in a visual format and sometimes even in a written format...So there was this narrative that existed and this preciousness that I invested in them...<sup>88</sup>

As his collection grew Dean realized that “all the albums I could buy had lost their homes, they were orphans for that matter, they were without their narrator.”<sup>89</sup> Here Dean reveals that the external context or interpretation of an album is determined not only by the socio-historical context in which it is viewed, but the history of contexts in which it has been seen. Hackett made this clear in interview, stating that “you have to think about what the object was made for. It was made for a domestic environment...you have to think about what its life has

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<sup>88</sup> Max Dean, interviewed by the Art Gallery of Ontario, May 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Max Dean, in conversation with the author, Toronto ON, March 6, 2012.

been,”<sup>90</sup> – something that Dean's *Album* project highlights.

The tripartite contextual model offered by Barrett allows for a mode of analysis that encompasses the myriad and often enigmatic motivations and influences surrounding the creation and use of family albums. It provides a way of analyzing and understanding the original function and context of these complex objects. I have therefore used this methodology to highlight how the albums are transformed as they pass from private to public contexts.

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<sup>90</sup> Sophie Hackett, interviewed by the author, March 22, 2012.

## 5. Family Albums within the Art Gallery of Ontario

The AGO has been collecting photographs since 1978. In 2000 a major donation of approximately 1,000 photographs by renowned Czech photographer Josef Sudek was received. This donation prompted the official creation of the photography department. The department – headed by Maia M. Sutnik focused its collecting endeavours on “the ways in which photography intersects with life” – a broad and ambitious approach to collecting photographs that shows the gallery's awareness of photography's extensive impact. While the AGO's photography collection does, of course, include the work of artists, the gallery has not limited itself to such work. For example, the AGO acquired 1,240 press photographs from the British Press Agencies Collection as well as photographs from the Klinsky Press Agency collection of photographs, the latter produced largely for illustrated magazines during the 1930s.<sup>91</sup> Also, in 2003 the gallery hosted *Pop Photographica: Photography's Objects in Everyday Life 1842 - 1969* an exhibition dedicated to everyday objects including jewellery, clocks and even walking sticks embellished with photographic images, many of which were acquired by the gallery. Sophie Hackett, assistant curator of photography at the AGO, explains the broad approach the gallery has taken:

Because photography has had such a huge impact not only on the amount of images produced but on the kinds of images produced, it feels false to limit a discussion, or exhibitions or collections of photography only to works produced by known makers in the

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<sup>91</sup> Art Gallery of Ontario, “About the AGO Photography Collection,” <http://ago.net/photography>.

canon of the history of photography.<sup>92</sup>

The gallery's acquisitions have also included family albums. In 2001 five nineteenth century albums were acquired— a group of decorative photo albums akin to Victorian photo collage made by Carolyn Walker. In 2004 the gallery received a major donation of 495 amateur photograph albums created during WWI. This acquisition allowed the gallery to collect a group of vernacular objects showcasing how, collectively, people embraced technological advances in cameras and papers to document and narrate their experiences during this major international conflict – a fitting acquisition for an institution whose collecting focuses on the medium's intersection with life. Two cartes-de-visite albums – the precursor to the family snapshot album – were acquired in 2008 through the generous donation of Mary Williamson. In 2010 the gallery acquired a group of six albums created by Dr. Charles Townsend Olcott between 1904 and 1925. The AGO learned of these albums simply through Olcott's family, who got in touch with the gallery in order to find a better home for the albums. Similarly, in 2011 four albums donated by Cicely Blackstock were brought into the collection. They depict travels throughout India and East Africa in the early twentieth century and were created by the Slaughter brothers – Charles and Basil (the donor's uncles).

These albums provide an interesting counterpoint to the Dean albums. The large acquisition of WWI albums provide the photography department with

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<sup>92</sup> Sophie Hackett, interviewed by the author, March 22, 2012.

an in-depth look at the creation of private albums during a specific time period and the Olcott and Slaughter albums allow for insight into early vernacular travel albums. In contrast, Dean's collection of family albums span an almost one hundred year period, providing the AGO with a "broad sweep"<sup>93</sup> of album making activity. In addition, their everyday quality focusing specifically on the family provides the AGO with examples of "one of the most ubiquitous forms of photography in the twentieth century."<sup>94</sup> By collecting over 200 of Dean's albums, the AGO is able to make a statement regarding the ubiquity and sheer volume of album-making activity that this collection of objects implies. Further, it allows for comparisons between the albums to be made as they can be historically analyzed in terms of changing cultural norms and differences, as well as the changing use of various photographic processes and materials. As Hackett states:

With a group this size, we can begin to discern the conventions that governed the albums' creation, from material and favoured subjects to persistent aesthetic strategies. The impact of photography in our lives becomes evident as these family photo albums represent personal, individual engagement with the medium and in a narrative form.<sup>95</sup>

By looking closely at the AGO's photography collection, we can see that the family albums acquired from Dean join a collection rich with vernacular photographic objects. Housed within an art gallery, it is a collection of photographs that seeks to highlight the ways in which photography figures in all

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<sup>93</sup> Sophie Hackett, interviewed by the author, March 22, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Sophie Hackett, "Max Dean: Album," <http://www.ago.net/photography> (accessed May 16, 2012).

<sup>95</sup> Sophie Hackett, "AGO Acquisition Meeting Research Report" March 2012.

aspects of life. As Hackett suggests: “because the activity of making albums was such a collective activity for so long is one of the main reasons why we feel it bears bringing into the museum.”<sup>96</sup> As evidenced through the acquisition of the Williamson, Olcott and Slaughter albums – made possible through the generosity of members of the public, the AGO is interested in family albums because they are an important part of the medium's history. The acquisition of albums via Dean is perhaps best understood as such. However, the group of albums in the AGO are also now historically linked to Dean and his month long performance *Max Dean: Album* done in conjunction with the AGO and Toronto's CONTACT Photography Festival and they form a symbolic bridge between the gallery's collection of vernacular photography and its collection of art. This acquisition, then, seems to be a move to further contextualize the work of Dean while simultaneously providing the gallery with the opportunity to collect a group of photographic objects that represent close to one hundred years of album-making activity.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

**6. Max Dean: *As Yet Untitled***

Interactivity, where viewer participation is integral to the work on view, is a consistent element in Dean's practice. Since the 1970s Dean has created various performance based works and robotic installations. In each, viewers are forced to make choices that directly effect the outcome of the performance. More often than not the action required of the audience involves one viewer at a time and the decisions they make are put on display, drawing the participant's actions into a public context.



Fig. 11. Max Dean, *As Yet Untitled*, 1992-1995.

*As Yet Untitled* is a case in point. In the public space of the art gallery viewers are presented with one of over 50,000 family snapshots and have the opportunity to physically intervene in the transient life of these once private photos. First exhibited at the AGO in 1996 and now part of the gallery's collection, *As Yet Untitled* consists of a Puma 550 industrial robot, robotic controller, electronic components, motors, conveyor, paper shredder, metal, plastic and family photographs (*fig. 11*). The centrally located robotic arm is programmed to pick up one of the snapshots and present it to the viewer. "A certain dramatic flair presages the decisive moment"<sup>97</sup> and upon seeing the photograph, the viewer is then forced to decide - fairly quickly (the robot repeats the action three times per minute<sup>98</sup>) - whether to act with compassion and save the object, or to reject it. In order to save the photograph the viewer simply raises one or both of their hands to cover the 'hands' of the robot. Detected by a sensor, the robot then places the photograph in an archival box to the left of the viewer. If the viewer decides they are indifferent to the photograph presented and want to reject it, they decline contact with the robot and the machine drops the photograph into a shredder. The shredded pieces fall onto a moving conveyor belt where they are carried away and deposited in a pile behind the sculpture.

By offering the option to physically engage with the robot, Dean's work involves the public with activities that mimic the gallery's processes itself – of

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<sup>97</sup> Renee Baert, *Max Dean*. Ottawa, (Ontario: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2005), 17.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

“editing, rejecting as well as preserving.”<sup>99</sup> As the robot functions continuously, viewers are reminded that not every image can be saved. If no one is present to decide whether or not to save the family snapshots, the robot relentlessly continues to feed them into the shredder. The sleek, industrial, dehumanized sculpture provides a harsh contrast to the familiarity of the once private images of everyday family life that the robot presents (*fig. 12-13*). While these photographic objects seem mundane and commonplace, they originally held a deep, private and sentimental importance to the individuals and memories associated with them; it is precisely their 'everyday-ness' that viewers can immediately relate to and associate with the photographs. *As Yet Untitled* forces audience members to question the value placed on such objects and to decide whether “these photographs have meaning outside of the living memory of those who took them.”<sup>100</sup>

The dialogue with the gallery that *As Yet Untitled* provokes is continued and extended at the AGO through Dean's donation of family albums and his public project. Dean began by allowing the AGO's photography curators – Maia Sutnik and Sophie Hackett to choose from his collection of over 600 albums for those whose new home would be the public gallery. Limited for practical reasons such as space, the curators combed the collection for those they deemed as having “personality.” Hackett describes 'personality' as “the combination of the quality

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<sup>99</sup> Max Dean, “As Yet Untitled” *Artist Statement*. Art Gallery of Ontario, 1996.

<sup>100</sup> Vid Ingelevics, “Damage Done: Materializing the Photographic Image” in *Prefix Photo* no. 11 (Spring/Summer 2005), pg. 48.

of the photographs, captions, layout, the album itself and the cover. All of these things can add up together to something visually and historically interesting.”<sup>101</sup> Historical context also played a role in this decision process as the curators collected albums from all decades throughout the twentieth century. This allows for analysis of how albums changed over time since “the attempt to use photographic materials to document one's life, [is] something people were engaged in for more than 100 years.”<sup>102</sup> Here, the selection of albums by the AGO's curators parallels what Dean invited the public to do – to provide a home for the albums by volunteering to become their new custodian.

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<sup>101</sup> Sophie Hackett, interviewed by the author, March 22, 2012

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 12. Max Dean, *As Yet Untitled*, 1992-1995.

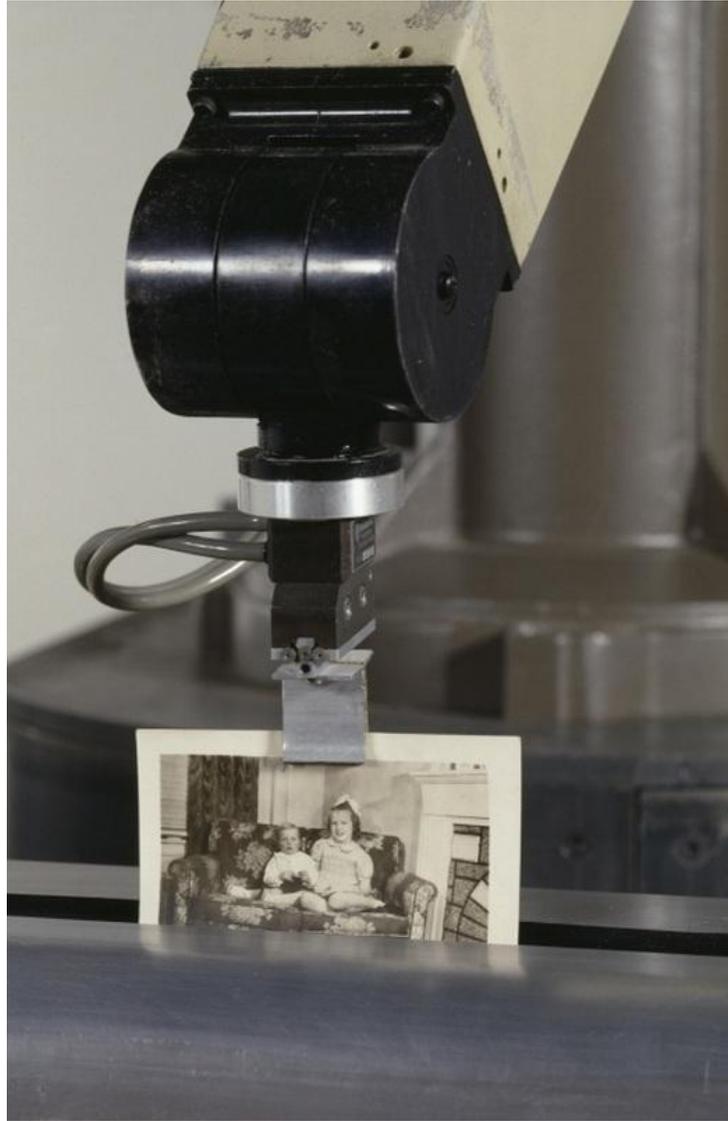


Fig. 13. Max Dean, *As Yet Untitled (detail)*, 1992-1995.

## 7. Dean's Public Gesture

*Max Dean: Album* consists of four parts: the *Waiting Room*, the Foto Bug, the facebook page *Album: A Public Project* and the exhibition of a portion of the AGO's collection of albums from Dean in the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp Gallery, at the AGO.



Fig. 14. *Max Dean: Album*, May 2012 (*Waiting Room*). Images Courtesy of Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. Image Credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

## 7. a    **Waiting Room and Foto Bug**

The *Waiting Room* is a small exhibition space located in the Community Gallery which is part of the AGO's Weston Family Learning Centre. Throughout the space, chairs are placed in rows, some of which extend onto the wall (*fig. 14*). Placed on the chairs are the remaining 380+ albums from Dean's collection. Here, the albums are literally waiting for homes before being loaded into the Foto Bug. Text panels in the *Waiting Room* explain Dean's project and its various aspects and invite viewers to: “look through the photo albums on display,” asking: “where do you think the albums come from? Who and what are the people and places you see in the pictures? What are the stories behind the photographs?” It is in this space that each of the albums (which have their own number) are fitted with their own custom made archival box and provided with a *Max Dean: Album* label (*fig. 15*). This exhibition space functions as a preparatory space for Dean's interactive public give away.



Fig. 15. *Max Dean: Album* – Album label

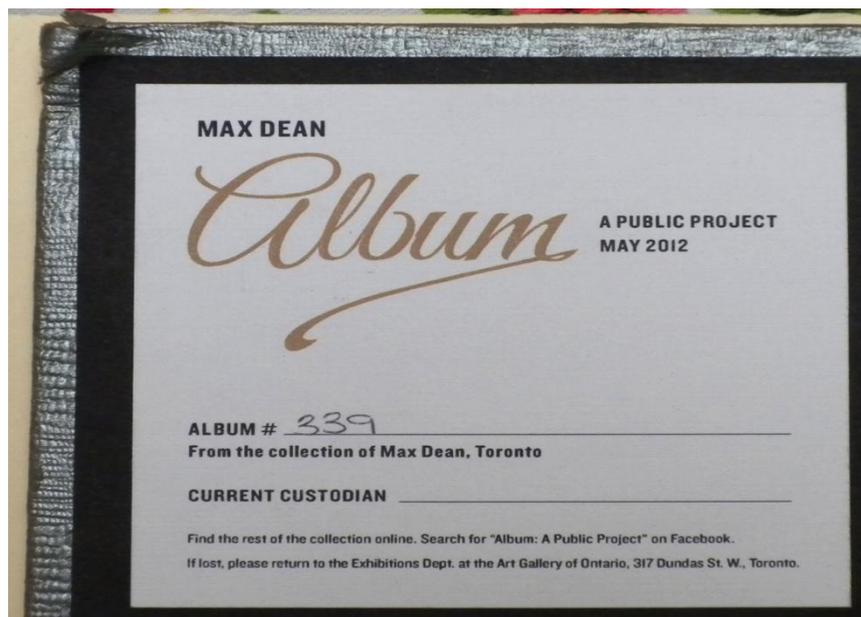


Fig. 16. *Max Dean: Album* – Book Plate

## 7. b Foto Bug



Fig. 17. *Max Dean: Album*, May 2012. Images Courtesy of Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. Image Credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

The Foto Bug aspect of Dean's installation is the heart of his performative gesture, in which he gives his collection of albums away to members of the public willing to take custodianship of the 'orphaned' objects. To create the Foto Bug, Dean specially reconfigured a 1966 Volkswagen Beetle into a mobile display case. Over the course of May, Dean held thirteen performances (plus five at local

Toronto schools) where his collection was displayed, viewed and given away outside the walls of the gallery – on the streets of Toronto. Each performance began by Dean setting up the 'bug' and laying out the selection of albums to be given away (each performance gave away between thirty to forty-five albums). Audience members were welcomed to *Album* by Dean and were then free to approach the Foto Bug, pick up an album of their choice and browse its story by physically engaging with it (*fig. 18-20*). If an album resonated with a viewer they could volunteer to become its new owner by filling out a provided form stating their name, the number of the album they chose and, most importantly, the reason why they chose it. The new owners then had their photograph taken with their album for the second part of the project -the facebook page where all 600 albums are “bonded together”<sup>103</sup> by Dean's collecting. Dean signed all albums and each included a label linking the album to the project, stating the album's number and room was even provided for the name of the new owner on bookplates (*fig. 16*).

By looking at the reasons why audience members chose their respective albums the words of Elizabeth Edwards in her essay “Photographs as Objects of Memory” seem to ring true where she states:

Crucially, the album retemporalizes, it constructs a narrative of history, not merely in the juxtaposition of separate images but in the way that the viewer activates the temporality and narrative through the physical action of holding the object and turning the pages. The viewer is in control of the temporal relationship with those images. Each viewer will have his or her own track through

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<sup>103</sup> Max Dean, interviewed by the Art Gallery of Ontario, May 2012.

the physical album, those pages lingered over, those skipped over, investing the object with narrative and memory, interwoven with private fantasy, fragmented readings and public history.<sup>104</sup>

Each new owner engaged with their chosen album differently, often in intuitive and surprising ways. The owner of album 135, for example, was drawn to it because: “The photos depict a return to a family farm and relatives, something I’ve done with my father.” Such personal and private motivations to adopt an album were seen throughout the project. People chose albums for reasons such as: “I felt an affinity with one of the individuals in the photo.”; “I’ve decided to keep this album because everything I have seen in this album has been a dream of mine to see myself. It inspires me.”; “Reminds me of the albums my parents brought to Canada from India and Africa. Nostalgic.”; “Something about these photos made me feel that they were put together by someone instructed in photography as an art form. I thought it would appeal to my niece, Alicia.”; “One image stole my heart.”; “The memories reflect a lot of my life presently as I am seeing my kids growing up.”; “It was purchased on Sept. 11 in NYC - in 1994 - and represents a time when we thought we were immune to the war photographed in the album.” Despite the anonymity of the albums and their content, people connected with them for very personal reasons.

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<sup>104</sup> Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory,” 230.



Fig. 18. *Max Dean: Album*, May 2012. Images Courtesy of Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. Image Credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

By physically engaging with the albums from Dean's collection and activating their narrative, audience members were able to experience what Batchen calls “the specific character” of snapshots and family albums as a genre of photography.<sup>105</sup> This specific character has two inter-connected parts: the first being the fact that many of the albums and their contents are banal and often predictable, making their familiarity important and intriguing, “as virtually everyone at some point in their lives no matter how remote, has handled a camera and made family photographs so it's something that can be immediately identified

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<sup>105</sup> Batchen, “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn,” 133.

with.”<sup>106</sup> The second character trait is the fact that these objects and images have the power to induce intense emotional reactions in certain individuals. In other words, the specific character of family albums is, according to Batchen, a “contradiction: (boring picture for me, moving picture for you) by way of a theory of photographic reception.”<sup>107</sup> This theory is central to Barthes *Camera Lucida* whose terms *studium* and *punctum* reflect on two functions of family albums and snapshots and on individual's responses to them. *Studium* represents the public knowledge one sees in a photograph and the cultural associations one brings when viewing or 'reading' it. In contrast, *punctum* is a very personal, private and emotional response to a photograph. Barthes describes this as an element of a photograph that 'pierces' and 'wounds'.<sup>108</sup> For Barthes this is best described through the retelling of his reaction to a snapshot photograph of his mother when she was a young child. While to most viewers this would appear to be another photograph depicting two young children (*studium*), to Barthes it conjured private memories and longings for his mother, their life together and her recent death (*punctum*). What Barthes 'saw' in the photograph would be indeterminate to any other viewer of the photograph. This subjective reaction to a photograph is conjured through the personal and “supplemental information”<sup>109</sup> one brings to viewing a photo, as evidenced in the ways in which audience members connected

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<sup>106</sup> Daile Kaplan, interviewed by the author, March 30, 2012.

<sup>107</sup> Batchen, “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn,” 133.

<sup>108</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 4.

<sup>109</sup> Douglas R. Nickel, “Roland Barthes and the Snapshot” in *History of Photography* 24:3 (Autumn 2000): 234.

with Dean's gesture as many of them talked about themselves and their own private feelings through the albums. Considering *Camera Lucida* is essential to this case study because it focuses attention on the multidimensional reception of photographs. As per Barthes' insights in *Camera Lucida*, the Foto Bug portion of Dean's project demonstrates that our responses to these objects and images are fastened to: "one's own experience of and relationship to the subjectivities and events in the photographs."<sup>110</sup> Further, it provides an interactive viewing experience that not only allows viewers to consider the internal and original context of family albums, but their own responses to them, an important aspect of family albums that both Barthes and Batchen emphasize.

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<sup>110</sup> Parsons, "Private/Public," 130.



Fig. 19. *Max Dean*: Album, May 2012. Images Courtesy of Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. Image Credit: Toni Hafkenscheid



Fig. 20. *Max Dean*: Album, May 2012. Images Courtesy of Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. Image Credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

### **7. c    *Album: A Public Project Facebook page***

This portion of Dean's *Album* project consists of a public Facebook page. Here, at least one two-page spread from each album in Dean's collection was photographed and uploaded to the group's page and identified by its album number. The albums acquired by the AGO are also included, so that all of the albums from Dean's collection remain together for online viewing. Album owners were and continue to be encouraged to post further images of their album along with any discoveries of the album's story they have made, such as where it is from, who made it, or anything else they want to reveal about their object.

Victor Mora, who now owns album number 116, used the project's facebook page to post photographs he had taken of his adopted album. Like many family albums, his includes a birth announcement. While browsing the facebook page, another member of the group saw this posting and, through an online search, contacted someone with the same name and found that they were part of the family who originally owned the album. This family – the Andoffs, lived in Toronto in the early 1980s before moving to Vancouver, their home at the time of this discovery. Somewhere along the way they lost connection with this album and it found its way into Dean's collection. Various members of the Andoff family, including Maria (the mother of the family) and Morgen (the young woman whose baby photo was featured on the facebook page), have since posted photographs of the family today as well as narrated photographs from the album

that Mora has included online. By engaging with the album itself (internal context) and the public forum provided by Dean's *Album* project (external context), Mora helped to reconnect the orphaned album with its original owner. In the process, he discovered the original context and story of his album.

A similar finding occurred with David Angelo, who did some research based on the information found in his album (number 247) and discovered that the original owner rowed for Princeton University in 1938. Through this, Angelo was able to get in touch with the album maker's son – Jim Hooper, and sent him some images of the album. They exchanged correspondence and the son found Dean's project “wonderful” and “brilliant” and requested the album back from Angelo who willingly obliged. Upon receiving the album, Jim wrote to Angelo telling him more about the album's creator and story. He revealed that the album was his father's “from his high school graduation, their trip to Henley, some college rowing and then the Navy.”<sup>111</sup> He also spoke of his joy at finding photographs of his great grandfather in the album which he explained were rare “because my father didn't think much of him.”<sup>112</sup> Providing intimate details of the psychological intentions behind the albums' creator that would otherwise be completely unobtainable. He further stated that the album is “a wonderful family heirloom and all the more so for its amazing journey.” Upon returning the album, Angelo told Dean (via Facebook) that “what I have enjoyed is the journey to

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<sup>111</sup> Album: A Public Project, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/171065169666190/>.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

investigate and learn who this person is...”<sup>113</sup>

The privacy issues that these objects raise was addressed by almost all of the interviewees. Elizabeth Smith, the AGO's Executive Director of Curatorial Affairs, for example, stated that: “depending on the age of the albums, privacy issues might arise if the identity of the subjects is known.”<sup>114</sup> It seems that liability is as much an issue as ethics. Ingelevics pondered “what are the moral obligations of the museum at that point?”<sup>115</sup> Kaplan also spoke of the intricacies associated with the public presentation of private family albums stating that:

The personal versus public relationship is very complicated and we see that so much material, for whatever reason, becomes dissociated from family members and this material is collected and exhibited. I wonder if there are going to be legal issues as well as ethical issues that emerge around family histories that for the most part are intra-family, that suddenly become very public. Obviously there are images in photo albums that are really not meant for other people to see. So that re-contextualization is important as there has to be a delicate approach given the fact that material we think can be in the public domain, may in fact have more entanglements and complexities.<sup>116</sup>

This would not often be resolvable, considering that “the family album almost inevitably comes in [to the museum] as an object that has no real or known author, which is an interesting space.”<sup>117</sup> Through Dean's project Angelo was able to make decisions as to whether or not to give his album back to the original

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Smith, interviewed by the author, March 26, 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interviewed by the author, March 29, 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Kaplan, interviewed by the author, March 30, 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Vid Ingelevics, interviewed by the author, March 29, 2012.

owner, something that may prove much more difficult for the gallery to do if one of the albums from their collection was or is identified. In the case of the Andoff family album, in an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Maria Andoff told them: “I respect that Victor chose that album, that it spoke to him. That makes me feel it's in good hands. That's the magic of this project, isn't it?”<sup>118</sup> She also stated that “it was definitely a little emotional, too, to think of these things floating around out there all those years. I just kept thinking, how did we miss them, how did they get away?”<sup>119</sup>

The fact that these albums float through various external contexts is made evident in Dean's project, not only through the research and stories new owners discover and share online but through Dean's fastidious collecting habits. Inside many of the albums owners will find a simple, white, 4 x 6 inch index card (*fig. 21*). On these Dean has written the date and location that he acquired the album. These cards provide insight into the journey the object has taken since its making. The album I adopted from Dean's project, for example, originated in Safety Harbour, Florida in the 1960s and was brought into Dean's collection in 1994 in New York City.

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<sup>118</sup> Murray Whyte, “Do You Recognize These People?,” *Toronto Star*, May 20, 2012.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*



Fig. 21. Max Dean: Album A Public Project - Provenance Card

**7. d Max Dean: Album Exhibition in the AGO's Isadore and Rosalie Sharp Gallery**



Fig. 22. *Max Dean: Album*, © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.

From May 5th to September 9th, 2012, the Art Gallery of Ontario exhibited a selection of their collection of albums from Dean (*fig. 22-25*). Located in the gallery's second floor Isadore and Rosalie Sharp Gallery is an intriguing and compelling display of twenty-nine albums. Here, like many museum and gallery displays of family albums, viewing has been limited to one album page or spread as the albums were shown in display cases. In many instances, the albums were propped open with other albums, creating a unique and aesthetically appealing presentation that also alludes to the volume of album-making activity (*fig. 23*). The accompanying text, like that in the *Waiting Room*,

describes the various aspects of Dean's project and of the albums move from his private collection to the gallery's public one – providing insight into the external contexts the albums have circulated through. Further, the text invited viewers to participate in the Foto Bug and to view the facebook page while reminding that family albums “reveal the personalities of the album makers who built these stories from their photographs.” This sentence provokes viewers to consider the original context in which the albums were made by considering the personal motivations and influences that may have gone into their construction. Perhaps this is what Hackett was responding to when she said that acquisition decisions were responses to the 'personality' of the albums.



Fig. 23. *Max Dean: Album*, © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.

While the albums in this exhibition are, for the most part, statically displayed, Dean's multifaceted project – made clear in the accompanying text panel – provides a balance or counterpoint to this viewing experience. Viewers have the opportunity to engage with the project via its online portion. And for those who were able to see the exhibition in May, to visit the Foto-Bug where they had the exceptionally unique opportunity to decide whether or not to participate in Dean's public gesture.



Fig. 24. *Max Dean: Album*, © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.



Fig. 25. *Max Dean: Album*, © 2012 Art Gallery of Ontario.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has sought to outline the issues and difficulties that surround the public presentation of family albums, particularly looking at the problems that arise when these objects are relocated to the public space of the art gallery. The critical literature surveyed in conjunction with the interviews brings one to the realization that providing as much context as possible is of paramount concern when private family albums are publicly displayed. The physical characteristics of these objects as well as their mysterious and emotional origins make family albums a challenge to understand, interpret and exhibit. Interviewees responded to this by stressing the importance of viewing as much of the album as possible, while championing the use of computer screens to showcase the entirety of an album through the use of digitization. The inability of museums to exhibit albums and provide viewers with the opportunity to physically engage with and experience these objects in a manner similar to the way in which it was used in the home was lamented. Barrett's methodology of analysis using the internal, original and external context of photographic objects provides one way of addressing these challenges by stressing the importance of examining the object itself, the historical and social climate surrounding its creation, as well as the maker, and finally, the albums' presentational environment.

Using Dean's *Album* project as a case study provides a way to highlight and analyze a creative interpretation and solution to the problems of publicly

contextualizing family albums. Dean's recirculation of the album is a playful intervention into the life cycles of these objects and by applying Barrett's methodology to this performance, one finds that the contradictions regarding the contextualization of these private family albums in the public space of the art gallery have been overcome. By collaborating with Dean for the CONTACT festival, and, essentially, by participating in his practice, the AGO was able to provide their audience with the opportunity to appreciate the complexities of albums by providing a multifaceted participatory experience. This allowed for engagement with the objects themselves, a stark contrast to the static presentation of albums that generally occurs. More specifically, Dean's public performance gave viewers the chance to physically and emotionally engage with the albums, allowing them to experience the performative intimacy albums demand. In doing so audience members were able to enact the albums' narrative by turning its pages and viewing its contents in entirety. Further, through Dean's particularly potent display context, the Foto Bug, viewers were provided with the unique opportunity to contemplate the ways in which the albums have circulated through various external environments, how their value and meaning changes according to this circulation and to continue that circulation by taking them home – a gesture that would otherwise be impossible for the gallery to envision on its own, let alone realize.

Dean's dual role as artist - collector allows him the freedom to construct

such an unorthodox and multifaceted installation. The online aspect of Dean's project, which has further extended the public lives of the albums and his collection, encourages audience members to participate in researching the albums and contribute their findings to the collective knowledge base. This not only acknowledges the problem of lack of social context, it addresses it by looking for answers back in the social realm, creating an open-ended productive system rather than a reductive piece of text. Through Dean, the AGO was able to provide their audience with the opportunity to interpret the albums for themselves and through the various aspects of Dean's public gesture, provoke them to examine the internal, original and external contexts of these objects. It is inevitable that the art gallery cannot fully make up for the loss of the personal context of these objects and perhaps we should not just focus on reconstructing it; we should also look for generative solutions that provide new ways of personally connecting with them. Dean's *Album* project effectively demonstrates that family albums are objects of interpretation and creatively evokes both the private functions and public meanings of albums. The *Album* performance allowed new private functions to be added to the albums that were given away, furthered the audience's understanding of these objects, and, through his rigorous cataloguing, as well as the documentation and digital archiving included in the project, added to their public meaning.

The public meaning of the albums donated to the AGO is also further

enriched by their connection to this gesture and to the albums given away during the performance. This is no longer just a collection of family photo albums in an art gallery, as they are associated with Dean's practice, with his public gesture and with other objects inside and outside the AGO's collection. They are a complex group of albums whose meanings have been made available and added to so that we can better understand their histories and our own fascination with them.

## **9. Appendix – Interview Transcripts**

### **Geoffrey Batchen**

School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies – Victoria University of Wellington. Writer and Curator focusing on the history of photography.

**Email interview March 17, 2012:**

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*The collecting of photo-albums by art museums is rationalized the same way they rationalize the collection of religious paintings by people like Raphael; the museumification of an object changes that object. Anything collected by an art museum becomes an art work, whether it likes it or not. It has to be recognized that many many of the photographs collected by art museums were never intended to be seen in such settings. So a strong precedent for such collecting has already been set.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*The main issue is the question of how they are going to be used and displayed. They are obviously going to be changed by being shown in an art museum, but HOW are they going to be changed, and to what extent?--that is the question that needs to be contemplated.*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*The personal element adds something different to the usual issues museums face (see above). Privacy issues will need to be taken into account. And then there's the practical issue of only being able to show one page at a time. Digital media can help restore some sense of movement to an album. But nothing can restore the sound of the laughing voices of loved ones to the experience of an album.*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*It would depend on how the album is shown and treated. Art museums have become de facto depositories for the history of photography (rather than libraries or social history museums, or photo-specific museums) so it stands to reason that albums would eventually be added to their collections. They could show them as erstaz art (as 'folk art') or they could try and be more true to their original functions. Either way, they are going to be transformed.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*It could help, as it adds elements drawn from ethnography and sociology to the intellectual mix.*

**Alison Nordström**

**Senior Curator of Photographs, Director of Exhibitions – George Eastman House,  
International Museum of Photography and Film**

**Telephone interview March 19, 2012:**

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*There are a number of different rationales. Family albums are so common they have influenced other types of photography. The MET collects rare albums such as African families and albums of famous people.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*Albums come with no information. They are unknown. In some cases we do know the family but this is rare. There is a list serve containing a list serve of personal collections that discusses albums. Albums are challenges – are they singular or an aggregate? What level do we catalogue these at?*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*Facsimile albums can be used. I had an album digitally reproduced and its weight and 'heft' was made the same. It was placed in the gallery next to the vitrine of the original object. It was expensive to do this. Another time, there was an album in a vitrine where the pages were turned once a week. The entire album was also digitally reproduced which viewers could view via an ipad which was also placed next to the vitrine. This was reasonably inexpensive but there was a loss of haptic qualities. Albums have been unbound and framed. Sometimes a particular spread was only exhibited. Both sides of album pages have been made visible. The more of the album that is visible the better. In the "Playing With Pictures" exhibition everything was digitized. It was a good use of digital technology.*

**Can you tell me about the exhibition you curated in 1997 entitled *Telling Our Own Stories; Florida's Family Photographs*?**

*Family albums were included. The point of the exhibition was to comment on the quantity of albums and photographs in the home. Not all objects were exhibited. Objects were taken from the family home and placed in the gallery in the same manner, such as a shoe box of snapshots: you couldn't see all of the snapshots in the box but you could see how many there were. One of the biggest challenges of this exhibition was the family trust. Students worked with the families to inventory their objects for a year.*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*No. Albums are low culture but are not intended to be art.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*Using the methodology of Visual Culture is one way but it is not the only way. It has limits. There are many ways to exhibit and you must choose the methodology you want.*

**What role do family photograph albums play within the context of the George Eastman House collection? What do you (or would you) look for when choosing an album for your respective institution? Why would you choose one over another?**

*We have over 2,000 albums. Condition is a factor. If it is in poor condition the photographs must be exceptional. We have typical albums and anomalous. Look for the base line and the unusual. If an album was presented to us from Fiji and an album from upstate New York we would take the Fijian album because it is unusual. If it is unusually well made we would also want it. Does it have a mix of processes or a captivating story? For example, GEH has an album that tells the story of one picnic.*

**Sophie Hackett**

Assistant Curator, Photography – Art Gallery of Ontario

**Interviewed March 22, 2012:**

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*You have to take a step back and look at photography's place in the museum and in art history which has always been uneasy. As Maia and I have talked about on a number of occasions, the approach we have taken to photography has been on a much broader level. Because photography has had such a huge impact not only on the amount of images produced or the kinds of images produced, it feels false to limit a discussion or exhibitions or collections of photography only to works produced by known makers in the canon of the history of photography. There is a lot that happens at the fuzzy edges and I think that a lot of institutions do collect snapshots and albums but still maintain that they are collecting capital A art. While the photography collection at the AGO is certainly in an art museum, what we are looking at is the broader swath of photographic activity and its aesthetic impact on not only artists but life in general, hence the collections of press photography and vernacular material. To me it's not really useful to call it art or not art, it's all photography, it's all photographs. We think a lot about the history of the medium and we think a lot about moments in that history, such as when illustrated magazines started to boom in the early twentieth century and what that meant for our world, it really was a transformational moment. So for us to think about press photographs produced for that context, there is a lot to discuss: from the point of view of the subjects, from the point of view of technology, from the point of view of capital H history as well as small h history. Every art institution thinks about visitors and their audience, and photography is one of those mediums that, especially right now, a lot of people feel comfortable with. By collecting and exhibiting this broad range of photographic material, it's an opportunity for the AGO to involve its audiences in novel ways.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*Certainly in the context of acquisitions, curators have to ask themselves, "Why this object? What does it do in the context of our collection?" Albums are complex objects, it's not just one photographic print, they can hold hundreds of photographic prints, you have the pages, you have the cover, you have the spine, the adhesive... There are several factors to consider: 1. Quality of the images, 2. Are there captions – are they humorous? What is their relationship to the images? 3. Page layouts – layout plays a huge role in how people structured those visual narratives, sequencing... their change over time... standard slots or open*

*pages that allow for more personalized arrangements, some people trim the pictures into shapes, into maple leaf shapes or they will cut out the face or the body and paste that on the page, those can be quite dynamic and visually interesting. It's not just what's within the boundaries of each, single photographic image, it's how the photographs together build a story. As for the 237 albums the AGO acquired, Maia and I assessed them for 'personality' – the combination of the quality of the photographs, captions, layout, the album itself, the cover – all of these things together can add up together to something visually and historically interesting. I looked at some albums yesterday and it's clear in one that someone was producing or developing their own pictures and prints and there are chemical stains all over them, and yet in the context of this album, it adds another interesting feeling to the album. You have to think about what the object was made for. It was made for a domestic environment - most likely. The "Home Juice Co" album was made for a corporate environment so we have a few things like that.....but you don't assess a press print the same way you assess a fine art print and the album falls somewhere in between, you have to think about what its life has been. And its condition will reflect the life it's had. If that doesn't stand in the way of discussing it and displaying it, if it doesn't get in the way of the image and reading the image, greater allowances can be made for condition in these cases. They can be quite poignant objects and quite homely objects in a way but that's part of it...that's part of what we think about when we think about an album. One other criterion with albums that's important to think about is a certain aesthetic failure that is inherent to their character. The attempt to use photographic materials to document one's life, it's something people were engaged in for more than 100 years. The success of the images really varies. Some people had an eye and others clearly didn't. The accidents or the unintended results are sometimes what provokes a certain fascination. We make allowances for that too. There are also conservation and display considerations because of course you can only show one page at a time but increasingly with new technology it's becoming easier to display the material in other ways, or simultaneously in two ways or more.*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*I guess the possibility always arises that a viewer could see a family member in an album and we would have to deal with that on a case by case basis. I wouldn't say it's a problem so much but a consideration that is unique to albums. Typically, if someone has a family member depicted in an artwork and it comes into a museum collection, it's because the work is by a well-known artist or because the family wanted to place it there. With albums, we don't often know why they became unmoored from the family context. Hence the potential for a surprise discovery by a family member. But the biggest challenge in my mind is: how do we*

*display these objects in a way that is really satisfying to the visitor? By opening albums to one page in a museum case, you are denying visitors the opportunity to flip through its pages. Usually albums are touchstones for stories, you sit on a couch and the album sits on your lap and the album maker narrates, say, their travel pics for you. The album is a distinct form – one that is no longer being made – and so we acknowledge its changing and evolving history by accepting this gift [of 237 family albums] into the collection.*

**Given your experience, what have you found to be the most successful method of displaying albums? For *Songs of the Future*, did you turn the displayed album pages weekly?**

*It was not that often. We did it once during the run of the show. We digitized one complete album and put it online. In an ideal world, I would have liked a digital surrogate for each of the three albums in the show. I think one of the nicest presentations I've seen is the Playing with Pictures exhibition that came to the AGO from the Art Institute of Chicago. It was a relatively focused show with about 15 albums. Each one had been fully digitized. Pages in the albums were turned two or three times during the course of the show. The Art Institute had acquired an album that they had put in the exhibition and they had taken it apart for the purposes of the show and then put it back together. One of the other albums from the Musée d'Orsay only existed as single pages, so they had works for the walls. But everything else was in cases. For Chicago, there were three monitors and the relevant albums were placed close to that monitor. You were able to see the full object from front to back with the monitors. The interface was simple and worked quite well. It was an elegant and focused show. Here at the AGO, everything was digitized on two monitors and people did sit and look through them, so people could satisfy their curiosity. I am currently facing putting a show together with our World War I albums and how best can we address that? A discussion will need to happen with colleagues in education and exhibition design.*

**Have you ever had an album fully physically reproduced? High quality scans and weighted - so that you can have the object encased and a full physical reproduction?**

*We haven't done it here. I've seen it done but not particularly well in a gallery in London. I am not sure how long the show had been on when I saw them – facsimiles of 19<sup>th</sup> century albums from India. The pages looked worn by the time I got to see them – obviously they weren't going to be the same as the original objects, but they lacked a certain weight and ease with turning the pages. In theory, it's certainly another good option and I don't have a problem with it. As long as the real object is on view, you have to choose a surrogate. Other options would be to digitize the object and project images but only given the right subject,*

*as a slide show and an album are fundamentally different – perhaps for aerial views, projecting images could be argued as appropriate.*

**I thought that too, what if you videotaped someone looking through an album and projected that? And viewers watched that, mimicking looking at albums ‘at home’?**

*What would be interesting about that is having somebody who knows about the album and its subjects to narrate it. For the WWI albums if an album deals with aerial photography or with a particular battle in the war, it could be a historian or a pilot narrating as they look through the album - adding the voice over element which is always missing when albums are outside their context.*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*I am in no way an expert in folk art but, I feel as though I want to say no to this question. It's tempting with terms like 'vernacular photography' and 'folk art' to say that those are the same. But when you look at the subset of objects there are some crucial differences. Folk art is usually made by a known individual who operates with intention, whether or not they ever expected the work to grace the walls of a gallery. Whereas most photographic objects classified as "vernacular" were created with different functions in mind, the album being a great example. Their value comes from a shift in the history of photography that allows for consideration of a broader range of objects – it's really about an approach, a different framework for what constitutes a history, and what informs the category of photography. The little I know about folk art is something that is made in isolation, someone covering a tree in bottles or their house in bottle caps and they are a lone figure. Whereas vernacular photography is the product of exactly opposite forces, it is a product of mass engagement and collective engagement with the medium. To me that is what is really interesting – it's collectivity. So, to me folk art and vernacular are not akin. Collecting folk art is not going to trouble an art collection, it's not going to trouble the history of art. Whereas collecting the types of photographic objects we collect at the AGO has an impact on how people see - it is a very distinct telling of the history of photography and the stories that we tell about how photography has infiltrated our lives. There is a bit more at stake in collecting this way. It is going against received notions about what the history of photography is.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*I haven't studied in visual culture. I am aware of the field. The rise of that field has allowed a loosening of the same concepts into the history of photography.*

*When I think of visual culture I think of people analyzing images not analyzing objects. I think more accurately what we have done at the AGO has been informed by concepts from material culture as well as visual culture.*

*But what visual culture can do is really only look at the image, not look at the object. And because we are an art museum we are very interested in objects and the life of objects and the context in which they were produced. One of the ways we think about photographs – one of the ways I first engage with an object is asking why the thing looks the way it looks, is it because of the medium of the photographs that are employed in it or how they are used? The person using the technology is also plays a huge role, but you have to deal with the object itself, as you know – since this is the whole foundation of the PPCM program and its partnership with the AGO and GEH. It's becoming a distinct strand of the history of photography, as an approach versus being either visual culture or material culture or art history.*

**You're saying that material culture is more closely related to how you're approaching collecting and how you would contextualize these objects in exhibitions, more than using Visual Culture?**

*Yes. When I think of material culture it's not archaeology, but it's akin to that in that it's reading an object to say something about a time or an instance. It might include archaeological objects but it could also include looking at advertising and many other things. Why photographs look the way they do is something that is the concern of photo historians. Any given person working with a set of photographs might address that question whether working in visual culture or material culture, but the inflection of photo historians is a bit distinct.*

**What role do family photograph albums play within the context of the AGO's collection?**

*Precisely because we accepted this broad definition of what constitutes photography, and what important moments there are in photography, the end of the physical photo album is certainly one such moment. So that is certainly one justification for collecting them, an activity that is no longer pursued in the same form – not to the degree it was in the 1950s or the 1980s. So that is certainly one – changing technology and the impact that has on the ways people remember their lives. Also, they are a good counterpoint to the WWI albums, which go deep in one time period, around one very important conflict in the twentieth century. And they are important because it was the first time soldiers could go off to war with cameras and essentially photograph their own experiences of war in many ways. It's not as if there are heated battle shots, but the impulse to photograph this experience as one of many in someone's life – they are narrated in a particular way. Whereas, the albums we just acquired from Dean, which span about one*

*hundred years, rather than going deep as we did in one area with the WWI albums, we get more of a broad sweep, they cover a different axis. We get to see what kinds of photographs get pasted into albums, from albumen prints, to polaroids, to chromogenic snapshots. We see how the album formats change over time, from cabinet card albums, to crumbly black pages from the early twentieth century, to peel and stick albums from the 1980s. We see the form of the albums changes over time and we see how certain kinds of pictures don't change, in that the subjects don't change. It's still mostly children, birthdays, Christmas, the new car, vacations. Of course, the way people look changes drastically – the cars we drive, and design and fashion changes which can be tracked. You can track world events too from WWI to WWII, Royal visits (which figure largely in the Canadian albums), leisure, like trips to Niagra falls... You get sense of what endures and what changes.*

*And the AGO also owns Dean's As Yet Untitled, which is a piece he made with snapshots. Many artists working in the 60s and 70s such as Barbara Astman, worked with either found photographs, or snapshots, or with images from their own family record. So we start to see it with artists thirty years ago, turning snapshots and albums into material for art making. I think this is also an important thing to consider. We do have works in the collection that reflects this – such as Astman's work and Roy Arden's piece called The Potato Eaters that was drawn from his family photo albums that loosely references the Irish potato famine.*

### **Is Arden's piece a physical album?**

*It isn't – it is a series of very quiet, photographic details of hands and faces and feet, displayed in a grid. But this mining of one's own family photographs is something several artists had done. One of the first shows I curated was called The Found and the Familiar: Snapshots in Contemporary Canadian Art which was at Gallery TPW in 2002. Vid Ingelevics was in the show, as well as Chris Curreri and Sara Angelucci. As mentioned, you see it with Astman in the 1960s and 1970s and then it comes around again with early digital camera use in the 1990s.*

### **Is there an ideal way you would want to exhibit family albums?**

*In my mind albums are very complicated objects. They seem very simple but the more I think about them the more complicated they get. There are two aspects: there are the specific pictures and the specific narratives that get told in specific albums but then there are also the mass of them that are produced. We've tried to signal in photographic installations in the gallery for example, with the Klinsky photographs we put on view in 2008 with our re-opening, we displayed a grid of eighty on a wall, four by twenty, as a way of saying this is only eighty of 18,000, to signal the volume that exist in the collection. As I am picking albums to go on view for Dean's project with the AGO for*

*CONTACT, I will not be able to put that many on view at a time but I will try to signal that volume in some way. I will stack some in the cases so people can see there are more. I don't know an ideal way...you can't overwhelm...because they are complicated objects, different albums will do different things. Some will be on view because of a certain page. Some can be taken apart and placed on walls. I would want to digitize some. Some can be digitally narrated – which you can't do for each one, you have to pick the right ones. You need a lot of help to give the viewers as much access as you can to the albums. I will rely on my colleagues in design and education to help. Perhaps vinyl blow ups of some pages. I think that you have to work harder to animate them, as there is so much to be animated. The storytelling aspects, the narratives that are constructed in a linear and a non-linear fashion, I was looking at an album the other day that on a single page had photographs from 1898, 1928, 1916 – chronology didn't matter to that person. It's hard to know why they would do that - perhaps it was the order in which they received the photographs. What's fascinating about those is that they do leave a lot more to the imagination, in that sense, art does leave a lot to the imagination, it allows you interact with the object or image in that way.*

**Elizabeth Smith**

Executive Director of Curatorial Affairs - Art Gallery of Ontario

Email interview March 26, 2012:

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*I think these can be justified as manifestations of material culture.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*Main issues facing the curator would be judgments of aesthetic merit in addition to the social value of the items, whereas the conservator might find his or her biggest challenges in the low quality or casual nature of the materials.*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*Depending on the age of the albums, privacy issues might arise if the identity of the subjects is known.*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*I don't feel that the albums are necessarily parallel to folk art but see them instead as social documents.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*Collecting and researching these can certainly be looked at through the lens of visual culture. When these items are exhibited, the interpretation surrounding them can make clear the criteria underlying their selection and value from the perspective of visual culture.*

**Vid Ingelevics**

Artist, Freelance Curator, Professor – Ryerson University

**Interviewed March 29, 2012:**

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*I think they weren't until recently. The appearance of vernacular photography is relatively new. They are several things going on. There has been influential critics and writers such as Geoffrey Batchen who has written extensively about vernacular imagery. And there has been an expansion of the territory of academic writing too. Photography has always been a sort of wasteland in terms of the kind of writing of its history, which Batchen has pointed at – there has been a very selective 'historicizing' of the medium. Eventually all of this uncharted territory has come to the attention of a lot of people and I think that is what's really going on now. There has been a sort of movement to really try to map the turf that photography really occupies. Institutions are starting to see that the question isn't really just about art – photography as art. Although it's interesting when you think about what goes on in an art institution, the AGO doesn't collect kitsch paintings, it doesn't collect black velvet paintings, what would a collection of vernacular albums be doing in an art museum? It points to the fact that the idea of the history of photography is changing and it's not an art history. We're not having a history of vernacular paintings, or people who make sculptures out of stones and tin cans on their front lawns - occasionally they may end up in the art museum but it's rare. There is something going on definitely that you're getting at here with the popularization of vernacular. The market has something to do with it too, but I don't think that's the only reason art institutions would be collecting that, but there is an emphasis on the photographic object on the marketplace too, you can see prices on ebay and you can gauge where it's going - and certainly they seem to be gaining some kind of value. There are good questions to be raised – is there a difference that collecting vernacular photography is a symptom in the photography department that differentiates from the way that other art media are collected? So there is something there for sure and it is a good question to ask.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*The first issue is to rationalize why they are doing it. I would be very curious to hear the perspective of curators of photography – what is the reason for that collection? Are they becoming historians of material culture now? Because that's really what I would say the family album would be, which is a manifestation of material culture. And it's really not part of the conventions of photography as part*

*of art history. So really it is a question of what is this a symptom of? Is it a symptom of the market place, is it a symptom of the re-visioning of the history of photography that people like Batchen have been championing, what is this a symptom of exactly? This is the question that I see is being raised. And it should be addressed by the people collecting these albums. What does a family album mean when it's displayed?*

*This reminds me of the history of photography as it first appeared years ago when I was doing research at the Victoria & Albert Museum. When I researched the history of photography in that museum they had a very visionary director at the time – Henry Cole and he saw photography as the future of the museum – this is in the 1850s, and he started something like three or four different collections of photography in the museum and I am wondering if we're going back towards a time like that, where there were many different histories of photography possible to see simultaneously. They had a history of photography as technology, a history of photography as art – these weren't formally histories but they were collections...so these are examples of all the processes. And then there was documentation of the collection itself, so that was the third collection and these collections all existed simultaneously all just being re shuffled in terms of their categories and uses. Sometimes one photograph could exist in all collections. I am wondering – as to the original question you asked, what is this a symptom of?*

**I've never heard anything about these early photograph collections at the V&A.**

*It started off in the 1850s as the 'South Kensington Museum.' It wasn't the V&A right at the beginning. It had all of those different forms and uses of photography. So really the collections were defined by a sort of use of the image at the time. And that seems to be always the problem – or the interesting dilemma with photography, is that it's always being re shuffled according to its use. Certainly some people who are not considered to be artists, such as Atget, whose images were used by painters to copy from, have been re-contextualized. His work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, his work could be seen as another form of vernacular image making – as documentation for painters. The idea has been around for a while obviously of re-contextualizing images all the time and finding new meaning in them at different points in history. Is the family album an attempt to see art in the vernacular or is it an attempt to expand the territory of photography as an interest within the museum. And as we said – it seems out of synch with the way that other territories within the museum are operating in terms of other art forms.*

*The other thing that is interesting is that artists have used vernacular photographs a lot. And one of the ways that art enters into the museum is through*

*artists. Artists have often seen value in the family photographs or snapshots because of their empty-ness and bland-ness and seeming 'normalcy' and everyday-ness made them very interesting to a lot of artists. And also because they weren't seen as art. The whole idea of them as –what exactly was very interesting to a lot of artists. So a lot of artists have brought family photographs or the vernacular usage of photographs into to their work. It's been going on for years starting in the 1950s and 1960s or even early when you think of avante-garde artists of the 1920s using collage and montage from the daily magazines. The idea of the malleable image has been around for quite a long time, certainly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the art world. The photograph has always been of interest to artists, not so much always in the same way. I think the way that the first vernacular photographs have entered into the museum is through artists.*

**I would agree that vernacular imagery entered into the museum in the 1920s with surrealist collage.**

*Yes, it returns again the 1960s and 1970s when a lot of artists were revisiting some of the avant-garde movements. And they were really really staggered by the glut of imagery that happened in the post war period. And also, the movement into photography by conceptual artists is really key. The kind of interest that those conceptual artists have is often in the kind of mundane–ness and banality and its seeming objectivity too. That seeming notion that it was just recording things, so people performed for it or photographed installations or sculptures with it and created things for the photograph - and those record photographs ended up in the museum. So I think that the vernacular use of the image entered into the museum long before it ever realized it was there.*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*I guess it's a question of contextualization. How does an institution chose to contextualize that material? How are they framing that material? What kind of criticality is being brought into the transformation of the album from domestic object and family heirloom and personal history and an icon of subjectivity to suddenly being in a space where it becomes a form of artifact of some kind. But again, the album sort of muddies the waters of the art museum's mandate. The question of whether the museum can address the question of how the waters are being muddied – it's a question of self-reflexivity to some degree, because - is the entry of the family album into the previously understood as art collection, dose that actually raise serious questions about the art there too? Does the family album sort of act as a time bomb, that goes off and suddenly the same criteria you've brought to collecting photographs up until that point suddenly completely changes. Because the family album can't be understood in the same way as an art object. The idea of provenance, authenticity, all these kinds of things that are*

*related to the collecting of art seem to not mean the same thing anymore or seem to disintegrate around the family album. So what does the family album's inclusion doing to the mandate itself? And to what degree is the institution acknowledging what kinds of changes are happening because of the appearance of this vernacular object in the collection? Clearly you can't position it as art - although those kinds of things do happen. Some of the collage work from the Victorians has been positioned as a form of art. So the question of will this result in a re writing in the history of photography? Or will it result in a re-positioning of these objects as aesthetic objects?*

**Does the Vernacular nature of family albums contradict the mandate for collecting artworks within the museum?**

*Well, if the museum doesn't announce or acknowledge that the family album constitutes a different conceptual space than the collecting of artwork has in the past in photography, if it doesn't acknowledge that there is a contradiction. I think it clearly has to address that question of what the place of the album is in the institution and my sense is that it really does call into question the history of the collecting of photographs. To simply say this is another category, but it's another category of what exactly? We don't have driver's licenses' being collected at this point. It's a specific kind of vernacular photography. It's not all of vernacular photography. It seems to be focused on certain kinds of things at this point still, as I said not all uses of photography are necessarily being brought forward, so in that sense it's not totally a material culture issue. It seems like a strange or hybrid space that the family album occupies. It's up to those in the collecting institutions to clarify their motivations and the meaning of those objects when they come into the walls of the museum. It clearly isn't the same as collecting an Irving Penn photograph which has a pedigree. The family album is the complete opposite of that - you'd think. To me it would be part of the role of the curator to make a case of what that album means in that collection. As I said, is it actually undermining the very idea of that collection and the very basis of that collection? Or is there a sort of philosophical side stepping of that issue by creating a new category called 'vernacular photography' in the museum? Is that a band-aid? Is that really going to stop the questions? It really is obvious it really isn't happening elsewhere in the museum. They aren't collecting sculptures made out of old mufflers and they aren't collecting the black velvet bull fighter paintings. So what exactly is going on here?*

*The idea of institutions using photography to fix forms of identity is an interesting question in society too, it's just as interesting as the subjective projection of the family - they're all uses of the medium to project idealized notions of some kind. With driver's licenses, this photo stands for you completely. There is no sort of nuance there. It's not a portrait - it's you. It's meant to be an objective portrait.*

*The family album is just the flip side – it's a heightened subjectivity. So where is the discussion about what the entry of those albums is?*

*I know the AGO has accepted the entry of the albums from Max Dean. It's interesting that it's from Max Dean. There is another layer – an artist's collection. What is Max Dean's position here? Is this considered an artist's collection? Is this another new sub-category of collecting - collecting artist's collections?*

**Yes, and *As Yet Untitled* is part of the AGO's collection...**

*It really is about value. I guess the albums could possibly contextualize Dean's work a bit more. And his obsessions with the kind of pathos with the family snapshots – he's really working that pathos in As Yet Untitled. Because here you are, you stand there and you're treating these snapshots as if they're stand ins for the people and you're executing them or not. So there is a certain level in which he is really milking these photos for their emotional content or potential emotional content and the potential for us to identify on some level with these individuals in the pictures because of the everydayness of the pictures – it's our everyday life that is being depicted. But if that's the answer to the question – that the albums are really there to provide context for Max Dean, then that's another interesting issue, that's really not collecting vernacular, it's just collecting an artist's archives. Is that really what it's about? Are they also collecting albums a part from Max Dean's collection? I know that Maia has an interest in vernacular photography.*

**They do have a fairly rich history of collecting vernacular photography, so, in a sense if you were to look at their collecting history it wouldn't seem that out of place, but it is an art gallery. How would it change if it was the MoMA?**

*Yes, and it goes back to the question of where are the black velvet paintings?*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*I don't think so. Intention is so different in the two forms. It doesn't really strike me that way other than that - the only way that I see any similarities is in the idea of a dominant institution like the gallery or the field of art history making a judgment about something outside of itself that can under certain circumstances enter into that world. It's still really a relationship of hierarchies – folk art is certainly not seen on the same level as a Rauschenberg, who produces folk art like sculptures but who isn't seen as a folk artist of course. The idea of hierarchy of judgment, and inclusion and exclusion is really part of that dynamic. The family album comes in only because someone opens the door. In the same way as*

*someone would open the door to a folk art piece, but they would still occupy their own category within the institution. There is still that attempt that they have to be sectioned off and kept in their place so to speak.*

*That's a good question, but I think the intention of the person producing folk art is a bit different from the person producing the family album. I am just trying to think if there is a parallel, but the parallel, like I said, seems to be more around the kitschy painting but folk art has its own kitschy quality too, it's hard to say where the line actually is. But perhaps a small category of vernacular art has been judged to be potentially admissible under very special circumstances, but not all forms. There seems to be some sort of judgment being passed on work. Where is the "paint by numbers" collection?*

*The idea of visual culture or material culture – because these categories exist now as fields of study, there are people now interested in this material. And perhaps that's part of the reason why there's a shifting in the ground, the kind of academic study that people are doing, maybe as part of their art history studies, might be starting to move across those kinds of territories and are starting to look at the cultural significance of objects as opposed to their aesthetic significance. So when you start to look at cultural significance, it totally starts to turn things upside down. And I think Batchen has been very clear about that. The production of art photography is probably less than one percent of the entire output of photography. The family album would have to occupy a massive amount of space. And there has been an increase in the number of people studying the family album in the last decade as a subject, but it's still not a huge number. I could count the books on one hand, so the flood gates are not that big. But the influence has been in the widening in the kind of objects that are being brought into the field of consideration in the academic world. So that has had some influence for sure. And art historians can't completely separate themselves from what's going on in other academic disciplines, especially ones where there is so much overlap especially in visual culture.*

**Yes, in the last decade there have been a lot of exhibitions on but on snapshots, not necessary albums – although there have been some, but these snapshot exhibitions seem to be part of this growing interest.**

*The idea of people being fascinated by snapshot collections has been around for a while; because there are so many they keep resurfacing. There is this Hungarian guy who collected snapshots from Europe all through the twentieth century which goes back ages and they are all by anonymous makers. And the thing that ties them together of course is odd subject matter. And that's usually what happens with vernacular photography, it gets valued by the subject matter. The stranger the image, the more valuable it is. It's about uniqueness and oddities.*

**There is a documentary film about snapshot collectors, I believe it's called 'Other People's Pictures' and it follows collectors, revealing what they look for and why.**

*There is the term antique dealers use for stranded photographs which is - 'instant ancestors.' There is a strange familiarity about it but at the same time there is something odd about it because you don't know the people at all. That's why re-contextualization is odd, because you're put in the position of being one of the family members without any knowledge of who they were; because the albums were produced for someone to look at who knew the story. So when you're looking at them on your own, you don't have any context. And it can be creepy because it's a weird displacement as if you're in someone else's body without their mind. It's an odd feeling to look at people's snapshots, it's the intention again, they weren't forms of public communication. They were part of private and domestic space, about people's lives within the family. People don't walk around showing off their private photos.*

**Especially the album, it was very much an at home object.**

*So that's another big shift in context when people's private lives are made public. Even though we may not know who they were, it is somebody. And what protects us is their anonymity – the fact that we don't know. Sometimes maybe we do find out, maybe there are some clues as to who it is. But as for the 200+ albums, I don't know if anyone could track down who they were, if someone put a lot of energy into it they probably could through the visual clues start to narrow down who they were and where they were. It may be do-able but it's probably too big a project.*

**In regards to the 200+ albums, there are a few that would probably be easier to track down the creators than others. Also, authors usually title themselves as "me" and so there is often yet another layer of distance created in trying to track down the owner/creator of the album.**

*Think of the possibility of someone walking into a museum and recognizing a family album. What would happen then? It is a really interesting hypothetical question, even around copyright and what not. Whose album is it? What are the moral obligations of the museum at that point? The albums come in as anonymous objects, not authored. The family album almost inevitably comes in as an object that has no real or known author, which is an interesting space.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*It certainly offers a broader context for considering the album because we move*

*quickly beyond aesthetics. You immediately move into social usage and all kinds of questions about the album. We're not studying them as curious images, there is more depth that's brought to bear on the object. The possibility of more depth and being produced through research, questions around production, forms of technology that were used, uses of the albums, the kinds of events depicted, people do a lot of comparisons of albums. There are so many more avenues open for considering the object as socially relevant. In a way, a family album that enters into a collection as an aesthetic object is a very limited thing. We would not be able to bring much more to it than our own sort of emotional responses to the images. Whereas an object that has been studied as an object of visual culture would actually have a fairly broad space to consider. It would offer us a lot of thought that might reflect back onto our own albums. It seems a more inclusive and comprehensive space for the viewer. In a way it becomes much more like an artifact in a history museum. In a way, what I see that being like is going to a history museum like the ROM and you find pottery shards that were used 3,000 years ago in ancient Greece – the family albums starts to acquire that kind of status as a visual cultural artifact. It's no longer about the beauty of the object, now the interest is about how it was used at the time and what it meant at the time, and how it reflects on the society that produced it. That's a richer territory. And albums can be very beautiful, they have beautiful covers, someone could have done a gorgeous job of arranging the photographs, there are a lot of levels on which we can appreciate them as designed objects. Ultimately if you don't go into the background and the social context they were produced in, it seems to me you miss an enormous amount of really interesting potential information. I think that's a really great basis – the artefactual nature of these objects, it's really where their greatest interest lies to me. It doesn't deny the possibility of enjoying the images it just adds to them, it adds more levels of appreciation and understanding.*

**Daile Kaplan**

Vice President & Director of Photographs – Swann Auction Galleries

**Telephone interview March 29, 2012:**

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*From my vantage point and, doing a lot of scholarly research into vernacular photography, particularly in relation to Pop Photographica which I continue to collect and develop and hope to do a book about it, seems to me that the relationship of low and high culture, popular and visual culture is something that is very much in transition. You may be aware that maybe ten years ago, Kurt Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik co-curated an exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art called 'High and Low' in which they examined this cross current. And while the exhibition didn't really focus on photography very much, when we look at photography from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of the Kodak camera we see there was an amateur sensibility associated with picture making where out of focus, skewed angles, all the sort of thematic grammar associated with modernist photography of the 1920s is really being introduced. The so called mistakes associated with amateur sensibility and vernacular photography are embraced by Moholy-Nagy and Kertesz and all the great fine art photographers. Typically, there has been a misunderstanding about how high culture trickles down to low or popular or mass sensibilities, I think in fact it's the other direction. The idea of family photo albums and images that relate to everyday life, we see the sensibility in Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg and I think that they were very much inspired by press imagery and the banality of images that appeared in the popular press, and Rauschenberg - very much inspired by the sort of gap between art and everyday life... a very dynamic relationship...and that as the sort of practice of making art has become a lot more wide spread with more programs devoted to painting, photography and sculpture around the world, this idea of how everyday life influences art making is going to become more and more dominant.*

*The role of the collector in selecting particular types of imagery and albums that reflect sophisticated sequencing and notions of display, obviously contextualize that material very differently.*

*But I think you hit on something very important which is that the contents of the album are being done by anonymous makers. Forty years ago when photography was first being repositioned as an art form, and a marketplace for photography was developing, there was incredible resistance and the field was seen as illegitimate and as a bastard art form because it relies on a mechanical device.*

*Today, this is increasingly laughable with digital technology trumping technique in so many regards. Now there is this recognition of photography by professionals in the museum and by collectors; there is a growing recognition that the maker of the photograph needn't be famous. That idea of the anonymous artifact whether it's a folk-art artifact, whether it's a prehistoric sculpture, all of this is beginning to link up so that photography, in the new stratum, if you will, has facilitated a kind of openness in relation to interpreting other types of photographic expression. I would say also, that the interest in the photo-book, the photo mechanically published, printed, volume – libraries of photo books, the artists books by Ruscha and other figures of the 1960s and 1970s, that too links up with the photo album. There is recognition that they are not that dis-similar. There are a number of factors that I think are contributing to this repositioning of vernacular photography. And obviously the photo album, as a cohesive form of expression, is very important to the idea that so many single vernacular photographs were removed from albums, disrupting the integrity of the album, the narrative of the album, which just reinforces the importance of leaving the album intact.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*A primary issue is how to preserve them and then of course to display them. Because, like a book one is somewhat limited by the manner in which the album can be presented; it can be open to a double page and it can be opened in such a way that a single page is featured. So I feel that the new technology is going to not only reinvent the book, but allow curators to look at new forms of display where the actual artifact will be complemented or enhanced by digital representation - that's one issue of concern. It's also important for the albums to serve as a bridge between the department of photography and other disciplines in a museum. Photography is increasingly an interdisciplinary form and it is very much enhanced by dialogue with other forms including material culture. And to recognize that there are going to be images that may relate to the history of fashion, there may be images that may relate to the history of automobiles, an approach to images and the album – especially women's history. So many of the albums were actually created by women to preserve family memories, and it's an increasingly important focus because so much of the emphasis on women's history and feminism especially in this country where we were in the middle of a political culture war is again being overwhelmed by religious fundamentalism. And I feel that the museum, as a secular environment intent on promoting culture is in a very good position to reinforce the role of women, not only in the home but as artists, as creators and makers of beautiful things and records of family life. To me that is very very important.*

*As the fragility and historic aesthetic and commercial value of these albums changes overtime, they are valuable books and it's going to be less likely that scholars will be in a position to handle them the way that a lot of materials were readily available twenty years ago or even ten years ago. So having this sense that technology can foster that scholarly awareness with all of the new software being developed, creating an experiential relationship to the material is really really important.*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*That's a really interesting question because, again, just as we saw with the 'high and low' relationship, the personal versus public relationship is very complicated and we see that so much material, for whatever reason, becomes dissociated from family members and this material is collected and exhibited – I wonder if there are going to be legal issues as well as ethical issues that emerge around family histories that for the most part are intra-family that suddenly become very public. Obviously there are images in photo albums that are really not meant for other people to see. So that re-contextualization is important but there obviously has to be a delicate approach given the fact that material that we think may be in the public domain, may in fact have more entanglements and complexities. But I feel that that role of the curator as a champion of culture and understanding and enrichment of everyone's life is in a very unique position to promote photography and visual culture, to foster an awareness of visual literacy and to use something as basic and fundamental as the family photo album to engage in these programs. It's a very wonderful link to material that may not be as popular today as it was as recently as it was ten years ago. But given the new interest in scrapbook making and book making, I think that this material is ideally suited to engage in new dialogue about visual literacy.*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*I just keep returning to the idea that photography is ideally suited to relate to a multitude of disciplines, book making, folk art, African American art, native art, these are the spokes of the wheel and photography is at the centre of this wheel and it's so young as an art form and as a documentary form, where is it going to go and how is it going to evolve in a world where there seems more and more focus, at least amongst collectors, in contemporary art and popular culture and not more of a connoisseur's medium of photography and how artists of the twentieth century are using photography as a form of self-expression not as a branding device.*

*To go back to your question, I don't think of the album as a form of folk art but I*

*suppose it would depend on the album. There must be numerous examples of albums where the binding has been laboriously created and the pages may have design features but the idea that snapshots are taken and then arranged in a sequence, that to me doesn't really reference folk art, there might be a superficial relationship, but again, the making of art, the practice of art, is a very dedicated, singular process, even if someone is an outsider artist, there is an obsessive quality and drive. A lot of albums were created with a very different intention, sometimes as I said an artistic intention, but primarily as records, as documents and as a creative endeavor depending on the person. But as a form I don't really see albums as an example of folk art or as paralleling folk art.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*Visual culture is a pretty broad topic and from where I sit the role of classical photography and the idea of black and white, poetic, intimate, emotional, personal, small format photographs are very much directly allied with photography. And I would hate for photography and photographic practice to be subsumed by visual culture. I think visual culture is an important discipline and again, from the vantage point of being involved in photography, there is still so much work to be done and contributions to be made and new histories and expansion of the canon to be developed. My concern is that we not lose sight of that, that photography maintains its autonomous status and continues to be addressed as a separate form, but yes, to look at these cross currents and interdisciplinary connections is increasingly important – so it's sort of striking that balance.*

**Does the Vernacular nature of family albums contradict the mandate for collecting artworks within the museum?**

*No, I think they are very closely allied. The notion that the museum is a repository of again, high art is a dated proposition. The sense that museums are focusing or have focused on hiring star architects, to build fabulous institutions that are attractive and look great when most of the public are afraid to walk into a museum because they don't have the skill set or the motivation, so I think the idea of vernacular culture and how these popular forms make art accessible is a very timely idea because museums need to expand their resources and their visiting public and their demographic to survive and museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have to reinvent themselves because high culture is not really of interest in the same way it was a hundred years ago, especially with the internet and the ability to sit at home and visit anywhere in the world virtually. So this relationship between vernacular culture and fine art production and high aesthetics is certainly a part of how that model needs to be reinvented.*

*Again, I think it's about creating new relationships and new contexts and in many ways photography is the perfect vehicle for that because everyone at some point in their lives no matter how remote, has handled a camera and made photographs so it's something that can be immediately identified with versus painting or sculpture or any of the other types of art making. I am very much a populist and really believe that as much as I love going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and being transported to other cultures, other times, having an opportunity to look at materials from the vantage point from real admiration and appreciation. I've spent my ten thousand hours learning my field, I know my field, and I bring what I like to think is a very sophisticated if not special approach. I am lucky to have had this marvelous professional life which has so influenced and informed my personal life. How can other people do this? How can the general public be made aware of this and recognize it's available for everybody and it's there for the taking and it can really really change your life.*

*Look at Pop Photographica... what did I do? I became interested in looking at three dimensional, decorative and functional objects that are all around us. What I managed to do was connect the dots – it's being aware that the stuff of everyday life connects to the stuff in the museum and how can we link up those new contexts? – By being mindful. And just to simplify it – why hasn't there been a show about Andy Warhol and press photography? - Or about Robert Rauschenberg and family and news imagery? When an artist is presented in a museum, there may be a re-evaluation of their position in the canon of art, but there is often little interdisciplinary focus. The Tate has made a big deal and a new platform where photography and painting and sculpture are exhibited in tandem. I think that is an important new context that institutions like museums where departments typically work autonomously work together to begin to position art works from the vantage point of how does one artist influence another? How does Robert Frank's work influence Robert Rauschenberg's work? There are sometimes really interesting visual connections but they are not often executed.*

**Have you noticed any parallels between the market's interest in vernacular objects specifically albums, with the museum's interest?**

*Definitely. We've been selling albums since the 1990s. They have garnered increasingly greater and greater interest. Initially, I think the focus was collectors were buying these albums and then often bringing them to museums with the excitement that collectors generally have and educating a lot of museum professionals. But at the same time there are always really brilliant curators that are always looking at everything. And so this material has been in museum collections for years.*

*We just sold a crime album in our February sale. It brought many times its original estimate. It was bid on by collectors and institutions and that was very exciting. As far as I know that's probably a record for a vernacular album. It was a California mug-shot album, with very artful material and display. We are interested in positioning Swann's as a go to place for vernacular material and continue to look at all iterations of it from news photos to Pop Photographica, to pictures by lesser known artists like William Snowflake Bently and other figures who made photographs because they had to –they were obsessed to do so.*

*To tell you more about the album it had 40 pages of serial photographs: criminals from 1908 and 1920 in San Francisco, a total of 700 photographs. We recognize that the album craze has definitely hit everyone, curators and collectors are completely on board.*

**Martha Langford**

Associate Professor, Research Chair and Director, Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky  
Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Canadian Art  
History* – Concordia University

**Telephone interview April 11, 2012:**

**Given that most family albums are not considered to be art, how might collecting family albums be rationalized by collecting institutions such as art museums?**

*They are being rationalized because of a growing interest in vernacular photography. And I suppose it follows a general pattern of interest in folk art and story-telling. There are certain trends that develop in thought and at the moment the effect of photography on visual culture and on people's experience and definition of what it is to have an image and to be looking at it. People and curators do feel that that backdrop to this is family photographic experience. I think it's important to be careful in defining an album as a family album – a point I made in *Suspended Conversations* where my research seemed to confirm that individual voices are reciting family experiences, their life within a family. They really have authorial qualities that are in the legitimate function of study in the art museum, as well other kinds of museums such as museums of anthropology and so forth.*

**What do you consider to be the main issues facing curators and collections managers when acquiring family albums?**

*Which one do you choose? The biggest problem that people encounter is that they are looking at an object where originality may not be as important as creativity, where the kinds of standards and criteria are not well established. The biggest problem then becomes a tendency to build collections based on what is already in the collections. You see this in certain kinds of essays that are written to testify that certain kinds of albums in the Metropolitan Museum or the San Francisco Museum, where the curators are drawing comparisons, they are saying 'oh look this is just like a Lee Friedlander' or 'a Diane Arbus.' I think that is the biggest issue or problem. It's not a matter of intentionality it's just a matter of creating such circularity within a collection – they already have Diane Arbus' work in the collection so the album is used to complement that work in the collection and that is really not a good way to think about vernacular photography.*

**What problems do you think arise when private family albums that were created for the home are collected by a public institution for display?**

*The biggest problem first of all is that the object cannot be displayed within the way that it was used within the family - I think that's the obvious problem. In a*

*sense what you get is a fetishizing of the object, as it sits under glass – open to a certain page, maybe some copy prints are made of other things, but it's not at all like holding the object and being able to turn the pages. It doesn't set up that imaginative spark that I was able to enjoy in writing Suspended Conservations because I had the objects in my hand or in my lap or on a table in front of me and I could immerse myself in the albums. So that is certainly a problem. It's just looking at the object and choosing the most exciting or – the dreaded word – 'original' pages or spreads in the album. And it doesn't give you a sense of familiarity or the banal experience of many many of albums spreads which is in fact the real glue of albums. So there is definitely a loss there. On the other hand there is a greater loss when these things are sent to the shredder.*

**Do you consider the collecting of family albums to parallel the collecting of folk art?**

*It does remind us of the interest in story-telling and folk art that developed in the 1960s. At the same time people were beginning to collect snapshots and snapshot albums. It was all in the same school of thought, trying to ascertain what the people were doing. What were people exchanging and seeing together as part of their photographic experience? I don't want to pin the album as an object of [folk-art] because there are all kinds of albums. There are albums that are carefully considered by someone who could be a 'Joseph Cornell' of the album world. I think the question of what is driving the interest in collecting albums (and vernacular), is that there is a parallel to collecting interests in the 1960s. And I go back to that because it was literature that was helpful to me in the sense that people who were collecting folk music and folk songs, and going to the Ozarks and making recordings and going to the throat singers and making recordings. Those people who were doing that were going through some of the same processes in trying to figure out what kind of museum structure and collecting structure was going to work for these things that were not symphonies or operas. So that's more of a parallel.*

**Visual Culture has been proposed as an ideal way to study and analyze family photo albums. Do you think this can apply to collecting and exhibiting such albums? If so, how?**

*It's a tricky boundary between visual culture and museum collecting practices. Visual culture is a theoretical framework not a collecting area. It's a way of thinking more broadly about the inter-lacings of visual experience, whether it be design objects or industrial fabrication. What is the visual construction of our everyday lives and museum lives? I think that a lot of literature has come out under the umbrella of visual culture studies because it's in an area that people have been looking at since World War II and have been looking very hard at what everyday experience is and where these things connect. But these people that I am*

*working with and some of the work that I've done fits very comfortably in the world of art history and the world of art museum's curatorial activity in the sense that it's an interpretation of the visual object. It's an interpretation based on speculation about the maker's intention – very traditional stuff in that it's looking at the way in which the work was received by its intended or accidental audience...as well as looking at the afterlife of the object in culture. It's always difficult in photographic studies to delineate a clear clear boundary between what people call visual culture and what people call art history or photographic studies. It really is right on the boundaries and I think that's why many of us are attracted to photographic studies because we don't feel too confined by these boundaries.*

**What do you think would be some ideal ways to display and exhibit albums?**

*To see the object and then to be able turn the pages of it virtually - this is pretty basic museum stuff. However, I don't want to diminish the thrill of the object itself.*

*I do enjoy walking into the AGO and seeing the way that the vernacular photo collection is being used – that is visual culture objects – not high art objects in cases and in relationship to paintings. Such as seeing a Motherwell painting and then having in a case an issue of Life magazine from the 1960s and a photo album from the same era. I think that the presence of photographic albums can also be a prompt for those kinds of identification experiences even if you can't see every image in the album. I think that using these in such ways is really interesting. I commend the AGO for what they're doing there because I think that their entire philosophy has changed dramatically to include everyday visual experience in their exhibition spaces. It's very instructive, inspiring and engaging. It's engaging to me as a scholar.*

**Does the Vernacular nature of family albums contradict the mandate for collecting artworks within the museum?**

*No. I think that as photography has been doing since the 1980s, it is opening and changing the ways that we think about museums. We are sort of feeling our way forward. Trying to getting away from these modernist conceptions of being a genius and solely creating the most original work, but these things are all in conversation with each other. They are now anyway. I think the way that museums presented things in a cathedral like, white box space was pretty true to the elites who had experienced these things. For many many reasons we hardly need to go over, which is the great democratizing of objects. And at the same time we go to the museum to re-experiencing the aura of these objects. To see masterpiece paintings alongside Life magazine is a pretty interesting way of thinking about things. In the 1950s and 1960s a lot of people got a great amount of their art information from Life and Look magazine – so the dialogue has been happening*

*for a long time and to refuse the dialogue is only to cut ourselves off from people who have a lot to experience in our art museums.*

**What role do family photograph albums play within the context of ‘your’ collection?**

*The CMCP was an affiliate museum of the National Gallery and I was the founding director...I was not in a collecting position here but in 1980 I did a huge project, an outdoor exhibition, called Sights of History, based on a call for photographs to artists, amateurs, anyone, to create an outdoor photographic exhibition that would travel across the country. The idea of it was how do you connect place and what are the historic markers in your life? There were people who sent very traditional, very strong images of monuments and this kind of thing but a lot of people sent in snapshots of themselves standing in front of these monuments, whether they were wedding pictures or ...posing in places where their grandparents had marked important...and so on. There were about 3000 photographs that came in...I can't remember how many there were in the exhibition...It was a genuine effort on my part to break down those boundaries within a nation building narrative. In French it was called Your Pictures, Our History. It was launched in Ottawa in front of the Parliament Buildings and then in Nathan Phillips Square. If you look in Contemporary Canadian Photography which is the book that the NFB Still Photography Division published on its collections, you can find it under my name. I was the lead editor, and in the introduction there is a small photograph of the exhibition – there is other literature on it, not a tremendous amount, but it is an indication of my long interest in this type of photography. The AGO library will have a copy. It was published in 1984, about the collection of the still photo division which became the collection of the CMCP so it was a transitional moment.*

**What do you (or would you) look for when choosing an album for your respective institution? Why would you choose one over another?**

*Collecting doesn't really happen that way. It's not competitive, it's accumulative. What a collection is always doing is building on its strengths and it's always trying to fill gaps. So, if, for instance if you have a strong collection of photographs from the 1930s, an institution would be looking for albums from that era. But, you know, collections are built on offered donations. A lot of it is very serendipitous. If you look at the collection at the MCCord that I studied while I was writing Suspended Conversations, it came in initially because – because the McCord has the Notman archives, if an album had a Notman in it, it came in and it had a Notman and fifty snapshots or fifty carte de visites of no interest. And that's when albums were vulnerable to being raided, and they were raided. Sometimes if one image was particularly interesting that image was removed. Especially in one era when paper was especially acidic, those considered more precious, such as a*

*calotype, it was removed, maybe because of foxing, and the one photograph was treated rather than the whole album. "Complementarity" is always a driving force in museum collecting.*

*So...if an institution is going to expand its collections from the 1930s and wants to collect photograph albums from this era...and you get an album in and it's not in very good condition, and some of the images are missing but you acquire it anyway because you don't have any photo albums from this era – you have nothing. And then you get an album that is much better, but you don't deaccession the other, you keep it. So it really is accumulative. How to choose one album over another? I suppose the only thing that would make the acquisition of an album...the acquisition of anything, even if it is free entails a cost, it needs to be preserved and conserved and catalogued. I would look for, if I had two albums in front of me and I was trying to choose between them, I would choose the one that was the most complete. I would be interested in the one whose story I was able to follow. But I would still try to find a place for the other, an archive or another museum, because there are a finite number of these objects and a lot of them have gone to the bone-yard. We need to love them and protect them because they aren't going to be around for much longer. And...you would also look for parallels...because we are historians...if you came across a album from Winnipeg at the time of the strike...and there are images of the strike in there, you would be interested in that – how does that fit into the world view of families and Winnipeg...looking at continuity and the people and rioting on the street...You look for those kinds of eruptions in narrative which are very interesting parts of the story. It's very much about reaction.*

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