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Susan Murray

Abstract

In this article, the author argues that the social use of digital photography, as represented on Flickr, signals a shift in the engagement with the everyday image, as it has become less about the special or rarefied moments of domestic living and more about an immediate, rather fleeting, display and collection of one's discovery and framing of the small and mundane. In this way, photography is no longer just the embalmer of time that André Bazin once spoke of, but rather a more alive, immediate, and often transitory practice/form. In addition, the everyday image becomes something that even the amateur can create and comment on with relative authority and ease, which works to break down the traditional bifurcation of amateur versus professional categories in image-making.

Keywords

aesthetics • amateur • digital images • everyday • new media • photography • photo-sharing

There is a group photo pool on the photo-sharing site Flickr made up entirely of images of bottle houses. That is, houses made of bottles. Surprisingly, perhaps, 11 people belong to this group and, at my most recent visit to the site, there were 35 photos posted (see Figure 1). 'Bottlehouses' is linked to another photo pool 'Tips for Recycling and Reusing', which includes photos of tires incorporated into walls, toys made from old pieces of material, a couch someone had picked up from a junkyard, and wall art made with Styrofoam plates. There are comments and how-to tips attached to some of them but, for the most part, the meanings of the individual images and the collection itself are in the eye of the beholder.

Figure 1 A contribution to Flickr's 'Bottlehouses' group pool (dotpolka, 2005). Creative Commons, 2005.

In browsing through Flickr, one is invited to explore thousands of images organized not only through technological features, such as tags, groups, and batches, but also through the less concrete processes and functions of fetishization, collection, memory, flow, taste, signification, and social networks. One example of the site's temporal and social relationships is the 'Memory Map's mashup pool, created days after Google launched its satellite-mapping feature in April 2005 (Figure 2). Members used the Googlemap technology to capture images of meaningful locations, and then employed the Flickr note feature, which allows users to write notes on their images. People mostly chose their communities, their home towns, college towns or other favorite places, noting the memories attached to a particular building, road or outdoor space. One user (gavindow) mapped out his childhood memories of a Chicago suburb with notes such as:

> This is the local movie theater. It was once the site of a shooting, but never while I was there. I saw a lot of movies here, including *The Matrix* and *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*.

Another user (kartooner) mapped his work experience onto an unidentified town next to a highway, saying of one complex:

> Castle Park. This mini amusement park includes a miniature golf course, a variety of 'thrilling' kid rides, a full-fledged video game arcade and a seasonal haunted house. I worked here for 7 months, until an employee assaulted me, at which point I quit.

There is also, somewhat predictably, a map of the fictional Springfield, Illinois that is packed with notes detailing every inch of space ever mentioned or shown on *The Simpsons*.

Flickr (along with the photoblogging[1] site Fotolog) is one of the most popular free photo-sharing sites on the web.[2] It offers a variety of functions that take its services beyond other commercial sites, such as Ofoto/Kodak, which have largely turned into repositories of traditional family photographs of special events. On Flickr, each member's page is part of a decentralized network of similar pages, and contributes to the construction of a community and a larger collection of photographs. For example, Flickr creates community through the use of categories or keyword 'tags',[3] notes (which are used to write comments on other people's photos), contact lists (people who subscribe to a member's page), and groups (subject-based pages in which the photographs are contributed by a multitude of members). With the help of these functions, Flickr has become a collaborative experience: a shared display of memory, taste, history, signifiers of identity, collection, daily life and judgement through which amateur and professional photographers collectively articulate a novel, digitized (and decentralized) aesthetics of the everyday. Flickr has become so popular, and the images it contains so well distributed and displayed, that it has become one of the most active social networks around.[4] It is also one of the rare sites centered more on image than on text.

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http://www.flickr.com/photos/woodysworld1778/2154397138/   29/05/2008

Figure 2 A memory map image of a Canadian suburb (Woody1778a, 2008). Creative Commons, 2008.

There is obviously a long, complex history of amateur photography and its relationship to domesticity, leisure, consumerism, and artistic production that is relevant here. I will detail some of that history in order to provide a context for what is at work in sites like Flickr. I will also argue that the social use of digital photography, as represented on Flickr, signals a shift in the engagement with the everyday image that has to do with a move towards transience and the development of a communal aesthetic that does not respect traditional amateur/professional hierarchies. On these sites, photography has become less about the special or rarefied moments of domestic/family living (for such things as holidays, gatherings, baby photos) and more about an immediate, rather fleeting display of one's discovery of the small and mundane (such as bottles, cupcakes, trees, debris, and architectural elements). In this way, photography is no longer just the embalmer of time that André Bazin (1967: 14) once spoke of, but rather a more alive, immediate, and often transitory, practice/form. In addition, the everyday image (and by this, I mean the types of images that we can create or engage with on a regular basis that evoke or reference the more ordinary or frequent moments of our lives)[5] becomes something that even the amateur can create and comment on with relative authority and ease. In making these claims, I want to make clear that I will not be arguing that these new practices are inherently more emancipatory, progressive, or participatory, but rather that they signal a definitive shift in our temporal relationship with the everyday image, and have helped alter the way that we construct narratives about ourselves and the world around us.

A Brief History of Popular and Amateur Photography

In order to better understand the shift in production, representation, and sociality that these photo-sharing sites represent, it would be helpful to consider a brief social history of some of the more transformative moments in amateur photography. According to Patricia Zimmerman (1995), with the advent of Kodak's easy-to-use roll-film cameras in the late 1880s, amateur photography became not simply an immensely popular leisure/consumer activity, but also an organized social and artistic practice that was valued for its spontaneity, authenticity, naturalness, and emotionalism (particularly in its widespread use and reference to pictorialism). In other words, there were two types of amateurs: those who took photos for fun or to record special events, and those 'serious amateurs' who considered themselves engaged in the making of art but who were also enmeshed in middle- to upper-class leisure. (Professionals were largely understood to be those who worked almost exclusively in the studios.) The influence of pictorialism and the call to imitate or reference painting was so pervasive that it pushed approaches and content other than nature into the realm of the unacceptable. This was especially true for images of modern urban life and everyday images. Zimmerman makes the argument that this 'deflected cameras, at least on the discursive level, from insertion into the day-to-day world of industrial capitalism' (p. 39).

By the turn of the century, Kodak was actively creating a market for its $1 Brownie camera and consequently redefining what amateur photography was supposed to look like and mean. Through its advertising, manuals, promotional literature, and trade journals (*Kodakery*, *Kodak Magazine*, *Kodak News*) the company defined amateur photography as a practice that could easily be integrated into everyday leisure activities and could be used to express artistic impulses, yet more than anything else was centered on capturing those special moments of domestic life. Indeed, along with the mass dissemination of cameras came the rise of snapshot photography and perhaps stronger divisions between those who took themselves seriously as artists and those who viewed photography more functionally. Certainly, marketing discourses pushed by companies like Kodak had a limiting effect on the potential uses of photography. However, even those deeply invested in promoting creativity and the artistic process in photography (such as the pictorialists) initially stayed away from the harsher realities of modernity and instead focused on the pleasing and pretty ways of nature and the body. As Zimmerman points out, amateurism during this period 'became the social and cultural site where one could revive one's true self, which was invariably vivacious, ambitious, and imaginative' (p. 10).

Amateur or snapshot photography experienced another surge in popularity during the 1950s, this time accompanied by commercialization. Not only was the camera to be used to document the good life in postwar America, it could also be used as a means to that end. Popular photography magazines suggested to amateurs that they could make money by selling their photos to advertisers looking for images of domestic happiness. In the 1960s and 1970s, these images came to have more than just a commercial or familial function as the snapshot aesthetic entered the world of art photography as a way of pointing out the medium's complicated relationship with reality and the construction of family and private life.

Consumer digital cameras represent the next major shift – in terms of both technology and practice – in popular photography. The market began to take off in 2000 as prices of cameras began to decline and, according to the market research firm InfoTrends, by 2004, 28 billion digital photos were produced. That number represents 6 billion more photos than were shot on film, even though twice as many people owned film-roll cameras than digital (Harmon, 2005). Digital media theorists and researchers have not had that much to say about the social practices and aesthetics of amateur/consumer digital photography specifically. Instead, the focus has tended to be on the question of indexicality and the impact the digital has had on the moving image. In his book, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (1992), William J. Mitchell has identified the early 1990s as the start of the 'post-photographic' era, since it was at this point that digital imaging became more prevalent than traditional emulsion-based photography. Noting the manner in which digital imaging technologies were in the process of restructuring institutions, memory, meaning, and social practices at that point, Mitchell concludes that 'a worldwide network of digital imaging systems is swiftly, silently constituting itself as the decentered subject's

reconfigured eye' (p. 85). The dissemination of these technologies has obviously led scholars to rethink the meanings and practices of photography and has consequently caused some to valorize film photography and others to participate in the construction of what Philip Rosen (2001) has deemed the 'digital utopia' (p. 318).

In 1995, Don Slater wrote an article on domestic photography and digital culture that discussed the potentialities of the consumer digital camera, mostly in relation to self-representation. Slater had a difficult time discussing the practices already in use, since as he said:

> It is the very early days yet for the digital domestic snapshot . . . Private images have not yet entered the datastream of either telecom-munications or digital convergence (for example computer-based multimedia which would integrate the photograph within a flow of manipulable public and private images, still and moving, with sound, text and other forms and organizations of information). (p. 145)

The very same year that Slater wrote this article, Lev Manovich (1995) wrote about what he considered to be the paradoxes of digital photography but, unlike Slater, managed to be quite prescient about the way that it would be used and received over a decade later. He refuses to confirm or deny the common belief that the digital would revolutionize photography, but instead argues that:

> The logic of the digital photograph is one of historical continuity and discontinuity. The digital image tears apart the net of semiotic codes, modes of display, and patterns of spectatorship in modern visual culture – and, at the same time, weaves this net even stronger. The digital image annihilates photography while solidifying, glorifying and immortalizing the photographic. In short, this logic is that of photography after photography. (p. 1)

The move to the digital alters many of the basics of photographic practice – whether practical or theoretical – for users and scholars alike. While theorists grapple with the meaning of photography without film, consumers have had to learn new practices and protocols and many have found new ways to use their cameras in their everyday lives. The relationship between photographer, camera, spectator, and the image changes in some fairly significant ways (some of which will be detailed in the following sections) and yet, as Manovich points out, there is also much continuity between the practice of digital photography and what came before.

Transience, Collection, and the Everyday Image

Whether professional or amateur, photography has traditionally been discussed in relation to history, memory, absence, and loss. Friedrich A. Kittler, André Bazin, Walter Benjamin, and Roland Barthes have all made

arguments that have consigned the meaning and practice of photography largely to its ability to preserve moments in time. As Barthes (1985[1980]) has said:

> If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death. It's true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more. Even if the person in the picture is still in love, it's a moment of this subject's existence that was photographed, and this moment is gone. This is an enormous trauma for humanity, a trauma endlessly renewed. Each reading of a photo and there are billions worldwide in a day, each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contract with what has ceased to exist, a contract with death. (p. 356)

Bazin (1967) has made similar claims, arguing, for example, that in family albums,

> the gray or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration . . . for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. (p. 14)

Indeed, its connection to memory and history is an essential aspect of photography's social use and meaning. Nevertheless, I would argue that the introduction of digital photography and accompanying websites such as Flickr have created an additional function to photography that has much more to do with transience than with loss. As Nancy Martha West (2000) has pointed out in her work on postmortem photography of the Victorian era, the depth of photography's connection to death or loss has a different meaning or weight at different historical moments. During the early to mid 19th century (the period that West is looking at), photography was overtly and regularly linked discursively to mortality while now this concept might seem quite foreign, theoretical, and perhaps even simply wrong.

Those who visit sites such as Flickr use their photography as a daily diary of impressions that teeters somewhere between a collection and a weblog promising frequent updates. Flickr is set up in such a way that a user's 'photostream', which is often located on the left-hand side of the page, contains the most recent uploaded photograph at the top of a vertical string of all photographs ever posted by a user. Depending on the layout a user selects (Flickr offers six options), 5 to 18 photos appear on the first page, along with a group of thumbnails that exist on the right side of the page that stand as links to 'collections' and/or 'sets' usually on certain themes, topics, or events. Since Flickr allows you to subscribe to another person's page through its 'contacts' function, you are notified when new photos are posted. What results is that a typical user (as constructed in relation to the Flickr platform) will return to their contacts pages in the same way they might relate to a blog – revisit and refresh in order to get the most recent

information/images/stories. The regular use of Flickr means that while the creator of a page might use their sets as a way to arrange their collection (and might provide new visitors with a back story), their photostream is the active, narrative center of their Flickr identity. The photostream moves old pictures out of the way to make room for the new, which creates a sense of temporariness for the photos – as if each one had limited time in the spotlight before it would be replaced by something newer.[6] Caterina Fake, the founder of Flickr, describes this aspect of the site as moving the focus away from the single image and says: 'The nature of photography now is it's in motion. It doesn't stop time anymore, and maybe that's a loss. But there's a kind of beauty to it' (Harmon, 2005: 1). A user's Flickr page works as autobiography or diary by layering an ever changing or growing stream of photos on their page.

Some groups and pools function as more of a collection than a story and often have rules that require that all photos posted to the group share particular characteristics. For instance, 'Doors and Windows in Decay', which is described as a 'strict' group, has many rules and requirements for any photo contributed to it, including rules that: there can be no gates, fences, or people in the shots; photos cannot be taken through a window or door; and photos 'could be new or old, urban or rural, but must be clearly decaying and not stuff that could be resolved with a wet cloth and some detergent'.[7] The result is 6,557 photos that share a number of specific characteristics but are also quite different from one another. The intention here is to have photos of decaying doors and windows that both highlight the structural elements of the objects and emphasize the varied effects 'authentic' wear and tear have on them. There is less narrative coherence in the practice of 'strict groups' and much more of a fascination with the process of compilation and comparison.

The most popular Flickr pages tend to contain images of the mundane with autobiographical references that either hint at or blatantly refer to their creator's work/home life (including photos of desks, co-workers, pets, food, laundry, etc.).[8] They are also likely to have some sort of artistic aspirations or pretensions in their composition, use of lighting or framing. Snapshot hobbyists, serious amateurs, and professionals all post photos on Flickr, and it can often be difficult to tell the difference between the latter two groups as most people do not self-identify either way. The pages that are the most subscribed to are those at the center of a community of photographers, such as those by Heather Powazek Champ, a popular photoblogger who was eventually hired by Flickr in 2005 (see Figure 3). The content of some of the most popular pages has little relation to traditional snapshot photography and is, in many ways, the opposite of pictorialist amateur photography (with its focus on realism, urbanization, and the small objects in life that often go unnoticed). It also has little to do with studio photography. It seems to speak to a new aesthetic and function – one dedicated to the exploration of the urban eye and its relation to decay, alienation, kitsch, and its ability to locate beauty in the mundane (see Figure 4). Some have claimed that it is indeed a new category of photography, called 'ephemera'.

Figure 3 An image from the street by Heather Powazek Champ. Creative Commons, 2005.

Figure 4 Graffiti (shoehorn99, 2008). Creative Commons, 2008.

It is, perhaps, the confluence of digital image technology along with social network software that has brought about this new aesthetic. Digital photography has provided the sense that photographs are no longer as precious (and expensive) as they were with traditional roll-film photography. The ability to store and erase on memory cards, as well as to see images immediately after taking them, provides a sense of disposability and immediacy to the photographic image that was never there before.[9] It is now possible to affordably and reasonably incorporate the taking of photos into your everyday life rather than saving film for 'special' moments. Online photo sites may consist of wedding photos or holidays, but they are just as likely to be organized around ephemeral themes and collections. Group photo pools act as larger collections that highlight not only shared interests between community members but also shared fetishes for certain objects, colors, styles, and themes.

In everyday digital photography, there is also an implicit acknowledgement of the inability of photos to hold onto certain moments. Rather than interpret this as a type of death, in the display of digital photography in social network sites there is an already accepted temporariness to one's sense of publicly presented self in all of life. An acknowledgement that, while one is building an autobiographical narrative of sorts, it rests upon old versions of the self as well as collections of objects and experiences encountered in everyday life. Subjectivity shifts and our relationship to the temporal can never be fixed.

There is sadness and a longing in the relationship to memory and history that theorists such as Barthes ascribe to traditional photography that is not altogether present in the social construction of popular digital photography and its communities. Instead, it is understood that an everyday aesthetic – whether present in digital photography, the internet, television, or in the life of the city streets – is fleeting, malleable, immediate, and contains a type of liveness in its initial appearance that is lost once it is placed under glass or replaced by an even more recent image. This description is likely to bring to mind the question of indexicality that has been at the heart of so many discussions involving the move to the digital in both photography and film. The idea that digital images can be easily manipulated, altered, or constructed without a real world profilmic object, has led many to conclude that digital images are nonindexical and lack the traces of the material past that were so much a part of traditional photography. Rosen (2001) describes the crux of the argument this way:

> Both indexical and the digital images are produced through machines, but the production of the digital begins from numbers as its mediating materiality. Therefore it can do without an origin in a profilmic 'here and now' (or 'there and then'); hence the ease with which the indexical imaging of photography and film can be used as the defining other to digital imaging. (p. 306)

Rosen goes on to debunk what he considers a false binary constructed between digital images and film, and puts into question the way that indexicality has been used to make 'claims for a historical break in representation'(p. 306). I agree with him on these points and, while I note that it is perhaps the 'there and then' of the indexical in photography that is the source of the melancholy present in Barthes' work on the subject, it does not follow that the lack of the indexical is necessarily what makes digital photos more fleeting and immediate. I would argue that the temporal qualities of the photos I have been discussing are located more in the *practice* of online photosharing and yet are still certainly related to the specifics of the technological features of digital cameras (such as the erasable memory card mentioned earlier). I am more interested in the ways that consumers interact with their cameras and these photo sites, and consequently I find the question of indexicality less pressing. It would seem that while many amateur photographers recognize that digital photos can be manipulated, I do not think that this leads them to regularly question the 'truth' of the photographs that they or their fellow Flickr members produce. They are also unlikely to give much consideration to the materiality of film versus that of digital technology.

Photo-Sharing and Communal Aesthetics

Although I would like to avoid discussions of self-representation, interaction, and emancipation that Slater (1995) engages with in his work on digital

photography and that others have addressed in their studies of online communities more generally, I would briefly like to consider one of the social features related to representation found in Flickr. The comment function, which enables any number of members to comment on a photo (as long as it is marked 'public'), is certainly an important aspect of developing community bonds, but more importantly perhaps of building a shared aesthetic and negotiating the limits of judgment.[10]

Obviously, Flickr was not the first to allow for such group comments on a singular piece of photography. In his 1965 book, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, Pierre Bourdieu 1996[1965]) uses his now familiar concepts of habitus and ethos to understand the social workings of amateur camera clubs. Finding that most members of such clubs had considerable disdain for domestic or snapshot photography, Bourdieu noted that they established their own norms, values, and systems of aesthetic judgement that served to legitimate practices, styles, and subjects that were relatively unique to their community (but that also had artistic and social–class aspirations). In this way, there are some similarities between Bourdieu's camera clubs of the 1960s and the current Flickr community. Yet an essential difference between these two groups is that the size of the online photo community, along with its decentralization, results in the development of subcommunities of users that may contain variations and alterations of a larger Flickr aesthetic (the focus on ephemera described earlier in this article). One could also argue that the exclusion or marginalization of certain types of photos or photographers may happen at the level of self-selection for membership on these sites, the amateur and professional become virtually indistinguishable in their interaction in the comments section, and comments move back and forth between the aesthetic, the personal, and the whimsical. Snapshot/ domestic photography is placed alongside the professional, often on the same page, creating less distinction between the two forms. While there is a preference for a certain type of everyday aesthetic, the hierarchal relationship between hobbyist, serious amateur, and professional does not really exist on these sites. Heidi Cooley (2004) makes the argument that those who moblog with MSDs (mobile screenic devices) are 'amateur-professionals and professional-amateurs' who use the technology in both work and leisure (two other binaries that have been blurred in this sort of practice) (p. 68). She also argues that many of the professionals' claims to expertise (such as access to distribution) have been undermined by the new technologies the amateur can now use with ease.

While the boundaries between amateur and professional are becoming difficult to discern on these sites, there are still norms and values to follow and judgements to be made regarding items such as choice of subject, lighting, color, and framing. Through their comments, members reward one another for 'good' (which could mean beautiful, funny, quirky, unique, etc.) images and reveal the specific features they privilege in certain types of photographs. These preferences or judgements can also be influenced by the almost daily photos posted on Flickrblog (http://blog.flickr.net), discussions on Flickrcentral (a group page for all members), and interactions that occur

at local (in-person) member meet-ups organized by members and advertised on the site. Flickrblog, a companion Wordpress blog managed and edited by Flickr employees, showcases photos or groups of photos taken by members that are considered to be the 'best of' on a certain theme or topic.[11] Visiting the blog provides members with a sense of what those who work at Flickr consider to be the ideal look of a Flickr photo. This is further reinforced when members share tips or favorites in the discussion groups on Flickrcentral and through the in-person interactions that occur at meet-ups.

Most of these sites of interactions (comments, discussion groups, Flickerbogs, and meet-ups) do not involve distinctions between amateur and professional, and the overall focus on the everyday brings both snapshot and professional photos closer together in terms of their value to the community. For example, depending on the context, a photo taken of an object with a cell phone can be just as valued – or sometimes even more so – than one taken with a professional quality camera if it is creative in its subject or framing or overall look. And the subject can be mundane or typically domestic in some way and still be valued by the community for some other reason, perhaps its ironic stance to the subject or its mimicking of traditional style, or even just its simplicity. The tagging system employed by Flickr – which is obviously a different function than commenting, but is one of the ways that people find one another's photos outside of pools and contacts – is a bottom-up classification system that not only decentralizes control over many collections and pools, but also contributes to the development of a non-hierarchical community aesthetic. As an example of folksonomy, Flickr's tags help connect people with similar interests and, as Gene Smith (2004) explains:

> Folksonomies can work well for certain kinds of information because they offer a small reward for using one of the popular categories (such as your photo appearing on a popular page). People who enjoy the social aspects of the system will gravitate to popular categories while still having the freedom to keep their own lists of tags.

Cooley's (2004) analysis of the Textamerica moblog 'Identify Game' (which asks its users to upload abstract or partial images of everyday objects in order for other users to take guesses at what the object might be) provides insight into the ways that different imaging techniques, modes of perception, and aesthetic values seem to result from the intersection of digital imaging technology (such as the cell phone camera) and internet software (in this case, software for moblogging). In describing the images posted on 'Identity Game' and similar sites, she argues that they 'counter the systematic rectilinear organization of space that informs and corresponds to a modern perspectival seeing, which disregards, and consequently, relegates to the status of the invisible that which is minute, peripheral and/or coincidental' (p. 74). She also notes that they tend to be more spontaneous and 'activate vision through illegibility' (p. 76). While the camera phone certainly lends itself to this sort of recording of daily life and may sometimes produce more

'illegible' or fuzzy images as a result of its technical limits, the cell phone owner may also be collecting images that she or he believes will be prized for (and challenged by) their abstractness within the community of users on the site. Cooley's case study provides another example of how such community interactions help shift the focus from those things that have been traditionally privileged in both snapshot and professional photography to those things that have been considered inconsequential or even mistakes within those contexts.

While it has been said that digital photography has in many ways raised our standards for the quality of the image, even in snapshots, as we erase our mistakes and work to find the best shot before saving it (temporarily) in our camera's memory, there is an accompanying acceptance of what might be considered the 'imperfect' image as well. For example, images such as those resulting from cell phones, digital cameras set at the 'wrong' aperture or shutter speed, and Polaroids, which are commonly scanned and then posted on Flickr, are not only popular forms on these sites but are often fetishized for their low-end look (see Figures 5 and 6). It is as if our move towards clarity, improvement or perfection in the image is accompanied by an attraction to the blurry or grainy, which is interesting given all the early hand-wringing by critics and scholars over the predicted loss of difference, mistakes, 'realness' in the photographic and filmic image that would come with the widespread use of digital image technologies.[12] These early critics feared a loss of texture and authenticity, features that they believed were inherent in old image technologies and missing in the 'cold inhuman perfection' of the digital. An idea perhaps best encapsulated by Bill Nichols's (2000) statement that: 'the chip is pure surface, pure simulation of thought. Its material surface is its meaning, without history, without depth, without aura, affect, or feeling' (p. 104).

Figure 5 Polaroid of Coney Island (thehanner, 2005). Creative Commons, 2005.

Figure 6 Flickr user Owrede moblogged this photo from his cellphone on 12 November 2005. Creative Commons, 2005.

What Nichols claimed and others feared is not turning out to be the case. It would seem that, in this new image environment, there is a place for both the sharp and the grainy, for the 'perfect' and the imperfect. It is also important to note that there is always a certain amount of degradation in digital photos. As Lev Manovich (2001) explains, the storing and transmitting of photographs at a size that is reasonable involves the 'lossy compression', a process that involves the deletion of information to create smaller image files. Therefore, Manovich argues:

> there is actually much more degradation and loss of information between copies of digital images than between copies of traditional photographs . . . So rather than being an aberration, a flaw in the otherwise pure and perfect world of the digital, where not even a single bit of information is ever lost, lossy compression is the very foundation of computer culture, at least for now. Therefore, while in theory, computer technology entails the flawless replication of data, its actual use in contemporary society is characterized by loss of data, degradation, and noise. (pp. 54–5)

So, in fact, the notion of the pure, depthless, ahistorical digital image is a false one and has served to both elevate and denigrate the digital image when compared to film. However, as this quote from Manovich reveals, the digital image does bear remnants of its own history, which may not be exactly the same as, say, scratches on a film negative, yet nonetheless shows traces of its own use and manipulation.

In Flickr, we find an altered temporal relationship to the everyday image, a leveling of the hierarchy between professional and amateur, a unique sense of a community of viewers/producers, as well as a differing relationship to the collection, display, categorization, and distribution of the digital image. Instead of evoking loss, preservation, and death, users and viewers are encouraged to establish a connection with the image that is simultaneously fleeting and a building block of a biographical or social narrative. While these sites build a collection, they also privilege the immediacy of the image and acknowledge the inability of photography to hold onto time even as it provides avenues for nostalgia and memory. In addition, on the photo sites at least, the everyday communal aesthetic that has been constructed is one that privileges the small, the mundane, the urban, and the industrial. While digital photography has not revolutionized photography or led to a loss of the authenticity of an image as predicted early on, it has significantly altered our relationship to the practice of photography (when coupled with social networking software), as well as to our expectations for and interactions with the image and an everyday aesthetic.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. A photoblog is a blog (web log) that focuses on photographs more than text.
2. As of November 2007, 2 billion photos had been uploaded to Flickr.
3. Members can 'tag' or label their photos with terms/keywords of their choosing. When a search is performed using that keyword, all photos tagged with that word are included in the results.
4. According to the web research firm Alexa, as of January 2007, Fotolog was the 26th most popular site on the web and Flickr was 39th. Fotolog is more popular internationally (particularly in South America) while Flickr appears to be more popular in the US. See Furman (2007).
5. Of course there is great debate/discussion over what the term 'everyday' might refer to when we use it in our scholarship. For a recent example of this, see the special issue on everyday life in the *Journal of Visual Studies*, 2004, 18(2/3).
6. In her work on mobile imaging, Cooley (2006) theorizes that the use of these images in moblogs (that are streamed somewhat similarly to Flickr pages) is non-narrative in nature yet is still autobiographical. She maintains that: 'mobile imaging as autobiographical practice proceeds according to a logic of catalog or database . . . Such a logic privileges techniques of selection and (re)combination, which do not operate according to cause–effect relations.'
7. Doors and Windows' Flickr group. URL (accessed June 2007): http://www.flickr.com/groups/dwd/
8. The founder of Fotolog is famous for having taken a photo of every meal he has ever eaten.
9. Of course, the Polaroid provides immediate access to photographs, yet does not provide the no-cost disposability of digital photos.
10. The comments on Flickr appear below each photo. Each member has an icon that represents his or her identity and which appears besides their comments.
11. Recent topics include: 'Dear Santa', 'The Writer's Strike', 'Aurora', 'Through the Looking Glass', 'En Masse', 'Red Rules', 'Strange Vintage Fictions', and multiple entries called 'My Best Shot', which feature photos taken from a group pool started on Flickr Central.
12. See the *Wide Angle* January 1999 issue on 'Digitality and the Memory of Cinema', 21(1).

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