

Ubiquitous Photography

Martin Hand

Cambridge: Polity, 2012

Reviewed by Alfredo Cramerotti

A well-researched and multilayered book, *Ubiquitous Photography* is organized around chapters on image, technology, and practice with the specific aim to “focus upon their specific dynamics” and to show “how they are mutually entangled in reality.” Hand’s premise is that image, technology, and practice are different but interdependent. Even the author admits “This may seem obvious.”

The starting point of the book is that photography is now a set of information technologies that produce, distribute, and consume images in digital form. Hand also argues that the domain of the ordinary (as in “personal photography”) is what should concern sociologists and technologists when trying to understand social and technical change. Thus, personal photography should be a central concern for understanding the status of photography today.

There may be an issue with such an overall claim. The reported example of Flickr resonates well in Europe and the U.S. but has no bearing in China. And the way personal photography (as in nonofficial representation) has been used politically in Africa or Latin America during the twentieth century reveals instantly its different intentions and uses; along with the movement of the Third Cinema, “amateur” photography was used as a tool for class struggle and power relations. This is mentioned in Chapter Six under “Photography and Social Change” but not referred to in earlier remarks.

Personally, I am not sure if we can talk about personal photography any more; as the author himself points out, “Photographic practices and images that are *inextricably* part of personal life” have been vastly expanded and diversified over the last century and a half to the point that this cannot be reduced to amateur, private, popular, family, and snapshot photography, as if all these were the same. People are taking pictures of things they did not before, but after all, what practices are included in, or excluded

from, a definition of personal photography? Even work-related, sport, or commercial photography has a “personal” element embedded in it, if anything to confer a note of authenticity; i.e., the personal is appropriated as a snapshot style and widely circulated as mass-media artefact (the advertising industry being a forerunner on this). Personal photography has not only expanded, but also infiltrated every other category of photographic practice we may think of i.e., institutional, governmental, peer-assessed, and any other kind of professional forms of photography and imaging.

Hand states that the discourses, technologies, and practices of photography have become *radically pervasive* across all domains of contemporary society. “That is the true meaning of ubiquitous,” he writes. Exactly so: and the same applies to all the subgenres of photography that used to be differentiated by approach and practice, including personal photography. Hand’s critique of personal photography is typical of the rather confusing approach he has chosen for his book. While campaigning for one element of his theoretical architecture, he misses out the more radically interesting ideas that his analytical overview offers. The above-mentioned argument for personal photography’s relevance and contradictions mirrors exactly the problematic status of photography itself and all its subgenres; but this reflection never occurs in the book.

A motivating Chapter Five clarifies a key shift in photographic practice—from preservation to communication. Images are now mainly taken or made in order to be distributed among friends and colleagues, rather than to be stored. Digital photography—well, photography at large—is therefore *primarily* a form of communication rather than of memory-making, and the key aspect of this is the largely invisible performativity or agency of metadata: the data that organize and channel the flow of information, as in tagging. Further on, another interesting elaboration takes on board the idea that photography cannot even

be identified as a medium, as the multitude of forms it takes defies reduction to a definitive set of specific technical characteristics or outcomes/objects (a long-standing assertion by Lev Manovich and his “new media” argument!). The digitization of photography ensures its current ubiquity as part of broader socioeconomic, technological, and cultural changes associated with information societies. While it is clear how technological and socioeconomic developments have facilitated this ubiquity, it remains to be seen how *cultural* changes have done so. I cannot identify a direct cause and effect.

Other noteworthy questions in the book remain unanswered. Has digitization appreciably altered the relations between photography and a broader visual culture? Do we see, look at, and interpret the world differently through digital means? The author does not attempt to evaluate these issues specifically. He ventures, though, to explore that realist theories of the image (in which the image *denotes* the real) have become attached to analogue photography, while constructivist theories of the image (in which the image *constructs* the “new” real) most often are used to make sense of the digital. Hand identifies three ways in which these aspects of (ubiquitous) photography raise questions for contemporary visual culture:

- 1 “Photography and social change”: on the one hand, the field of vision has become the central focus for the exercise of rhetorical and real power to articulate normatively what society should look like. On the other hand, the new mobility (also visually) of contemporary societies contributes to how we *think* of our social lives and how we participate in cultural life—strengthening family ties and democratic communication.
- 2 Archiving and sharing: visual preservation has been all but replaced by *visual communication*—with the ideals of

permanence and fixity still embedded in photography practice even in the digital era. Hand remarkably sees tagging and commenting about pictures on social networks as efforts to singularize and own (or control) the meaning of images, in line with earlier photographic ideals.

- 3 How to live publicly: the visual traces via social media (all the online archive material that is retrievable at the flick of a finger) can be also considered in *ethical* terms. The argument advanced by Zygmunt Baumann is that our *will to confess* (“confessional society”²)—our constant outpouring of personal details—represents a continual effort to remake ourselves. Rather than how to reinstate privacy, a better question to examine would be how can individuals live publicly?

Photography has always been a constructive myth-making practice—the changes in technology are not necessarily disruptive. In a bid to answer the above issues, Hand writes that digital photography *extends* rather than breaks with several trajectories of modern visual cultures. Is this sufficient to say, as he does, that it has *not* altered the relations between photography and a broader visual culture, as outlined in the three questions above? Photography takes the primary role in constituting the experience, memory, and culture of life; media used to be more obviously external (i.e., watching TV) whereas now devices such as screens and monitors are required (for the Internet-connected world) for ordinary and everyday experience and sociality. Consumers are even “put to work” in producing images for brand identities and products through affective and immaterial labor in their use of networked digital devices. To me, that is quite a change in the way we see, look at, and interpret the world through digital means.

A further point left unresolved in the book is about the presence and circulation of

digital images on the Web, which makes them, interestingly, subject to heightened critical reflexivity. People are increasingly aware of their malleability, and as such there are “cultures of manipulation” that have a degree of legitimacy and authenticity and others that do not. The overproduction of digital images and an awareness of routine alteration unexpectedly create a more critical audience, while at the same time changing the consensus of appropriate or acceptable aesthetic values. It would have been useful if the author, rather than using an entire chapter to describe the technological changes in camera techniques and image resolution which occurred with digital photography, had considered how our aesthetic judgment is not only affected but also shaped from the outset by digitization.

Although it is difficult to figure out what the author ultimately wants to say, since the remit of the book is too broad and one is left struggling to identify the main argument, Hand’s effort to tackle not only the sociological, but also the technological and cultural impact of digitization is to be praised. Hand is a natural when it comes to researching and connecting different academic disciplines. His interdisciplinary range of references is impressive, if sometimes rather tenuous. Anyone interested in visual culture and imaging would do well to pick up the publication and scrutinize its bibliography.

Notes

- 1 See Lev Manovich, “The Paradoxes of Digital Photography,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. L. Wells (London and New York: Routledge, [1995] 2003); and Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
- 2 See Zygmunt Baumann, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); and Zygmunt Baumann, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

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