

Chapter 12

Make the Most of Your Memories: Re-Enactment Phototherapy, Auto- Ethnography, Memorialisation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a 40-year photographic practice that has focused upon the relationships between photography and memory. A brief critique of the ‘family album’ collection is countered by how it can be opened up. A description is given of how the methodologies of re-enactment phototherapy evolved and developed, illustrated through examples. Memorialisation and the creation of new rituals is set within the history of post-mortem photography. A longitudinal auto-ethnographic study of a 1930s suburban semi-detached home examines both stasis and change over time. This too becomes a study of the need for memorialisation and the quotidian every-day. Re-enactment phototherapy is returned to as a means of embodying loss and grief. Acts of reparation and ambivalence are given recognition and representation, as memory itself shifts and changes to accommodate conflicting emotions.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine my own photographic practice over the last forty years in relation to photography and memory. A brief critique of the traditional ‘family album’ leads to its re-examination as source material for interventions. Re-enactment phototherapy, which was created and evolved by (the late) Jo Spence and myself from 1983, is a methodology we designed to explore and open up the complex relationships between photography and memory through the creation of new images. I describe, and illustrate through examples, how this practice developed, what it involves and indicate how it continues to remain relevant to new audiences. This creation of new photographic images to explore and expand the representations of the multiplicities of identities that any one person inhabits extends notions of

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memory to include psychic, social and cultural formations. I elucidate the impetus to memorialisation at times of loss and how I improvised my own rituals of remembrance on the death of my father. My auto-ethnographic study of a 1930's working-class suburban semi-detached house, my childhood home, from 1990 to 2006 explores how what initially appeared to be set in aspic was itself a site of massive changes. I consider my shifting relationship to this place, how I chose to represent it and by so doing how it became another form of memorialisation. Returning to re-enactment phototherapy as a powerful means of embodying loss, grief and bereavement, I then explore acts of reparation and ambivalence.

Looking back over all the work I have done it is the relationship between photography and memory that has preoccupied me. "Make the most of your memories" extoled the text on the folder in which the bulk processors, Fotorama, returned my prints and negatives. But as I begin to examine my collection of personal photographs in the light of Fotorama's slogan, I am immediately struck by how photography and memory relate in a poignant and perverse way, through a sense of loss, predicated upon the unconscious wish to somehow arrest the passage of time by holding it in fragments of a second. How much are the images from the past that I visualise in my mind's eye constructed and mediated through the very few photographs that have survived in my family album? How else might I aim to re-connect with my memories? Can I speak to a collective memory through photographs that express my location in history and culture? How can I hold onto that which must pass? (Martin, 1996)

As composite formations, photographs, like childhood memories, have a sharpness and innocence that belie meanings that have far more potential significance than is often attributed to them, which means that in terms of history and memory, photographs demand analysis rather than hypnotic reverie. (Bate, 2010)

THE FAMILY ALBUM AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR REINVENTION

The traditional family album, be that the conventional family, or the 'family of choice', contains a paucity of images, either because of the lack of even a camera in 1940s-60s, or the limited repertoire of images considered worth keeping in the digital age of easy deletion. Whilst nowadays images are shared almost instantaneously into the constant flow of 'newness' on Instagram or Facebook, very few images are printed out for extended contemplation.

The traditional family album contains a mini-history of photography as a medium and a variety of genres, as interpreted by a succession of photographers both amateur and professional. Editorial control is held by the archivist, most often the mother, whose preferences are shaped by an unconscious desire to provide evidence of her own good mothering. The conflicts and power struggles inherent within family life are repressed. Like a public-relations document, the family album mediates between the members of the family, providing a united front to the world, in an affirmation of successes, celebrations, high days and holidays, domestic harmony and togetherness. It is bound within established codes of commemorative convention, so ubiquitous that they are taken for granted, even minutely reconstructed and sold back to us by admen.

Paraded in ranks on the mantelpiece, informally stuck on the fridge or safely stowed away, family photographs stand in for the extended family, now dispersed, as individual members follow their personal dreams, to distant cities, beyond borders. Looking at a family album often prompts nostalgia, a dream of a return "home" to an idealized golden past, where the sun shone and everyone smiled. In forgetting

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