

## EVERYDAY PIXELS: SNAPSHOTS AND SUBJECTIVITY ONLINE

### Biography:

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In the late 1970s American photographer Nan Goldin began photographing the events and moments that made up her life and the lives of her friends. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, as the project became known, consisted of highly personal images documenting the drama, joy and pain of Goldin's everyday life. The power of these images comes from this everyday quality; while the viewer may not know the exact story behind each image their snapshot style possesses a familiarity, or a sense of humanity that one finds in their own personal photographs. Goldin further controlled the emotional reception of these images by presenting them as a slide show with an accompanying musical soundtrack. The coupling of the soundtrack with the photographic image projected onto a screen has the effect of forgoing, or at least de-emphasising the photograph's status as an *object* in favour of an emotionally loaded *pure* image. Initially, comparisons to current digital imaging media are tempting, particularly the urge to teleologically track the immateriality of the image from the slideshow to the screen-based digital image. However such comparisons are more productive in the context of questioning the role the materiality of the photographic image plays in our interaction with, and response to photography today and further probing the implications of the characteristics of the digital snapshot in contemporary art and visual culture?

By the mid-seventies the snapshot aesthetic or rather the look of amateur photography had secured itself as a stylistic option for photographic artists to exploit. In the early 60s photography had reached a level of affordability and popularity that meant just about anybody could be a photographer.<sup>i</sup> Snapshots became so ubiquitous in visual consciousness that they now represented a cultural space for exploration by artists, in addition to the imagery of advertising and other areas of popular culture. Ed Ruscha's banal gas station snapshots disregarded *art* photography's previous requirements of technical proficiency and compositional harmony in favour of reflection on the medium and practice of photography itself.

Other artists around the same time were amateurising their practice to similar effect. In his essay "MARKS OF INDIFFERENCE: ASPECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN, OR AS, CONCEPTUAL ART", Jeff Wall gives the films of John Cassavetes and Andy Warhol as examples of this amateurisation. Of Cassavetes' film *FACES* he says, 'The rough photography and lighting drew attention to itself, but the style signified a moral decision to forgo technical finish in the name of emotional truth.'<sup>ii</sup> This 'emotional truth' is what allows Goldin's snapshot images to work so powerfully as art. The viewer experiences a sense of *familiar distance*; the subjective distance created by the personal intimacy of the images is

played against the familiarity of the snapshot's common, everyday or amateur language. When artists like Ruscha and Warhol forced us to think about photography as another dimension of visual consciousness rather than simply a reproductive technology it drew attention to the conceptual and emotive power of the photographic image. Ruscha's ephemeral book presentations of gas stations and Los Angeles apartments, Cassavetes' 'rough photography and lighting' and Warhol's protracted 1963 films of banal human activities (EAT, SLEEP, and KISS) stripped art photography of its dependence on a slick, polished aesthetic, giving it the same room for conceptual content that Pop Art and Minimalism had done for painting and sculpture. Goldin filled this conceptual space with an emotionally based narrative that did not require the images to be executed professionally or to be objects, framed or flipped through.

Amateurisation as a stylistic device for artists comes as a result of the amateurisation of technology. As technology develops things become easier, the tools of professionals become available to non-professionals, the medium becomes amateurised. However this means, in a sense, that it also becomes humanised. It is not until a technology is used, and indeed misused, on a mass-cultural scale that the nature of that technology as it relates to humanity becomes apparent and its full creative potential is realised. When it becomes another habitualised detail of modern life a particular technology then becomes a vital tool in explaining it. Consciously or not this is why Ruscha, Goldin and many others made the work that they did.

This is extremely important in art and mass-culture today, already digital photography has become amateurised, and subsequently the medium that was once seen as cold, difficult and untrustworthy has been welcomed into the homes and hearts of millions. The image itself has not suffered a decline in status since digital has become its favoured format. We still trust the image to do what photography has always done; harbour memories, record events and bring the world closer. This is not to say however that the digital image is now favoured over the printed image, the progress in simplifying home printing is proof enough of that. The need for simple home printing though does not signify a yearning for the 'old' kind of image kept in boxes and albums, framed, folded and flipped through. Potentially any screen image can become a printed image, and indeed vice versa. From print to digital or from digital to print, the image goes through selection or optimisation during its respective transitional process. Something makes an image important enough, more important than others, to be scanned and/or posted on the internet or worthy enough to be downloaded and printed.

That the photograph still holds such cultural power is proven, rather than disavowed, by the interchangeability of its form. Because the image is no longer bound by its objecthood and has not been completely colonised by digital immateriality we can see what it actually is that makes the photographic image so powerful. The image, in its purest sense, that occupies a primarily conceptual space, a space closer to the memories they represent and passions they stir. Rather than cheapen it or strip it of everything we value about it, digital imaging technology has reminded us of the magic photography initially possessed. The pleasure not only of looking at pictures but also, perhaps more importantly, of creating and showing them is enhanced by digital media. It is because images can be taken, distributed and viewed more quickly and easily than ever before that more and more people do exactly that. More and

more people not only enjoy but feel compelled to create and show images. Facilitated by purpose built websites, the creative drive of web users is finding its outlet catered to more frequently and in simpler ways. Technology appears to be continually empowering the subjective expression of its users, or at least more people are using it this way.

The most obvious manifestation of this technology-assisted collective drive to expression today is the weblog, the veritable index of online subjectivity. Most often truncated to 'blog' it is simply an online diary hosted by sites like BLOGGER and LIVEJOURNAL that simplify web-publishing so users can get on with the creative task at hand. Such infiltration of subjective expression is nothing new to mass media however. As early as 1939 Walter Benjamin, using the increasing scope of printed press as an example, predicted that 'the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character.'<sup>iii</sup> Through the introduction of opportunities like 'letters to the editor' readers were becoming writers, a process that continues to fulfill Benjamin's prophecy today to the extent that the number of blogs currently in existence is estimated at exceeding 50million worldwide.<sup>iv</sup>

Though developments like weblogs, the internet is responsible for what has become known in various web-commentaries as 'mass amateurisation' which is, as Clay Shirky states, 'the web's normal pattern.' In his article *WEBLOGS AND THE MASS AMATEURISATION OF PUBLISHING*, Shirky expresses concern about this effect weblogs, that they undermine the publishing system in terms of both quality control and its economic structure. As the hurdles associated with getting published the traditional way, from submitting a manuscript to printing and distribution, stripped away, so, Shirky believes, is its value.<sup>v</sup> However he pins this destruction of value to the forecasted threat of the demise of books, of objects; 'A book's physical presence' he claims 'says "Someone thought this was worth risking money on."<sup>vi</sup> That a book even exists attests to its quality. This view relies on a concept of creativity that is validated by its association with an object that can be bought, sold and held on to – a commodity. Therefore Shirky would obviously see weblogs as a negative, regressive force in contemporary literary culture because they breakdown the traditional barriers that prevent 'just anybody' from being published in print. However the closing sentence of his article points to the most important aspect of creativity on the web that weblogs have been instrumental in developing: the idea of collaboration, of cultivating common interests, the sense of community, sharing ideas, and promoting dialogue. As Shirky himself states, 'this is mass amateurization, and it points to a world where participating in the conversation is its own reward.'<sup>vii</sup>

Posted as an essay style blog entry one commentator applies Shirky's idea of mass amateurisation to digital image production: 'It is only within the last few years that internet use in developed countries has tipped over 50% of the population. This, combined with increased bandwidth and processing power, has led to the "mass amateurisation" of digital image production, an activity that was previously limited by the cost of capture and editing equipment.'<sup>viii</sup> With the addition of mechanisms facilitating the inclusion of images in blogs (not to mention audio and video clips) or the creation of solely image based blogs the scope of this so called mass amateurisation has widened considerably even since Shirky wrote his article in 2003. Although the format is different bloggers are still 'participating in the conversation'. Often the images posted continue the everyday character of the traditional text

based blog, they are in effect what would traditionally be called *snapshots*. Very often the emphasis is not so much on the technical quality of the image, for example, relatively new sites like FLICKR<sup>ix</sup> and the Australian based MOBLOGS<sup>x</sup>, cater to photographs produced specifically with mobile phone cameras where, while image quality is improving, it is in no way meant to compete with those produced with digital cameras. What is most important is the instantaneity with which images can be taken and posted. All that is needed is the right kind of phone, potentially extending the scope of 'mass amateurisation' even further. And while this may make it more difficult to find genuine artistic quality, the potential for quality increases. People that would not normally bother creating an online gallery of their photographs are now able to do so without even going near a computer. But perhaps the word 'amateur' is not completely appropriate?

Artists like Ruscha, Goldin and more specifically Thomas Walther with his collection of found 'amateur' snapshots exhibited as art<sup>xi</sup>, have helped us recognise the cultural significance of the everyday snapshot. Their sense of mysterious familiarity (or familiar distance) is a quality unique to this most common style of photography and is most apparent when snapshots are transferred into an art context. However, this sense of finding the extraordinary or at least something meaningful in the everyday has obvious popular appeal. Consider how traditional text based blogs, the written documents of the everyday thoughts and activities of individuals, amass their own interest, in some cases to the level of a cult following, *outside* the bounds of traditional literary publishing. In the same way, the popular growth of photo-blogs consisting of individuals' images of everyday life – or snapshots – represents a popular fascination with such images outside the traditional bounds of 'art'. It is tempting to call this process the mass amateurisation of art, but this appears to have negative connotations and regressive consequences. A more productive approach is to rethink what it is that art actually is, and does, and rethink what implications this new kind of image making has for those definitions. The people that create these images are only amateurs in the sense that they are not necessarily artists, but the work that they are creating is doing the job of art, we find in them the same things we look for in a work of art.

Lia Bulaong is a Master's candidate in the Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU. She is the initiator of a number of blog-based projects called 24in48.org.<sup>xii</sup> She invited 24 people in a particular city to post pictures of their activities over a 48 hour period to a group moblog (from their mobile phones), twice in New York City on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> November 2004 and again on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2005, and most recently in San Francisco's Bay Area on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2005. Over the two days of the project the blog is gradually populated with images from each participant depicting anything from self portraits and banal personal hygiene activities, to still lives, plates of food, friends, pets and other details of everyday life. Bulaong uses the specifics of FLICKR's additions to blogging technology in a way that is unique to the medium: instantaneous, collaborative, chronological documentation of real events in real time in a designated, real space.

24in48.org engages the details of everyday life on a level beyond that of mere observation. It is the behaviours and sensibilities of the individual participants that inform the creation and selection of an image to be posted to the blog that are exhibited in this new form of snapshot practice. The images, and even the fractured narratives they produce, contain a range of

scenarios, emotions, ambiguities and provocations, which are essential elements, even devices, found in works of art. What implications then, does that have for our current definitions of art?

Or, what if the work produced *looks* like a work of art? Matt Haughey's blog based project combines the unique characteristics of FLICKR with a recent addition to the techno-colonial sweep of GOOGLE. GOOGLE's new MAPS feature, at this stage available only in America and the UK, allows users to access satellite images of cities and towns and which the user can zoom down to a level where streets and buildings become clearly visible. Haughey combines GOOGLE MAPS with the FLICKR feature that allows users to isolate parts of images and write relevant text that is displayed when a user runs their mouse cursor over it. The result is MEMORYMAPS, a satellite image of Haughey's childhood home town that includes brief personal stories related to designated places on the map (the street he rode his bike on, the house of a girl he had a crush on) that only become visible when the mouse rolls over that particular part of the image. This image, and the others in the series, have all the hallmarks of a work of art, and the exploration of memory is territory well-trodden by artists. The difference is that Haughey's image became so popular among other FLICKR users that it inspired the formation of a MEMORYMAPS group which now has over 500 contributors.

There is a distant echo of the photographic tactility of traditional snapshots that we are used to in Haughey's work.<sup>xiii</sup> It is as if we are running a finger over one of his old childhood snapshots and asking, "What's so special about this place?" But then, it is also completely different. The actual image is as far from a traditional snapshot as it could visually and physically be, but the same information, perhaps more, is present. But it is this actual *image* that Haughey uses as a metaphor for the mental image of memory. The image is not dependent on substantiation as an object to be able to perform this task, in fact if it were to become a printed object it surely could not.

The image as an object seems to be less of a concern to such 'amateur' artists and those artists whose practice is consciously amateurised. Goldin and Ruscha, helped expand the boundaries of what could be considered 'art' by engaging with amateur modes of production and aesthetics. The situation today however indicates that the work of 'amateur artists' or 'non-artists' no longer exists as an external reference point to be transmuted into high art for the purposes of a reflection on common culture and the 'real world'. These seemingly 'non-art' works do that already. The ever elusive avant-garde pursuit of merging of art and life is played out quite literally in the context of internet culture. This possibility has much to do with the fact that there is no rarefied commodity-object associated with the works of Bulaong and Haughey. Their unquestioning and acceptant attitude toward the fact that their original idea is being adopted and developed by other individuals, could well be construed as a kind of nonchalant, indifferent or even an unconscious neo-avantgardism. These works represent the current reality of creative work on the internet, a widening area where creativity is common property, outdated copyright restrictions are not just ignored but re-written. This kind of creative production appears to evolve concurrently with technology, enabling it to engage with the intricacies of the contemporary everyday culture in a language expressive of that particular context, which is, in effect, exactly what we expect art to do.

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<sup>i</sup> Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art”, in Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds.) *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965 – 1975*, Los Angeles, 1996, 262.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in Hannah Arendt (e.d.) *Illuminations*, Frankfurt, 1968, 232.

<sup>iv</sup> Duncan Riley, “Number of Blogs Now Exceeds 50 million Worldwide” *The Blog Herald*, Online, available: <http://www.blogherald.com/2005/04/14/number-of-blogs-now-exceeds-50-million-worldwide/> accessed: 20/07/05

<sup>v</sup> Clay Shirky “Weblogs and the Mass Amateurization of Publishing” *Networks, Economics, and Culture*, 03/10/05 Online, Available: [http://www.shirky.com/writings/weblogs\\_publishing.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/weblogs_publishing.html), accessed 20/07/05

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> Blog entry posted by matlock, “Let Us Grind Them Into Dust!”, on *Test*, 28/06/05, Online, available: <http://www.test.org.uk/> accessed 20/07/05

<sup>ix</sup> Flickr, Online, available: <http://www.flickr.com/> accessed 20/07/05

<sup>x</sup> Moblogs, Online, available: <http://www.moblogs.com.au/> accessed 20/07/05

<sup>xi</sup> Thomas Walther, *Other Pictures*, Santa Fe, 2000.

<sup>xii</sup> 24in48.org, Online, available: <http://www.24in48.org/> accessed 20/07/05

<sup>xiii</sup> matlock, *Test*, op. cit.