

Digital Image and Culture | Assignment 3: Critical Essay Gesa Helms #492645

“How does the networked image in contemporary visual culture shape the boundaries between public and private? Discuss, notably with reference to earlier performative and analogue works by feminist practitioners.”

2851 words – 359 words in quotes.



Figure 1 Trish Morrissey 2007 Katy McDonnell, October 5th, 2007, from *Front*

Introduction

Trish Morrissey's (2005-7) series *Front* explicitly addresses the boundaries – physical, social and cultural – that delineate the public and the private. Consisting of twelve images *Front* features family or friendship groups on public beaches around the UK and elsewhere. On closer examination we find that each image features Morrissey as part of the group depicted, often centrally so, sometimes awkwardly. Following the timeline of the images, we also realise that this is neither her own growing family over a number of years

nor extended family circle but, instead, these are different families, different friendship groups. Morrissey takes the form of a cuckoo, a 'confidence trickster' (Oldfield 2009, no pagination) who sneaked in and performed a self-portrait as part of other people's beach visits. As Oldfield argues, the setting of the beach is crucial for these performed self-portraits: it provides an 'unstructured, communal space', away from workplace or home. It is furthermore, 'a particularly charged site, a place of boundaries and potential transgressions' (ibid). Morrissey carefully chooses group and setting and then proceeds to select appropriate clothing from a large bag to fit in before approaching the group, sets up a portraiture shot with her large format camera and late on suggests to swap with a woman in the group (often the mother), taking her place while the woman presses the shutter. The image is given this woman's name and date¹.

Working with a 4x5 large format film camera, Morrissey's approach is firmly traditional in terms of image production. While her images are accessible (*in toto*) on her personal website, the series is published in a small book, available by phone from the publishing gallery. Its situatedness within analogue practices provides a reference point to explore how dimensions and forms of public/private boundaries are being negotiated to then investigate the impact the networked image has on such negotiation.



Figure 2 Trish Morrissey July 14th 1974, from *Seven Years* (2001-03)

¹ Morrissey also takes a second photo of the actual group, which she provides for her sitters – a fact that, along with the naming, provides an important insight in to her understandings of cooperation and visibility of her working practice: the one whose place she takes does not simply disappear but instead provides the title for the actual work.

Morrissey's earlier series *Seven Year* (2001-4) touches on similar boundary negotiations and transgression while moving more explicitly into the private domain of domestic photography. Here, she and one of her siblings (a seven year older sister) restage, complete with period props, a series of scenarios that did not make it into the family album. As Green (2006) observes in a brief survey of the work, '[h]er work does not so much define these subjects but uses photography to probe their boundaries, often left intact in every day life.' *Front* continues to probe in a more public setting by drawing attention to 'body language, gestures, and the dynamics of spacing' (Oldfield 2009). These reveal Morrissey's trickster, and as such is exemplary for the kinds of transgressions I am interested in probing further between analogue and digital practices.

I would like to use this body of work to explore in more detail what boundaries are being transgressed and negotiated between public and private, to then begin to chart the impact of digital – or, perhaps the more useful concept of networked – images have on these boundaries and potential transgressions. In order to do so, the essay is structured in three parts:

1. Feminist practices as the site where the boundaries (and its crossings) between public and private in still and moving image are examined;
2. Understanding the construction of public and private in its contemporary social context, i.e. what is the cultural field in which these practitioners engage;
3. How does the condition of the networked image engage with these concerns, re-articulating older questions?

Liz Wells's (2015, 364) glossary entry on the public and the private spheres serves as a first marker in how these intimately related concepts have been understood in contemporary visual culture:

We live our lives in two relatively distinct modes, a 'private' sphere, which is made up of personal and kinship relations and domestic life, and a 'public' sphere, made up of economic relations, work, money-making and politics. The 'private' sphere tends to be controlled by moral and emotional constraints, the 'public' sphere by public laws and regulations.

Her use of inverted commas already signals a hesitation over the validity of these concepts and serves as a means of distancing. Nonetheless, she considers the paired concept necessary to introduces in their 'relative distinctness' in order to frame, notably, personal photography, and, possibly less explicitly so, the role of the body as subject in photography.

Wells provides two challenges to this 'relative distinctness' and I would like to attend to these in turn. The first challenge comes from feminism, the second, most specifically relating to the network image, from post-photography and digital practice. This essay will thus examine Lister's contention that current

evolving practices provide a challenge to photographic theory, demanding a turn away from the image itself towards its context and uses (Lister 2013, 46), and that 'photographies' (Tagg 1988) have always relied on a multiplicity of social practices and media; the networked digital image being a further extension of this development (Lister 2012, 3). While the essay will refer to the field of personal photography, the lens-based practitioners referenced actively perform such (Holland 2015, 139). Thus, the focus for this essay resides less on vernacular photography and/or its collection but instead intends to comment on such modalities in the work of contemporary artists. Furthermore, setting out with contemporary artistic practice, firmly analogue in production (and in some cases also in circulation, i.e. in off-line formats such as books and exhibitions), this essay in itself hovers on the boundary between analogue and networked image practices. In a sense I am tracing the boundary, identifying modalities of public/private negotiations in analogue practices and pointing towards changes brought about through the use of networking.

Personal photography, feminism and public/private

Personal photography has engaged with debates of public/private as a core concern as part of feminist debates over actual artistic and/or intellectual practice, concern and method (Holland 2015, Landes 2003 and Weintraub 1997).

Besides Morrissey, there are three artists that I would like to point to as examples of working across the public/private, in different media, guises and arguably intentions. For all of them, personal photography is a performative practice: each artist has made herself part of the artwork – as subject, author as well as audience (and as such is distinct to e.g. the modes of collecting and curating other people's personal photographs as e.g. in the work of Eric Kessels and Joachim Schmid).

The works of Chantal Akerman, Nan Goldin and Sophie Calle serve as exemplars of such practice, interrogating the boundaries between public/private on a number of registers. I would like to draw exemplary on one work by each to relate to the concerns raised in this essay.

Akerman's first short film, *Saute Ma Ville* (1968) stars Akerman herself as she is seen entering an apartment block, her flat, and then is almost entirely set within her kitchen, in which she performs a series of increasingly surreal tasks, often while humming to herself. She seals herself into the room; pushes many onto the floor to then messily, and not successfully clean it; and cooks a meal, she proceeds to eat, puts on a raincoat, applies some face cream. As an 18-year-old she performs domesticity and a woman's role in the quintessential domestic space of the kitchen. The tasks seem disordered, yet purposeful moving along to the final scene: she rests on the cooker while we

hear the gas streaming out, the screen cuts to dark, we hear the noise of an explosion and then we hear her whistling again.



Figure 3 Stills from Chantal Akerman's (1968) Saute ma Ville

Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* first was shown as a slide show projection in 1985, then published in book form in 1986 while continued to be shown, continually re-edited and updated, since then.

"The Ballad" was Goldin's first book and remains her best known, a



Figure 4 Nan Goldin's Ballad of Sexual Dependency (1985 onwards)

benchmark for photographers who believe, as she does, in the narrative of the self, the private and public exhibition we call “being” (Als 2016, no pagination).

Considering these photographs to be snapshots, Goldin continues that

“[p]eople take [snapshots] out of love, and they take them to remember—people, places, and times. They’re about creating a history by recording a history. And that’s exactly what my work is about.”

Photographing friends, lovers, strangers, passers-by, Goldin recorded her surroundings, and initially projected these recordings back the subjects of her photographs, only later, these became more anonymous, public projects in which the material began to circulate.

The third artist to consider is Sophie Calle. In her project *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) she invites 107 women to draw on their professional expertise to interpret and respond to a breakup note, sent by her then-partner. Besides an exhibition for the Venice Biennale in 2007, this is published in 2007 as an artist book.



Figure 5 Sophie Calle (2007) *Take care of yourself*, selected booksreads

Public/private as a paired concept of social and cultural boundary crossings

Debates over definitions, meaning and significance of the public and the private are extensive and long-standing, from proponents to critics. Weintraub (1997) provides an overview, highlighting the key concerns in these concepts centring on (a) notions of collectivity and (b) visibility (the latter arguably being of central concern for the visual arts). He also identifies (p. 7) four distinct arguments and understandings of public/private:

- (a) the liberal-economic model which considers primarily the state as public and the market as private;
- (b) the republic-virtue model which focuses on public concerning political

- community and citizenship;
- (c) the public realm as a 'sphere of fluid and polymorphic sociability', the modalities of which examined by social history and anthropology;
- (d) the feminist tendency to distinguish between the private, family, and the public as larger political and economic order.

The last two are the arguments most salient in the context of this essay: the notion of what constitutes norms and conventions of public interaction and what marks the boundary between public and private. Sociability as concept is informative for debates on the networked image. In particular, Elias, Aries and Foucault's arguments that the modern period is characterised by a triumph of the private is intriguing and possibly points towards some of the dismissal, resentment and anger that was not only directed at feminist practices that have sought to reveal (be it in Goldin's or e.g. Jo Spence's work) but also as expressed in the lamentation that 'Kids today. They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy' (newspaper headline, cited in Livingstone 2008, 4).

Lastly, as point to note from the literature, Gal (2002) provides further insight in the form of arguing that public/private is a paired concept that is strongly relational: one does not make sense without the other and they are depending upon each other².

Applying such lens to the three artworks discussed above, we can observe the following:

Akerman is the one artist of the three who uses herself as subject to perform domesticity; the tasks she pursues are at once known as well as transgressive (creating disorder rather than cleaning and ordering the domestic sphere); furthermore, the final scene in some way transcends the frame: the explosion that we only hear undoes the boundaries between the kitchen and the town, providing an anarchic counter to the opening scene where Akerman leaves the town to enter the private space of kitchen (that she ceases to exist in this process is possibly not tragic but significant: are these boundaries too severe to rupture?).

Goldin is observing and recording her day-to-day life, sometimes she features in the images, most often she doesn't. She is very much part of this scene, these settings; her act of recording and thus providing a reflective commentary for the subjects of her photographs but also for the wider public constitutes the transgressive act: the recording of several transgressive practices (which, while taking place, are illicit and not meant to be recorded) is

² It strikes me that this contention may provide an avenue for a research methodology for a future project which seeks to develop along such a negotiated path of 'more private than'.

the key means by which she negotiates as author the subject and provides insight into otherwise hidden practices.

Calle elevates her subjects as co-authors to her artwork: she only provides the source material; and, given the supposedly private (as in making herself vulnerable) nature of the email, transgresses with the very concept of the artwork: she turns a private matter into an investigative piece. Notably one that explicitly draws on her interviewees' professional expertise. The artwork is produced with an audience in mind (possibly the most obvious one among the three): the Venice Biennale as well as a widely available book publication.

All three artworks articulate the relational triangle of author–subject–viewer in ways that probe the boundaries of public/private as outlined by Weintraub (1997) as either sociability and norms/conventions or as explicit feminist practice which makes visible the private matters of family (chosen or birth).

Public/private boundary crossings between analogue and digital

Arguably, the most significant change between the networked image and the previous analogue is its relation to a previously unknown capacity for circulation, as Rubinstein and Sluis (2008, 18) state: 'The networking of the snapshot provides something which vernacular photographers have always lacked: a broad audience.' Thus, while previous incarnations of vernacular photography remained primarily within private realms (and provides source for transgression for artists such as Akerman, Goldin, Calle and Morrissey), contemporary networking alters this frame of reference of what is private (as in secluded, invisible) and what circulates in public. With this in mind, this final part of the essay shifts the focus from the performative artistic practices to the vernacular terrain of personal networked images. It does so for two reasons. The first reason is an ontological one, arising from this shift: if performativity and the construction of self has become one of the markers of the networked image and the increased circulation and visibility that goes alongside it, is there not an argument to be made that it is also in the terrain of everyday vernacular practices that we will find some of the negotiations between public and private that were explicit and performative constructions for the artists discussed already? With such reasoning, this section firstly surveys the argument over changes between analogue and networked image production, circulation, consumption and then visits the relational triangle of author–subject–audience to sketch out some of the implications.

For Dewdney (2012, 100) the key change of the status of the networked photographic image lies in its relationship to the TV monitor, notably,

[u]p until this moment the ontology of photography, largely taken to be discrete and technical, has been the guarantor of the coherence of the individual subject, whilst the ontology of television has been the guarantor of the coherence of the existence of public space. It is the

distinction between public and private, interior and exterior, held in place by the general representational system, which is now in a crisis produced by networked networked behaviours, globalized modes of production and transcultural subjects.'

If the biggest change lies in the circulation of images and less so its modes of production, we need to ask how such anticipated circulation along re-configured public/private boundaries already impacts on the intent and procedures of conceptualising images (and thus becomes effective long before the image then circulates). I will do so by outlining a series of implications as they relate to the relational triangle of the networked image.

The networked image and the authors of lens-based work

- seeking privacy in obscurity and large amounts of data (e.g. the everflowing feeds of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (West et al. 2009 on Facebook settings); seeking a private social world of which parents are not part of;
- enacting self-portraits as 'we are witnessing a shift from photographing others for self-consumption to documentation of self for consumption by others (Schwarz 2010, 165)

The networked image and the object/subject of visual culture

- selfies as hybrids, blurring author/subject, seeking cultural capital (and the precariousness of these attempts to valorise one's self (Schwarz 2010, Henning 2015)
- Erika Scourti's digital practice (such as the well known *Life in AdWords* 2012-13) as a commentary on this: the artist as subject becomes the subject of the algorithm.

The networked image and the audience of visual culture

- 'performative practice connected to "presence"' (Sandbye 2013: 106);
- participatory means and modalities are more easily achieved;
- imitation, appropriation, cross-fertilisation: authorship as blurred and hybrid.

Conclusion

Having set out with deliberately performative practices of analogue lens-based work by contemporary feminist artists, this final section has begun to outline some of the implications of the networked image for the boundary constructions around public/private. It does so by moving back towards personal and vernacular practices (or the performance of these as in the case of Scourti). It does so by taking serious Garde-Hansen's (2013, 88) contention of a 'public domain of networked intimacy' that effectively has emerged

around the networked image and in which public/private as concepts are blurred accordingly to differences in circulation, production and materiality. And with such an observation, this essay concludes with Joan Fontcuberta's (2014, 62) argument that

... the difference in the protocol we establish with the digital image does not derive from the technical capabilities of those [digital] processes or of the people who use them, but from a new critical awareness on the part of the viewer. What is truly revolutionary, then, is the paradigm shift in our reception of images.

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