

PHOTOGRAPHY, HISTORY, CURATING

A CONVERSATION WITH GEOFFREY BATCHEN

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Cecilia Grönberg

Why don't we begin by talking about your most recent exhibition at the Izu Photo Museum in Japan. The title of the exhibition, *Suspending Time*, seems to suggest a different conceptualization of photography's relation to time than that of a document or a record of a moment in the past, and in the subtitle, *Life – Photography – Death*, you have suspended "photography" between the dashes, between "life" and "death".

Geoffrey Batchen

The invitation to curate that exhibition, which came from the Izu Photo Museum via one of my Japanese students, whom I worked with on the exhibition, happened to arrive at a time when I was working on a book about *Camera Lucida*. I had been reading *Camera Lucida* in great detail, and one of the things that interested me in my re-readings was that most commentators on the book always emphasized an association between photography and death, and almost inevitably interpreters emphasized the "that has been" as constituting photography's relationship to the past. However, in *Camera Lucida* Barthes contests that too easy placement of photography in the past. In fact, in the passages when he associates photography most strongly with death, he equally associates it with life. The photograph of his mother, which he found after her death, would, of course, not be very interesting to him if it only certified that she was once alive in the past. What makes that photograph a source of ecstasy and indeed grief for him, is that it shows her both being dead now and alive then, that it suspends her somewhere between life and death. One of the things he proposes in *Camera Lucida* is that this is a peculiar photographic quality, this ability of photography

to suspend its subject between life and death, and indeed to suspend ourselves similarly, because one of the things he argues is that when we look at a photograph, we see the past in the present. Therefore, we witness or even experience the passing of time, and to experience the passing of time is necessarily to imagine our own imminent passing, our own deaths in the future. In that sense, every photograph refers us simultaneously to the past, the present and the future.

When the opportunity came to make this exhibition at Izu Photo Museum, I thought: Why don't we make an exhibition about photography's capacity for this kind of suspension? We could look at mainly vernacular practices where people often have taken up a particular genre of photography and tried, in one way or another, to enhance or embrace photography's capacity to offer a temporal suspension. That was basically what the exhibition was about, and as you suggested, the title, especially the subtitle, tried to embody something of that idea, that photography is suspended somewhere between and within the spaces of life and death.

CG

In the exhibition you emphasize this specific temporal photographic quality in various groups or categories of images that are quite different from one another.

GB

Given the particular exigencies of this exhibition project, which was mostly based on my own collection of photographs, the reality is that we had to have a broad theme, which would allow us to show quite different kinds of photography. At the same time it still needed to have a thread, some

common link. In some ways the theme – suspending time – is a broad umbrella that allows a lot of different kinds of photography to be gathered together. It prompts the audience to consider these varieties of photography from a particular perspective, but it doesn't preclude them from looking at them from another perspective, so in that case I thought it was quite a nice idea. It opens up various questions about the photographs on display without precluding people from looking at them from other perspectives as well.

CG

Perhaps you could say something about the installation of the images. It seems to be a display that also proposes something specific in relation to "traditional" historical exhibitions.

GB

The way the exhibition was installed was important to me, and it always is in my exhibitions. In this case, each genre of photography was shown slightly differently. For example, we had a group of Japanese ancestor portraits. They are traditionally shown in a certain room in a Japanese home where rituals celebrating ancestors are often held. In a Japanese home those pictures are often almost invariably hung just below the rafters, high on the wall just below the ceiling. We deliberately hung them not at the usual museum height, but as they would have been encountered, as they obviously were made to be seen – literally looking up at these people who have ascended into some other realm of life, into an afterlife. We tried to replicate that. But on another wall of the exhibition we show a group of American cabinet cards photographed as part of a funeral celebration, or funeral ritual. Flowers that were sent to the funeral would be gathered by a professional photographer and photographed. Then photographs would be sent to everybody who attended the funeral as a kind of memorial to the deceased. Frequently, in those still lives, a photograph of the dead person, taken when they were still alive, would be included. We had sixty of these cards and I chose to hang them in a grid, so it would look like a piece of minimalist art. The idea was to try to impart to the viewer the sheer ubiquity of this kind of practice; that is, although each of these cards is individual and unique, each of them in fact endlessly repeats a set of conventions, in this case sixty times, but the implication is that it could have gone on to six thousand times.

CG

So it is a kind of typology?

GB

Yes, the endless repetition, the sameness and the difference in each case. I think it is made apparent to the museumgoer by the artificial nature of the installation. In other words, here we have a nineteenth-century vernacular photograph presented as if it is a piece of contemporary art, and I hope that that sort of disjunction makes the viewer aware that it is curated, that it is there for a reason, that there is a proposition, if you like, behind it. It is not there as a masterpiece in and of itself. Hopefully people will question the nature of the installation, and therefore also the character of the photographs within it.

Similarly, we had a group of American tintypes, which was shown as a dense cluster, as a kind of cloud. Also in this case I attempt to try and make the viewer more self-consciously aware of the act of looking at these images. They do not just rest in a neutral museum zone. They have been put there by a particular person for a particular reason. Finally, we had a whole gallery devoted to snapshots. Each of the snapshots includes a shadow of the photographer. So there were ninety-five photographs with the shadow of the photographer cast into them, usually by accident, or so we assume. We set up a light so that when you looked at the wall your own shadow was cast on it, to remind you that you too are casting a shadow into these photographs.

CG

During recent years there has been a discussion on the implications of exhibiting snapshots within the context of an art museum. One approach would be to regard the snapshot as an involuntary readymade, which is an approach that facilitates the notion of the possibility of creating "masterpieces" as something inherent in the apparatus; another approach would be to focus on questions of production, acknowledging the way these images were intended to be used by the person who made them.

GB

It has been said that 550 snapshots are made in the United States every second, and that something like 7.7 billion of them were made in 1977 alone. Who knows where these figures come from, but they give you a sense of the problem one has as an historian. How do you decide what is representative or typical? How do you

choose a relatively limited number from this vast host of snapshots to represent the whole genre? As you suggest, most curators and collectors have solved the problem by selecting snapshots that appear to be innovative; that is, they look like avant-garde photographs that we are already familiar with: photographs by Man Ray or Moholy-Nagy or Rodchenko, photographs that have double exposures or interesting shadows or croppings, or capture unexpected or sharp angles or things like that. That is, of course, one way to go. Another way would be to say: The best way to write a history for the snapshot is to write a very diligent social history, to look into the history of the advertising of snapshot products, to try to find typical snapshots, let's say for each decade, and you would provide a kind of chronological progressive social history of the snapshot, somehow, in an impossible way, choosing some typical examples from each period that one wants to represent.

Another way, of course, would be to simply say that the historical judgment of typicality is impossible. It is impossible to choose a representative sample of snapshots, so I won't even try, I'll just pick a whole bunch randomly out of the air. The whole argument, then, is going to be about the impossibility of the project itself. Different scholars and curators have also attempted that effort.

In an essay that I wrote about this problem, I proposed, given its impossibility, that *Camera Lucida* once again offers us probably the best solution. In that book, Barthes describes in detail and with a lot of emotion a snapshot or at least a family photograph of his now deceased mother, but then he says that for us it would be simply banal and boring, so he is not going to reproduce it in his book. Therefore, when we read his book, we inevitably project into this void, into this lack of reproduction, an image of our own most loved photograph, a photograph that we own ourselves of a loved one who is dead or absent. It is a very clever rhetorical ploy which forces us to project our own emotions into the space left in his book where he tells us about *his* emotions. I think that is a powerful narrative strategy.

However, in the Izu show I decided to try another tack, which is to pick just one type of snapshot, in this case those snapshots that include the shadow of the photographer him or herself, and, within this category, to choose images from as broad a historical range as I could, from as early a

snapshot as I could find to the present, and to include snapshots of that sort from all over the world. I deliberately made an effort to include quite a few Japanese examples. Then we framed the whole ninety-five with two artworks: a Lee Friedlander self-portrait which incorporates his own shadow and a photograph by Daido Moriyama, an important Japanese photographer who similarly includes his own shadow. So we had two large-scale art photographs, one on each end, and in between this floating cloud of ninety-five small snapshots. Part of the function here was to ask the questions: Could one imagine a history of the snapshot looking at just *one* trope – the photographer's shadow? Could one as a consequence of this installation ask questions about the relationship between art and vernacular practice? These are the questions that the installation put to the viewer.

Then there is, of course, everything that could be said about the shadow itself. By looking at these photographs one can see who took the photograph, whether it was a man or a woman, whether they are looking through the camera or down a viewfinder, what they were wearing. Often the shadow reaches out and touches the subject of the photograph, thus creating a kind of permanent bond between photographer and subject. Frequently we see the shadow of other people who are outside of the picture, standing with the photographer, so we get a sense that we are looking through the window and at a mirror, seeing what is in front of the subject who was being photographed. In other words, I am hoping to propose that even humble snapshots can be very complex pictures, even when these complexities are unintended. They have quite a lot of things to say both about photographs and about modern life more generally.

CG

In 2004 you made the exhibition *Forget Me Not*, which, in a similar way to *Suspending Time*, investigates the function of photography in vernacular practices. Could you say something about the relationship between these two projects?

GB

I was invited to do *Suspending Time* by this Japanese museum who had seen the catalogue for *Forget Me Not*, and they were interested in doing something similar. The problem was that a lot of the material in *Forget Me Not* came from my own collection, which I had since donated to two museums, so I didn't have that material any-

more. As a consequence, *Suspending Time* definitely builds on that exhibition, but at the same time the earlier exhibition was supposed to be about photography's relation to personal memory, and this one supposedly was about photography's relationship to time.

These things are obviously interrelated, but still I think there is a shift in perspective. In the *Suspending Time* exhibition there were several photographs that had also been in *Forget Me Not*, but I am hoping arguably they function somewhat differently in *Suspending Time*. I had quite a few photographs in *Forget Me Not* of people holding or revealing photographs. In *Suspending Time* that kind of image became a kind of cover image and it was the first thing you saw as you entered the exhibition. A woman is literally revealing a photograph to you, as you walk through the door.

One of the things about the way photography is frequently talked about is as if the photograph itself isn't really there, as if you are simply looking through a window onto some scene captured from the past. The "photographicness", the visual agency of the photograph, is often overlooked. This is, of course, the magic of photography, and the reason why it has such a privileged place in our culture is that it indeed seems to provide that kind of window. What was interesting to me was the number of times you find, and especially in nineteenth-century photographs, people holding, or pointing at, or trying to bring to your attention, a photograph in a photograph. So that's what I started the Japanese exhibition with.

CG

This kind of image, that is, when someone who has their portrait taken presents or shows us an absent person by means of including a photographic portrait, also calls your attention to the photograph as a material object.

GB

Exactly. It is a very common nineteenth-century thing, even if there are, of course, examples from the twentieth century. I often wondered why. Obviously in some cases people want to say to you: "My husband isn't here, he's dead or he's away, but I want him to be here in a photograph, so here he is in a daguerreotype that I am holding open for you." Sometimes somebody is holding a *carte de visite* and is photographed looking at it; in both cases, these are obviously carefully choreographed and posed images. So one of their functions is

to say: "Here is my absent husband, he is in the photograph with me because here is a photograph of him"; but another thing these pictures also are doing is saying: "Look, this is a photograph, it's an object, it has weight, it has volume" – the equivalent of a piece of sculpture, if you like. There's texture, sometimes you can smell them, sometimes you can feel them, sometimes you can hear them when you snap them shut or open them up. It draws attention also to the sensorial materiality of the photograph, and in *Forget Me Not* that was something I really wanted to emphasize.

Photographs are material objects, they involve many more senses than just sight alone, and that multisensory involvement is an important part of the way they function as memorial objects. Most photographs are also touchable. Sometimes they include dried flowers, sometimes they include poetic inscriptions that need to be read aloud, and therefore the voice is evoked. All these qualities enhance their memorial capacities and *Forget Me Not* was very much about that kind of enhancement.

CG

Both these projects also seem to have a specific relation not only to everyday photographic practices but also to specific local customs. How do these projects relate to questions such as regional histories of photography?

GB

When I spoke in Finland once, and I was taken around to various places, something that was casually pointed out to me was that there were many photographs of young people, mostly students, festooned in roses. I had never seen the repetition of this gesture before. It turns out that in Finland, when you graduate, you are festooned in roses, and there are many, many *cartes de visite* showing people covered in roses. It is very much a Finnish tradition, from the nineteenth century till now, which I have never seen anywhere else. I suspect that wherever one goes, one finds these local variants, or these local practices. Finns probably hardly notice it because it is so natural to them that they don't think of it as specific or interesting. We outsiders probably don't notice it either, because we see one or two of them, and we have no idea what it means. I try and recognize and identify the specificity of these kinds of practices, and then gather them together in a way that, say, you, as a Swedish viewer, could recognize it as something specific to

the local culture, or in fact see things that you took for granted in Sweden that are actually part of a larger body of practices that one can find everywhere.

I'll give you another example: *Forget Me Not* went to Iceland, and when I arrived in Reykjavik for the opening of the exhibition, the director of the museum had, to my surprise, added six works to the exhibition made by her mother, not made for the exhibition but works that her mother had at home. It turned out that her mother for a long time had made framed objects where she included a photograph of, let's say, her husband riding a horse. Then the photograph was surrounded by a wreath woven out of hair taken from the horse after it died. The mother was amazed to find that this kind of thing had actually been done for a century throughout Europe, where people took hair and wove it around photographs. She had no idea that she was part of this greater practice. So here we had an example where I brought stuff from Germany and the United States and elsewhere that was doing something vaguely similar, and then found that there was a local Icelandic tradition, which could be added to the exhibition to give it this kind of local perspective. Wherever the show was shown, local objects were added in that way.

CG

So it is constantly expanding, adding new layers?

GB

Yes, exactly. When it was shown at the National Media Museum in Bradford in the United Kingdom, they actually put an ad in the local paper and invited people to bring in material and they added four more galleries of material that people brought in. That was a very nice aspect of that exhibition because it was responsive to the local scene and it involved a lot of local people in it. They of course came to the museum to see their stuff and brought their friends and families. It is a nice way of actually getting the community involved in the project.

CG

In the essay in *Forget Me Not*, you also situate these photographic practices in a specific cultural condition and as a response to what Richard Terdiman describes as a memory crisis.

GB

Terdiman argues something to this effect: that the wholesale transformations of so-

cial life, in the early 1800s, with the acceleration of time, the transformation of experience, the urbanization of populations, the trains, the industrialization of work, the introduction of watches, and of artificial light, which meant that you no longer measured your day by how far you could work during the daylight hours, but by various other means, changed one's relation to society generally and even to one's own past. Indeed it is often said that history is an invention of the early nineteenth century; that is, that the understanding of history we have today is an entirely modern conception. All of these changes, this acceleration if you like, resulted in a kind of memory crisis, in which people felt that they no longer had a connection to their own past. Traditions were being not just displaced but entirely destroyed, seemingly over night. This is the feeling many people had in the nineteenth century, and it is a common perception because it is a feeling that we often have in our own time about technology. The transformation from paper-based books to electronic books signals, for some, a terrible erasure of centuries of reading culture, for example. How does photography fit into that? Photography could be seen as both an answer to it, in that it provides us with convenient memories – the appearance of loved ones, who might soon be gone, for example – but, on the other hand, it could be argued that it is also a symptom of the problem, in that to simply photograph somebody is to displace our feeling for them from memory, which is a living thing, to appearance, which is something far more superficial, and something that is necessarily set in the past. The proposition in the catalogue, building on Terdiman's thinking about this, was that photography could both be an answer to the memory crisis, but also an exacerbation of it, that it has this very ambivalent quality within modern life. It refers us to life and refers us to death simultaneously, which is one of the reasons that we find photography fascinating, even when the picture we're looking at is simply banal. The photographic experience is not easily definable, and it is the same with memory I think. Photography enhances memory, and destroys memory, at the same time.

CG

This enhancement also entails physical work with these objects, additions of other kinds of material to the photographs.

GB

One of the interesting things about looking at the kind of work in that exhibition was that what you were constantly being told by the owners and makers of these images is that the photograph by itself is just not sufficient. That is why we find people adding hair, adding writing, adding paint, adding butterfly wings, surrounding it with elaborate frames, putting taxidermied animals with the photograph. There were many, many examples of this kind of thing in the exhibition. What all those examples suggest is that, for whatever complicated reasons, the photograph alone, the photograph by itself, the photograph unenhanced, was considered to be not good enough, not functioning optimally, which leads me to believe that in every case, these additions were designed to try and enhance the memory capacities of the photograph. One way they enhance it is by adding further senses – touch, smell, taste, sound etc., and these kinds of things – so that we have a much more multisensorial memorial experience than if we just looked at a photograph on a wall or in your hand with no other elaborations. This is what was being proposed in the exhibition, anyway.

CG

In 2002 you guest-edited an issue of *Afterimage* on vernacular photographs, where you wrote a *proem* [see page 510]. Was that a proposal or an appeal for a new form of history writing?

GB

That special issue, which was about vernacular photography, gathered together a group of essays, many of them written by students who took the first class I ever taught at the Graduate Center. Two or three of the essays in that special issue came from that class; then I added two others by students I knew or people I knew were writing on the kinds of things I was interested in. I think it is still a very nice little issue. I am sure many people haven't seen it, but I was actually thinking at the time, and even now, that it would be very useful if we had a book like that, with short essays looking at genres that people haven't looked at. Now we would add an essay about Finnish *cartes de visite* with roses, and other things like that.

The *proem*, right, it was like a challenge. Here's the problem: I am guest editing an issue, and normally the guest editor writes some kind of platitude in the front. I thought instead of that I'd rather have a

kind of manifesto. As I started to write it, I just found myself repeating the same words: I want history to be like this, I want it to be this, I want it to be this, so then I ended up just repeating that phrase, like a kind of agitational manifesto, and this rant became the introduction.

CG

But I guess you can also look at the issue as a sequel to the *History of Photography* issue, for which you wrote the "Vernacular Photographies" essay. Could you say something about vernacular photography as a concept?

GB

At a certain point, it seemed to me that there was a need for the discipline I am in, the history of photography, to at last open itself up to all photographs. For various historical reasons, the history of photography as a discipline has been framed by and confined within the practices of art history, and frequently by the art museum. This has meant that certain kinds of photographs have been privileged above all others, especially photographs that were intended self-consciously to be art: photographs by Alfred Stieglitz or Edward Weston or Garry Winogrand or any of these kinds of figures. One result of that privileging, that prejudice you might call it, is that the vast majority of photographs had not been discussed and are usually not included in our histories, such as snapshots or any of the other kinds of things we have been talking about. What I came to call vernacular photographs – commercial photographs, industrial photographs, wedding photographs, baby pictures, hybrid photographs, anything that is not pure – doesn't find its way into the history.

I was musing on this problem, and when I was given the chance to guest edit this issue of *History of Photography*, I tried to write an essay that was methodological about it. I wouldn't even say theoretical, rather a kind of methodological essay as a way of introducing or framing this special issue, and I came up with the word "vernacular," which of course had been used in architectural debates for some time, to refer to the kind of architecture that McDonalds or Pizza Hut employs. [For a Swedish translation of "Vernacular Photographies", see pages 497–509 in this issue of *OEI*.]

However, the reason why I liked the word is that it is actually hard to define, and those are good kinds of words, because that means that they are open to any use

that you want. What is interesting about the word vernacular is that, when you look it up in a dictionary, it means what you would expect: ordinary, everyday, ubiquitous, but it also means local, as in: to speak the vernacular, to talk with a local accent or in a local dialect. I liked the idea that the vernacular was both about the ordinary, but also about the local. That would seem to open up the discipline of the history of photography to ordinary photographs, like the ones that featured in *Forget Me Not* and *Suspending Time*, but also, for example, to photography in Mali or photography in Venezuela, or photography in Mexico; that is, to practices that are local and specific to a particular region or culture. In both those areas it seemed to me that the established discipline of the history of photography had been remiss. It had not dealt with those things very well. I tried to open up the field to that possibility and as we have been discussing, in subsequent work I have tried to fulfill my own ambitions in that regard. On the other hand, I now prefer not to use the word vernacular because the consequences of publishing that essay and being part of this conversation is that people now imagine that there is a special kind of photograph called the vernacular photograph – a category unto itself.

It has become a category from which art is again separated, whereas my interest was always to include art photography within this broader transformation of the discipline and treat art photographs much as we treat snapshots, to treat each with the same degree of seriousness, and to bring the same kind of scholarly apparatus to both. Although I think it was a useful strategic thing at the time, I now try to avoid the use of the word vernacular and now simply use photography instead. And when I use the word photography, I self-consciously imagine it includes everything. That is where I am at today. Indeed I am nervous now when I hear other people use the word vernacular as if they think they know what it means. Like I said in the beginning, one of the appeals of the word was that it was rather hard to define, and now it annoys me in a way, or worries me, when people imagine that they know what it means.

CG

Has it become too successful?

GB

It is too easy a term to use, it becomes just another collecting category, it becomes a kind of categorical box, so that people can

put snapshots in that box, and Stieglitz's work in this other "artistic" box, and separate them again. That was never the way I imagined it myself. In any case, for me the problem was not how do we write about vernacular photographs, the problem was how do we transform the very infrastructure of the history of photography as a disciplinary project in order to encompass every photograph. In other words, my interest was always in a vernacular history of photography, rather than in a history of vernacular photographs. How can we invent new kinds of voices, offer new kinds of insights, provide new kinds of arguments about photography? It was in that sense that I was interested in a vernacular history of photography, rather than simply to invent a new category of "vernacular photograph."

CG

Historically, there has been quite a strong dominance of French, British, German, and American photography within the canon of photographic history, but during recent years there has been a global proliferation of efforts to write national histories.

GB

I will tell you one thing that is very interesting to know, in relation to what you are talking about. I got this book, it came in yesterday: *Refracted Visions. Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*, written by an anthropologist who teaches in Queens, CUNY, and it is similar to books by Christopher Pinney and others that look at, for lack of a better word, vernacular photography. In this case, the author looks at photography in Indonesia, or at least in Java, which is a specific part of Indonesia. Pinney similarly looks at a particular part of India, and so on. This kind of work is coming out now, and ten years ago it didn't exist. This scholarship is obviously informed by anthropology, but it is also informed by postcolonial theory, and feminism, and all sorts of other kind of discourses. That is very interesting for the history of photography and for art history in general.

Our field is in the process of an important stage of transformation. It is also interesting that we don't have a word for it yet. We once had this word, postmodernism, a word that seemed to stand for some changes that were occurring, intellectual changes. I am not sure what the word is anymore. I am not sure that there is a common course, a political umbrella under which this new thinking is taking place, but there is definitely something happening.

Perhaps the fact that it doesn't have a proper name attached to it is a strength. It certainly allows people like me, but especially you, younger scholars like you, a lot of room for maneuver. You can go wherever you want, really. The field is wide open at the moment.

I will give you an example of what I am talking about. As you know, I was recently invited to visit Gothenburg in western Sweden as a part of a conversation about how to put together a history of Swedish photography. There was a conversation about what it should look like, what models should be looked to, how should it be organized, what kinds of photographs should be included or not included in this history, the usual kinds of questions. But my contribution was to say, why don't we reframe the question and say what would a Swedish history of photography be like? Why should we confine ourselves to just photographs made by Swedes or made in Sweden? For start there is the difficulty of defining what is Swedish. Should one include a photographer born in Sweden, even when they work elsewhere? Foreign photographers who for some reason had found their way to Sweden and photographed there? What is Swedish? It is a very complicated question. A lot of other regional histories have struggled to answer that question. Why don't we abandon that problem altogether and say we are going to write a history of photography from a Swedish perspective. That would obviously include a lot of photography that has occurred in Sweden. But on these occasions when Swedes had read *Life magazine* about race riots in Alabama, that too will be part of what is encompassed within a Swedish history of photography. The emphasis, then, will be on the problem of the *history*, rather than on the *photography*. What kind of history is this going to be? Is there such a thing as a Swedish history? Is there a Swedish perspective to the way we might write history? That would be a more interesting question to me than the question of whether there is a Swedish photography, which I have to say is always going to be a boring answer. It is photography produced by someone who has Swedish citizenship or something like that. So Lennart Nilsson will be in, but Robert Frank, who might have visited Sweden, will be out? That seems crazy to me; if you photograph in Sweden, you should be in. But I think that the more important thing would be: If such-and-such a photography mattered to Swedish people, then it should be in our histo-

ries, no matter where it was produced. In most of the modern age, photography has not stayed within national boundaries; it is disseminated widely through mass media. Probably Swedes saw the *Family of Man*, probably they saw the work of Diane Arbus, probably they saw the work of Otto Steiner. You can't put a national limit to the way photography has actually affected our lives. Anyway, this is the kind of arguments that people like me can help generate. But this is also the kind of arguments that our discipline needs to have. What are our aims and ambitions as a discipline? What are the really important questions that need to be addressed now? What can historians and scholars in a little country like Sweden actually contribute to this discourse? A, dare I say, boring history of a provincial photography is not a great contribution, except perhaps to Swedes – and maybe it is important to them. But a profound meditation on the nature of history itself; that is a fantastic contribution! That could change the whole world. Why not? Be ambitious! Why does the history of photography need to be written by an American or a Frenchman? Why couldn't it be written by a Swede? Or a group of Swedes? That's the question to be asked.

I am saying this as an Australian. I mean I grew up in a culture that's far more provincial than Sweden's, where we have constantly looked elsewhere, first to Britain then to the United States for all our standards and models, so I certainly understand, if you like, the economy of insecurity that leads to that kind of thing. Getting back to this current project, this is a time when we shouldn't be looking over to Newhall or Frizot, but we should be looking inward and asking what would a Swedish history look like, be like, sound like? What would its particular concerns be? Why can't we dwell on the question of our specificity as a culture and a nation state. Sweden is, of course, a very complicated nation state, which at different times incorporated all sorts of bits of Europe and the rest of Scandinavia. So the whole question of what Sweden is already is an open question. But if you actually address that question in your history, then you necessarily would have to deal with Sweden's colonial, imperial past, the complication of its relationship to its neighbors, the different languages that are even now still spoken in Sweden, etc, etc. It is important of course to look outside, because again Sweden is not impervious to the outside, but at certain points we also need to have the confidence to look at our

own histories, at our cultural traditions, to form something specific out of those.

CG

When talking about the writing of history and the contemporary conditions that shape this kind of writing, it seems unavoidable not to evoke the question of contemporary technological changes that affect both the production and dissemination of photography.

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One has to be careful that one doesn't propose that changes in technology in and of themselves will transform, or for that matter, dissolve photography – in part because, historically speaking, photography has never been any one technology. In technological innovation, obsolescence has always been part of the story, from the invention and then extinction of the daguerreotype through the collodion, gelatin silver, and now digital processes. Those are only a few of the changes that have occurred, but even to take those three or four, on each occasion, with the introduction of that new technology, what followed was the extinction of the one that had previously dominated the field. Photography continued, but it also changed. For example, with the end of the daguerreotype, photographs could finally be glued into albums, and because they were paper they could be much more easily distributed and were much less fragile. That opened up all sorts of possibilities for the distribution of photographs, which hadn't previously occurred. Similarly, with the advent of the digital realm we now have the possibility that at this very instant you and I could take cell phone pictures of each other and send them to each other within the same sixty-second period, almost like saying "hi" without even putting words to it. In other words, photography continues but under different conditions and to different ends. So, on the one hand, we do not want to say that technology in itself will bring about the end of photography; on the other hand, you wouldn't want to discard technological change altogether. Technology matters: the way photography is produced, and especially disseminated, and therefore received, is in part determined by the technologies that are available.

Historians need to be finely attuned to these changes. So regarding the potential possibility of photography's death, my answer is: first you need to define photography, and that is not as easy as you think, and second, you have to define death, also

not as easy as you think. Is Elvis Presley dead? He is one of the best-paid entertainers in the world today. His records are still released. He is as alive for me personally as he ever was. I never knew the man personally, so in effect he is still out there in exactly the same way as he always was. Death is a complicated matter, but then so is photography. It has constantly changed its format and the technology of its production. The way in which we perceive it has changed even in my own lifetime, markedly, several times, and it continues to change. The question will be, at what point does the basic conceptual infrastructure of photography change to such a degree that we can no longer call it photography, to a degree where it has become something else? At some point in the eighties and early nineties, it seemed as if it was about to reach that point, but now that we are in 2010, I'm not so sure. I am looking at the room we are talking in, and it is festooned with photographs, many of them digital, and yet I am treating them in much the same way as I have always treated photographs. I have the same, you might say emotional responsive, or lack of it, as I always have. So photography still seems to be clinging on. But, as historians, we also have to recognize that photography has not always been. It came from nowhere. It can go to nowhere. We have to be open to that possibility too.
