Other People's Stories: Bringing Public-Generated Photography into the Contemporary Art Museum

Areti Galani* and Alexandra Moschovi**

Abstract

Constituting the 'defining other' of art photography, amateur photographic practices have long been neglected or specifically excluded from official histories of photography. Even the term 'amateur' has historically been characterized by semantic ambiguity. In recent years, however, contemporary amateur photographs have been capturing the art curatorial imagination. This is often motivated by the institutional and political impetus to engage with personal, local stories, rather than official, national narratives alone. Amateur photographs, with their apparent rawness and immediacy may afford the art museum with a more credible record of 'real life' and enable the display of polyvocal narratives. Furthermore, the changing digital media landscape has opened up opportunities for art museums to reach new audiences through public-contributed content. In response to these developments, this article asks: How has amateur photography acquired a protagonist role in contemporary art museum displays? Drawing on contrasting case studies of exhibitions in the US and Europe, which have incorporated user-contributed photographic content in their displays, this article discusses how everyday photographic creativity and the raw materials of people's stories serve as a means to interact with institutionally constructed histories of photography.

Key words: user contributed photography, art museum, photography exhibitions, art history, digital heritage.

The recent expansion of photography's field of operations in the non-linear environment of Web 2.0 has impacted the culture of making and consuming photographs, breathing new life (and afterlife) into amateur practices. In this digital universe the means of production and (micro)publishing have come into the hands of 'ordinary' people at an unprecedented scale, signalling the second phase of photography's mass popularization—the first having been associated with the launch of George Eastman's Kodak camera at the turn of the nineteenth century. The current generation of smartphones, equipped with high-resolution digital cameras and high-speed internet connections, are indeed the 'you press the button, it does the rest' devices *par excellence*, allowing users to shoot, edit, manipulate, and share their photographic images potentially in real time.

The ubiquity and increased popularity of the networked image, or what has been called 'Photography 2.0', (Ritchin 2008: 12) have ushered in shifts in the interpretation, consumption and recontextualization of amateur, everyday snapshots online and offline, bringing to the public eye what until recently remained an 'invisible image' (Rubistein and Sluis 2008: 10). This omnipresence has also affected the very culture of photography, blurring the boundaries between genres and functions, scholarly and vernacular, professional and amateur, private and public. In this seemingly open-to-all space for visual communication, photo-sharing, moblogging, commenting, annotating, favouring and liking become social acts that shape the relationship between producers and consumers of cultural meaning, and as such have attracted much scholarly attention and interdisciplinary debates across the humanities.

Originating among the 'common' people (folk), adopted by, adapted to or reflecting the taste of the people (popular), a hobby and a cultural artefact lacking in professional sophistication (amateur), and relating to a large number of people (mass), what is often invariably termed

'vernacular', 'amateur', 'everyday', photography has been systematically examined in the related disciplines of anthropology, sociology, human geography and cultural history as well as in media and communication studies (Bourdieu 1990/1965; Chalfen 1987; Edwards 2001; Rose 2010; Hand 2012). In tune with the Zeitgeist of the so-called 'ethnographic turn' in culture and arts in recent decades (Foster 1996: 171-204), the renewed interest of artists and curators in the archive and the found image has also led to a reconceptualization of the amateur snapshot. More so as in its digital version, photography appears to be the perfect mouthpiece for the rebranded 'engaging,' 'reflective,' 'participatory' museum (Black 2005; Lang et al. 2006; Simon 2010). Reflecting on the latter development, this article explores how snapshots in the age of Photography 2.0 have been incorporated into contemporary displays in art museums and galleries. It specifically examines the ways in which such imagery has been interpreted, accommodated and assimilated within art curatorial practices that renegotiate authored discourse through the deployment of polyvocal narratives and participatory practices. Through case studies of art exhibitions that incorporated analogue or digital, public-contributed photographic content into their displays, we discuss how everyday photographic creativity and the raw materials of other people's stories can serve as a means to interact with institutionally constructed art and local/national histories. The article initially explores art historical debates around 'amateur' photography, which largely inform its curatorial treatment in the art museum, then turns to a discussion of four key themes from our case studies. We argue that desires for community engagement, expansion of the photographic genre, capturing of the vernacular, and generation of new museum content are shaping the processes and products of institutional attempts to include public-contributed photographs in contemporary art museum exhibitions.

Appropriating the amateur

Constituting the 'defining other' of art photography and failing by definition to match the value of other 'noble' genres of photography, amateur photographic practices have long been neglected or specifically excluded from the official art history of photography, and thus from the art museum (Nickel 1998: 11). An advocate of a more inclusive cultural history of photography more akin to Visual Culture Studies than to Art History, Geoffrey Batchen observed photo-historians' reluctance, at best, to accommodate snapshots 'into a historical narrative still anxiously, insecurely, focused on originality, innovation and individualism' (2008: 123-124).[1] This was considered an essentially modernist position despite two decades of postmodern theorizing. Accounting for this reluctance, he argued, are the sentimentality, the repetitiveness (both in terms of form and content) and the banality of snapshots as much as their lack of artistic and economic value within the art establishment. Indeed, snapshots have been generally regarded as potentially too reproducible *ad infinitum* (even if they usually survive in single printed copies), as essentially too intimate, destined to be primarily consumed and circulated in 'private contexts of interpersonal communicative relationships', to be considered museum collectibles (Chalfen cited in Berger 2011: 186).

Even the term 'amateur' that usually accompanies the snapshot has been characterized historically by semantic ambiguity hovering between 'praise and condemnation' (Green 1974: 2003), between the joys of the pastime and the qualities of those artefacts and practices deemed lacking in professional skill. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the term 'amateur' was to accommodate both the enthusiasm and dedication of the first aristocratic amateurs and the playfulness of the Kodaker. However, at the dawn of the following century, the term came to describe the gallant pursuit of artistic expression, which, distinguished from the trivial commercial practice of high-street photographers, was not to be confused with the unambitious pursuit of the average Sunday snapshooter (Stieglitz 2000: 104). Since the 1960s, the incidentality, technical clumsiness, and banality of casual amateur and vernacular photographs acquired new currency as these images were materially and/or stylistically appropriated by artists and photographers; the aesthetic of the unaesthetic associated with snapshot imagery effectively became a recognizable style in the contemporary art establishment.[2] Yet, such vernacular imagery, despite its established presence in other museums, has generated serious curatorial attention in the art museum only in the past two decades, as the exhibitions below demonstrate.

As debates were taking shape about the place of vernacular photography in photographic histories and curatorial practices, Douglas Nickel was among the first photography curators to bring the problematic of the snapshot to the fore within the space of the art museum with the exhibition *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present,* organized at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998. Nickel emphasized the intricate social and cultural currency of the snapshot in different historical contexts, the interwoven factors that determine a snapshot's making, and which make the theorization of the 'most populous class of photographic object' a fairly enormous endeavour (Nickel 1998: 9). Following this initiative, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York held in 2000 the exhibition *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*, while in 2004 two additional private collections of vernacular photographs were accommodated by American art museums: *In the Vernacular: Everyday Photographs from the Roger Kingston Collection* at the Boston University Art Gallery, and *Close to Home: An American Album* at the Getty Museum. In 2007, the National Gallery in Washington staged the exhibition *The Art of the American Snapshot*, *1888-1978*, which was based on Robert E. Jackson's collection of 8,000 snapshots. All these exhibitions aimed to recontextualize the historical vernacular within the art museum not simply because of what Catherine Zuromskis has called 'an atrophying of vernacular ingenuity or inability to distance ourselves from more recent developments in photographic convention' (Zuromskis 2008a: 426). This curatorial fascination was also triggered by more than a generalized interest in the social history or anthropological outlook onto cultural activity; unauthored images, stripped bare of their original function and context, 'take on the unassailable nobility of orphans and the ineffable enchantment of found poetry,' as one museum curator stated (Fineman 2000: np). It is the trained eye of the collector and/or curator and their de/re/contextualization in the museum's galleries or publication that metamorphosed these 'trivial' fragments of ordinary life into extraordinary moments that captured the 'poetic' aspect of the everyday. This process of curatorial interpretation within the art museum transforms the very functionality and personal meaning of the historical snapshot into aesthetic or social value, the two main contrasting axes in contemporary curatorial discourse.[3] We will claim that such conventions, which have often been explored in exhibitions dealing with historic vernacular photography, may also apply to museum exhibitions that incorporate contemporary vernacular photography.

In an attempt to challenge the curatorial control over displayed vernacular material, Bill Ewing, the director of the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, Switzerland introduced in 2007 a grand-scale participatory project suitably entitled *We Are All Photographers Now*. The exhibition featured an impressive 50,000 entries from all over the world, uploaded on a computer that randomly selected one hundred images to be printed and displayed each week.[4] In the same vein, when Erik Kessel was invited by FOAM in Amsterdam in 2011 to stage an exhibition on the future of the photography museum, he responded with an impressive installation that consisted of piles of prints of all the images uploaded onto the photo-sharing website Flickr during a 24-hour period.[5] We would argue that such purposefully liberal editing processes are not necessarily the norm when it comes to accommodating amateur, public-generated content in on-site and online museum displays.

The evolving digital media landscape that has given rise to online social networks, image-sharing platforms, citizen journalism and crowd-sourced knowledge has encouraged museums in the US, Australia, and some European countries (notably the UK) to identify in social media platforms and public-generated photographs a means to increase their diversity of activities and to reach new audiences. This approach is supported by researchers in the field who characterize social media like Flickr and Facebook as 'an exceptional platform from which to establish dialogue with and between users, to build relationships and bring together communities of interest'.[6] The motivation for the above, at least in the UK, is tied to governmental agendas for social inclusivity and diversity, particularly in the 1990s; more recently these have focused on ideas of community empowerment, cohesion and participation (Crooke 2007: 43). In this context, amateur photographs instigated within and collected through social media applications have been displayed in numerous contemporary museum exhibitions, three of which we discuss below. The selected exhibitions highlight the differences and similarities among contemporary art curatorial approaches to vernacular photography and its histories;

they further offer an opportunity to explore some of the challenges associated with accommodating public-generated imagery within the aesthetically defined space of the art museum.

Life of the City (2002)[7]

In spring 2002, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) held what it called an 'experimental' exhibition about the city of New York. Along with the architecture, landscape, and buzz of the city, the show aimed to also explore the diverse cultures and traditions of photography in New York. As such, the 156 exhibits that furnished the main part of *Life of the City* were drawn from the museum's collection of photographic masterworks. Mostly black-and-white, mounted and framed according to museological standards, the vintage photographs by renowned American art photographers were intersected sporadically by newspaper photographs and other 'non-artistic' images, all of which were included in a modestly priced exhibition catalogue (Hermanson-Meister 2002).

One wall featured colour photographs of every size, style and theme that were contributed by New Yorkers and visitors, amateur and professionals, who responded to the museum's open call 'to express their relationship to the city.'[8] 'Unless it's something violent… or potentially disturbing to a lot of people, we're going to put up everything we get,' Peter Galassi, then chief curator of the Department of Photography, stated when the call for submissions was publicized in the American press (cited in Siedel 2002). Unmounted and unframed prints up to 16 x 20 inches, hand-delivered according to the museum brief, were stuck onto the wall with clear pushpins on a rotating basis depending on the number of submissions, which steadily increased as some visitors to the exhibition would return to submit their photographs of New York.[9] Within the frenetic Salon-style installation were pictures of urban canyons and skyscrapers, subway ephemera and sidewalk dramas, window displays and kids at play, flags and views of the World Trade Center, the hustle and bustle of the big city—some clumsily taken, others more skillfully composed with references to the American tradition of street photography (Holliday 2002). Galassi specifically commented on the thematic pluralism of the submitted material and the unexpected dialogues initiated in the impromptu installation: 'what does a photograph of a Hindu procession in Queens tell us next to a picture of a city worker talking on his cell-phone in midtown Manhattan?'[10]

Nonetheless, the arresting centrepiece of the show was the projection of a constant stream of professional and amateur photographs collected by the post-September 11 project *Here Is New York*: *A Democracy of Photographs*. Initiated immediately after the attacks 'as an alternative way of looking at and thinking about history' proposed 'by the people for the people,'[11] the project gained phenomenal momentum attracting photographers and camera users of every type. In the *Here Is New York* display in a vacant storefront in Soho, no titles or names were provided for the photographs, while all of the inkjet prints were printed at the same size, hung on a hardware-store washing line, and sold for $25 each. The 'moral imperative to record' thus overshadowed claims of authorship as anonymity and the uniformity of presentation levelled professionals and amateurs, denouncing the 'master/mastery' discourse so long associated with photography in art museums. Here was, in the words of Margaret Olin, an 'ideal perception of a high-modernism type of democracy' (Olin 2009).

Yet it was neither photography's much-debated 'democraticness' (Berger 2009: 41) nor its perceived unpreciousness, everydayness, immediacy, and ease of dissemination in material or digital formats that established it in public consciousness as the ideal medium of expression in the aftermath of September 11 and every other traumatic public event since. Barbie Zelizer has claimed that the 'ritual' practice that photography involves can help people caught in tragedies such as these to 'establish moral accountability' and thus 'return the collective to its pre-traumatic state' (2002: 698). Dealing with trauma, loss, and memorialization was the predominant exhibition value and purpose of *Here Is New York* and what probably brought such a varied crowd of people who were not the usual museum-goers or tourists to MoMA's doors.

Life of the City was MoMA's cultural contribution to the local recovery campaign to lure tourists back to New York City after the attack, as museum director Glen Lowry stated.[12] The exhibition was therefore expected to have a populist element to make it appealing to a wider audience, to 'everyday New Yorkers' and tourists alike. A side display 'everyone' could engage

with was the curatorial eureka that not only considerably increased the number of visitors, but also created among the participants a sense of pride in and ownership of their work, as well as good feelings about the museum and the city. The photographs may have depicted a historic event and added the public's perspective to the museum's narrative of the life in New York before and after 9/11, but the act of participation was the main message of the side display. 'What the great artist photographers are doing and what you do when you take your snapshots,' Galassi stated 'is in the end practically the same, you point at something that matters to you.'[13] Interestingly, although the photographs were put on the wall as they arrived, with content or artistic merit regarded as perfunctory affairs, this diffusion of pedigrees, skills and intentions that Galassi hinted at was not equally manifested throughout the multi-site exhibition—an observation that we will come back to in the following sections.

How We Are and How We Are Now (2007)

Half a decade later, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Tate Gallery in London - often challenged for its exclusion of photography for most of the twentieth century (Moschovi 2005: 8) - held its first large-scale in-house photography exhibition in the summer of 2007. Placing anonymous snaps, photographic ephemera, archival material, and commercial imagery alongside celebrated masters, old and new, the curators, Val Williams and Susan Bright, aimed to 'revise the history of British Photography' and unearth 'fascinating continuums' among genres and practices, professional and amateur, artistic and applied, across time (2007: 9). This 'quasi-ethnographic' approach that endeavoured to 'make use of the medium as an embedded form of local documentation and social exchange'[14] purposefully disrupted with vernacular imagery the traditional narrative of technologies, inventions, and masterpieces that comprised the official history of British photography. Cabinet cards of 'working and destitute lads' from the Barnado Archives, lockets and hair bracelets with miniature portraits, surveillance photographs from the Criminal Record Office, records from the British Red Cross, *Country Life* magazine covers, anonymous portraits from commercial studios, advertising and fashion imagery, postcards, and family albums were interspersed in the grand installation. Challenging the Tate's long-standing reluctance to exhibit current and non-canonical work, the exhibition was complemented by contemporary public-generated imagery contributed via a Flickr group.

Submitted under four thematic categories - landscape, documentary, portrait, and still-life - the photographs entered a digital pool that was to be streamed continually for four weeks and with minimal interference (apart from obscenity censorship) in the hallway just outside the main exhibition. Out of 5,231 submissions, 40 photographs (ten in each category) were selected by a committee of established jurors, accessioned online, and archived on the gallery's website for future reference. This participatory initiative, although not a new museum practice in 2007, generated immense public interest among Flickr users. More than 2,700 photo-enthusiasts joined the group *How We Are Now*, many of whom visited the show in London. The curators of the main exhibition justified the inclusion of such imagery as a tribute to the snapshot, which they saw as providing 'a democratic, independent counterbalance to the demands of the gallery and the collector, […] offering a spontaneous, personal comment on a shifting and sometimes uneasy society' (Williams and Bright 2007: 9). Their original idea in presenting this raw vernacular material was to allow visitors to browse the Flickr pool on a networked computer inside the gallery. However, it was ultimately decided that a four-screen installation outside the ticketed area of the exhibition would be more enticing for the museum's diverse audiences.[15]

The streamline of unedited images showcased the breadth and depth of imagination of the casual snapshooter. Visitors saw pictures of castles, flowers, cats, dogs, babies, and family occasions; here was a mosaic of Flickr imagery, from romantic rural landscapes and bucolic idylls to chance and accident in the city, close-up portraits, still-lives, and a touch of eroticism here and there. Unlike the installation of *Life of the City,* the fleeting bombardment of images in the gallery slideshow allowed neither space nor time for building dialogues between images or for individual images to stand out.[16] This was only achieved in the Flickr pool, in which photographs of the homeless, clubbers, consumer insignia, chocolate-box views, and flowers mingled in such a way that expressed the diverse cross-section of British society.

Some of the most involved contributors, who appeared to be veteran Flickr users, admitted on Flickr group discussions that much of the submitted imagery was blatantly boring,

simplistic, at times kitsch, uninspired, and often of poor quality.[17] With triteness, repetition, and similarity being its defining characteristics, the amateur snapshot is by nature conceptually very close to the cliché. As Lynn Berger has argued, both are 'cultural products of technological change with middle-class connotations.' The snapshot, like the cliché, is 'associated with the common man' and 'commonplace' (Berger 2011: 178). As already discussed, it is the naivety, functionality, technical imperfection, and aesthetic banality that constitute the otherness, authenticity, and thus the novel cult value of these vernacular images; ironically, this is also what makes them so appealing to artists and curators alike. Therefore, the Tate's approach to involve a competition that defined genre categories and winners defies the very purpose of collecting such material, as contributors often censored themselves and selected submissions according to the competition's aesthetic criteria. The selection by the jury attempted to tame the amateur imagination, subordinating it to aesthetics by selecting images that were somehow eye-catching and reflected familiar visual or vernacular styles in recent art photography. This consistency of tone was not only apparent in the aesthetics underwriting the selection of photographs, but also in the exhibition's narrative of how the nation is now, presenting a UK that is, as one contributor commented, 'culturally homogenous, mono-ethnic and less conflicted' than it sees itself.[18]

Homogeneity was also re-enforced by the mash-up-style presentation, as the uniformity of the presentation and deconxtextualization of the images seemed to equalize and flatten all of the submissions, reducing them to flickering impressions of somebody else's everyday, despite the fact that the photographers' personal information, tastes, and pursuits were retraceable through the Flickr pool. Although these images embodied an enticing nowness, the gallery would not overcome its ideas of what was (or was not) worthy of museum collection (Moschovi 2008), and only archived online the 40 images that were selected by the jury as 'extraordinary' ordinary pictures. Reduced to some kind of 'visual chatter' (Grundberg 2005: 109), these images are far from historical documents of an era. Stripped bare of their contexts, these vernacular photographs were transformed into paradoxical cultural artefacts, or, as Geoffrey Batchen put it, 'into memories without memory, stories without storytellers; in short, into enigmas' (2008: 131).

Northern Spirit: 300 years of Art in the North East (2010)

Departing from the Tate's approach, the research team that contributed content to the *Northern Spirit* permanent exhibition, at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne, aimed to highlight the storytelling potential of amateur photographs and to allow for a dialogue to be developed between curated art displays and public-contributed visual (and audio) material. The permanent gallery display titled *Northern Spirit: 300 years of Art in the North East* opened in 2010 to celebrate 'the achievements of artists, manufacturers and makers from the North East of England' through the re-display of 'internationally acclaimed art' from the gallery's collection.[19] Alongside the more traditionally curated part of the exhibition, which included the display of work by nineteenth-century British artists John Martin and Thomas Bewick, were digital media installations, such as touchscreens, a wall projection and an interactive map. These provided access to photographs, films, and audio contributed by people in the North East of England, thus allowing visitors to explore broadly the connections between art, identity, and a sense of place.

The goal of the research team leading this aspect of the exhibition was not, however, to 'produce a commentary on the gallery and its content' (Mason et al. 2013: 174) or to treat the public-contributed content as a form of interpretation for the gallery's collection. Instead, the researchers 'aimed to facilitate the creation of new audio visual exhibits which would be integrated within the display and brought into relation with the collection' (Mason et al. 2013: 174). To achieve this goal a facilitated participatory approach was followed, which involved the recruitment of participants from different walks of life from the North East of England as well as contributions by media and photography professionals as facilitators. Specifically, the public-contributed photographs were generated through two routes: recruited participants made individual and group photographic visits to different locations in the region and a Flickr-based open competition invited contributions by both the Flickr community and the public. Flickr contributors were asked to submit photographs under two broad themes: 'then and now' and

'life today.' One may argue, therefore, that the new photographic material was generated to allow for contemporary vernaculars to be expressed but also to be juxtaposed with the interpretation of other vernaculars depicted in artworks from the collection. This dialogue between different vernaculars contributed to the team's broader intention to 'question conventional boundaries between categories like art/geography/social history; amateur/expert; scholarly/ vernacular; and public/personal' (Mason et al. 2013: 166). To borrow Ross Parry's comment about the LIVE!Labels project,[20] the participatory photography displays in *Northern Spirit* would 'connect the iconic fixity of the gallery environment to the new authoring possibilities of the Web'; this, in turn, would allow 'the narratives of the museum to become more fluid, more responsive and more polyvocal' (Parry 2007: 111).

In the exhibition, the public-contributed photographs were displayed in digital-only format in three kinds of display: small touch screens interspersed on the exhibition floor that offered access to public-generated material as well as interpretive material authored by the exhibition team; a large wall projection with a continuous slideshow of photographs from the institution's archives, the Flickr competition, and the participatory project; and an interactive digital map with old and new photographs associated with a specific location in the Newcastle/ Gateshead area. In this respect, the public-generated photographs were accessible in different sizes and under different viewing opportunities; one could physically interact with a digital map, watch a projection, or actively search exhibition content in touch screens. This approach aimed to 'make different knowledges [sic] resonate against one another, to disrupt conventional boundaries between types of material culture, and problematize the traditional hierarchies which underpin assumptions about different kinds of visual culture' (Mason et al. 2013: 167). However, from an exhibition design point of view, the different delivery platforms for the photographic content (including the historic photographs from the archive) were positioned on the periphery of the exhibition while works of art occupied its centre; most of the photographs were segregated in a space outside the main gallery and the touch screens were put on pedestals in the aisles of the exhibition. No other digital installations were included in the exhibition,[21] contributing further to the distinction between 'core' exhibition content and 'peripheral/supporting' material, part of which comprised public-generated photographs.

Arguably, this is not a surprising observation. Unlike the art-historical debate around amateur images critiqued by Geoffrey Batchen and others, the public-generated photographs in *Northern Spirit* were not intended to converse with the museum's collection of artworks and crafts in purely aesthetic terms. In an exhibition that according to its curator aimed to celebrate the 'intrinsic qualities of the [North East] art' (Whetstone 2010: 3) and 'some of the region's most significant artists and makers in the permanent collection' (anonymous 2010), the public-generated photographs, as part of the audiovisual offering of the exhibition, were not solely tasked with expressing people's alternative visions of the city; they were also expected to communicate 'different voices alongside each other' (Mason et al. 2013: 166). This was also pursued in the selection of the photographs for display, as some of them 'were intended to deliberately undercut a celebratory or overly romantic presentation of the city's and region's history and to expand the limited representation of issues such as the deindustrialization of the area and the regeneration of the city's quayside'.[22] Including the source of each photograph in its caption expressed the team's intention to strengthen the voice of individual amateur photographs and avoid their complete decontextualization, which has often happened in exhibitions of snapshots in US and European art museums. In *Northern Spirit*, the authored amateur images are expected to go beyond the commonly claimed immediacy and democraticness of vernacular photography and to inspire familiarity in visitors to the exhibition. In other words, the public-generated photographs (and audio-visual material) would provide the overall exhibition with new entry points by bolstering its ability to 'speak to multiple audiences.'[23] Making viewers feel familiar with the images on display meant that publically generated photographs in *Northern Spirit* were collected and curated not for their aesthetic quality but as personal expressions of everyday visual culture. Through their perceived lack of mediation, amateur photographs in *Northern Spirit* could offer 'not only [serve] an entry point for visitors to the larger narrative, but also broaden the currency of that narrative among a more diverse museum audience' by 'revisiting, and perhaps revising, the big narrative in light of little ones' (Rowe et al. 2002: 109).

Personal stories and photographic histories

The discussion of the three exhibitions above suggests that a number of art museums and galleries, which aimed to expand their institutional boundaries and to engage wider with their old and new audiences, have found in amateur photography and social media platforms convenient means of capturing people's interest, inspiring contributions, and enhancing their collections' ability to tell stories. The numerous exhibitions that explored this approach through public calls, competitions, or facilitated participatory projects have nevertheless resulted in the creation of new amateur images and the public sharing of existing private ones. The majority of these photographs found their way to Flickr pools; several of them were included in gallery displays; and some, admittedly the smallest number, have remained in the private collections of their creators as they were not deemed a good fit for the projects to which they were submitted.

Questions of relevance and/or fitness are paramount in the exhibitions we have discussed in this article and differentiate, we suggest, the amateur photographs solicited, produced, and displayed in these museum projects from the amateur snapshots that have preoccupied art historians and curators in recent decades (Nickel 1998; Fineman 2000; Smith 2001; Batchen 2000, 2008). Without a doubt, exhibition logistics and practical display limitations may well account for unifying the size and scale of the solicited photographs that we saw in all three exhibitions considered here. The flexible and 'variable'[24] nature of digital files opens up opportunities for these images to be manipulated in ways that conform to the aesthetics and curatorial visions of the exhibitions they inhabit rather than defining them through their materiality, as has often been the case with the exhibitions of historical amateur images at SFMoMA, and elsewhere.

Moreover, unlike Mia Fineman's 'orphan' amateur photographs and Catherine Zuromskis's 'lost' family photographs, the amateur photographs contributed by the public in our case studies had known creators, as platforms like Flickr groups disallow the submission of photographs by users without Flickr accounts. In the Flickr pools that formed one of the main contribution avenues for two of the discussed exhibitions, one can actually source the context of the images by following the links to the contributors' own pages. This access to the photographers' public data allows a valuable insight into the demographics of the submitted material that was missing from the displays in the gallery. What is more, the Flickr pool offers information on the folksonomy of the submissions, as users tend to tag their images with selected words that indicate their own interpretations of them; this also makes the material searchable, retrievable, and widely available online. Daniel Rubistein and Katrina Sluis have suggested that it is the semantic act of tagging that may 'subvert any attempt to impose narrative order on the snapshot collection,' allowing for multiple narratives, juxtapositions, and cross-dialogues through the constant remapping and migration of images to diverse online contexts and platforms (Rubistein and Sluis 2008: 16). Now this chameleonic potential seems to have been lost largely on the on-site displays of amateur photographs in favour of more prescribed institutional narratives on the basis of curatorial interests and collection relevance.

In the quest for increased relevance and accountability towards their old and new audiences, museums over the last decade have solicited and accommodated amateur photography in their displays. Under the weight of rich collections ingrained with historical and cultural meanings, which might appear detached from people's everyday experiences, and in the context of an ever-expanding technologically mediated visual culture, museums have turned to amateur photographs and everyday digital platforms, such as Flickr, for immediacy, directness, and familiarity—characteristics imagined to bridge institutional narratives with other people's stories. In the examples discussed in this article, small stories were voiced through the amateur photograph displays but in none of the cases did they appear to challenge the larger institutional narrative; small stories often functioned as illustrations of the dominant curatorial themes and their potential for dialogue with other amateur and/or authored exhibition content was often dampened by the selection process and the display techniques.

In the two examples from MoMA and the Tate, the official histories, photographic, local and national, that the *Life of the City* and *How We Are* exhibitions proposed, were written by acclaimed masters and professionals. Specifically, in the case of *How We Are*, photographs were displayed in a chronological fashion and the public-contributed photographs were

selected to fit in this chronological paradigm. However, despite being sanctioned to provide the here and now side of these histories, the public-contributed photographs were kept at the margins of this historiography, being shown detached from their author and context as a paragon of the main exhibition and excluded from the accompanying publications. Although a similar spatial segregation may also be found in the exhibition *Northern Spirit* at the Laing Art Gallery, the curators aimed to empower the small stories contributed by amateur and professional photographers by specifically including the source of each photograph in its caption. Over the next decade of this exhibition's lifespan, this selection of photographs has the potential to provide a diversified narrative of northerness, people and places, that converses with the gallery's collection of masterpieces and artefacts in writing the revised local history, inside and outside the art gallery.

What emerges from our examples, moreover, is that museums, either through open calls or devised competitions, have steered the content of amateur photographs towards specific themes relevant to the respective exhibition topics and often towards specific styles or points of view. Whether this new museum practice has the potential to have a long-term effect on amateur photography at large, outside the museum's open doors, and the writing of its history has yet to be determined. One may, however, hypothesize that these newly formed *corpora* of amateur photography occupy the yet uncharted space between private and public, scholarly and vernacular, social and aesthetic without adhering exclusively to either, and that this has transformative potential equally for the museum's narratives and towards more inclusive histories of photographies.

The three examples also suggest that despite the fact that the personal and social contexts of these photographs have made them desirable to museums, in the exhibition process the same characteristics appear to hinder the potential of photographs to be treated as part of a coherent narrative that allows for a smooth visiting experience. Although some museums have aimed to develop dialogues of some kind between their own collections and contemporary amateur photographs, the latter remain in the periphery of both exhibition and collecting practices in the art museum. While cultural institutions continue displaying contemporary vernacular photographs as 'context' for their historical collections, valuing them as products of a participatory act rather than a creative act, public-contributed photographs in art exhibitions will continue to miss the opportunity to truly shape photography's historiographic discourse. As contemporary amateur photographs remain underrepresented in art museum collections, their production and meanings are not documented in the 'official' museum narratives. The challenge facing curators and historians of photography is not for the museum to merely embrace the social context of amateur photography, but to find ways to facilitate meaningful conversations among the social and the aesthetic, the canonical and the amateur, the scholarly and the everyday.

Notes

[1]   Batchen started this discussion in his text 'Vernacular Photographies' (2000). More recent cultural histories of photography have equally accentuated the importance of vernacular photography; see for instance Warner (2002); Pinney and Peterson (2003).

[2]   For accounts of the appropriation of the snapshot in different art contexts, see Smith (2001) and Langford (2008).

[3]   For further discussion of these two approaches, see Zuromskis (2008b).

[4]   *We are All Photographers Now*, http://www.allphotographersnow.ch, accessed 21 October 2009.

[5]   'What's Next: The Future of the Photography Museum', http://foam.org/press/2011/whatsnext, accessed 23 October 2011.

[6]   Lynda Kelly and Angelina Russo, 'From Ladders of Participation to Networks of Participation: Social Media and Museum Audiences', Museums and the Web 2008. http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2008/papers/kelly_l/kelly_l.html, accessed 14 February 2013.

[7]   Some of the material presented in this section first appeared in Galani and Moschovi (2010). Alexandra Moschovi is grateful to the British Academy and the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies, Princeton University for supporting the archival research for this section.

[8]   *Life of the City*, MoMA press release, 2002.

[9]   The museum granted free admission to those who submitted a photograph to the show. Randal Pinkston, 'MoMA's Photo Exhibit, NYC', *CBS Evening News*, 9 March 2002, MoMA Archive, MoMA Exh. #1894, 28 February 2002 – 21 May 2002, video recording 2005-56.

[10] Pinkston, 'MoMA's Photo Exhibit, NYC.'

[11] 'About', *Here is New York*, www.hereisnewyork.org/, accessed 22 October 2009.

[12] Glen Lowry in 'Tourism in NYC post 9/11,' *CBC National*, March 2002, MoMA Archive MoMA Exh. #1894, 28 February 2002 – 21 May 2002, video recording 2005-38.

[13] Peter Galassi in 'MoMA, Life of the City,' *News All Day*, NY1 Cable, 7 March 2002, MoMA Archive, MoMA Exh. #1894, 28 February 2002 – 21 May 2002, video recording 2002, 2005-30.

[14] Campany, D. at al. (2007) 'We Are Here – Photographing Britain', *Tate etc.* 10 (summer). http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/we-are-here, accessed 28 September 2012.

[15] Susan Bright, personal communication with Alexandra Moschovi, 10 December 2012.

[16] *Did you see your photo on the Flickr Screens at the Tate*, discussion thread on the How We Are Now Flickr group, August 2007, http://www.flickr.com/groups/howwearenow/discuss/72157601241652683, accessed 20 August 2012.

[17] *Discussing the Final 40*, discussion thread on the How We Are Now Flickr group, August 2007, http://www.flickr.com/groups/howwearenow/discuss/72157601241652683, accessed 20 August 2012.

[18] Adewale Oshineye from *Discussing the Final 40*, discussion thread on the How We Are Now Flickr group, August 2007, http://www.flickr.com/groups/howwearenow/discuss/72157601241652683, accessed 20 August 2012.

[19] Laing Art Gallery, http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/laing//northernspirit, accessed 28 September 2012.

[20] Live!Labels (L!L) was an experimental project, which developed, installed and evaluated a series of digital label prototypes updatable online by curators and visitors in the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, UK, see Parry (2007: 111-116).

[21] This speaks primarily to the collecting remit of the Laing Art Gallery rather than to the negligence of the exhibition team.

[22] Rhiannon Mason, personal communication with Areti Galani, 19 December 2012.

[23] Rhiannon Mason, pers. comm., 19 December 2012.

24 Lev Manovich proposes 'variability' as one of the five principles of new media; he explicitly writes: 'a new media object is not something fixed once and for all but can exist in different, potentially infinite, versions. This is another consequence of numerical coding of media […] and modular structure of a media object […]' (Manovich 2001: 36).

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***Dr Areti Galani** is a lecturer in the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University, UK. Dr Galani holds qualifications in Museology and Computing Science and has curated projects in Greece and the UK. A significant strand of her research concerns the use of participatory methodologies in the design of novel interventions, such as mobile applications, in museum and heritage settings. Dr Galani is also interested in how museum and heritage practice accommodates user-contributed content. In this context, she has carried out research on how user generated photographs are incorporated in museum displays.

Dr Areti Galani
International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies
18 Windsor Terrace
Newcastle University
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 7RU
T: +44 (0)191 2223857
E: areti.galani@ncl.ac.uk

****Dr Alexandra Moschovi** is Senior Lecturer in Photographic Theory and MA Photography Programme Leader in the Department of Photography, Video and Digital Imaging at University of Sunderland. Her research examines the accommodation of the photographic image in art institutions, as well as the effects that digital technologies have had upon its use and exhibition value. Dr. Moschovi has published book chapters, articles, and catalogue essays on the history and theory of photography and visual culture. She also co-edited the publication *Greece through Photographs* (Melissa Publishing, 2007/2009) and the anthology *The Versatile Image: Photography, Digital Technologies and the Internet* (Leuven University Press, forthcoming).

Dr Alexandra Moschovi
Northern Centre of Photography at St. Mary's
University of Sunderland
Chester Road
City Campus
Sunderland
SR1 3SD
E: alexandra.moschovi@sunderland.ac.uk
T: +44 (0)191 515 3465