Book Review: *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life*

Annabella Pollen (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016)

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Annabella Pollen examines and interprets mass-participation photography events using, as a pre-digital case study, the charity-supporting *One Day for Life* photography competition in which contestants sent, with an entry fee of £1, a photograph taken on 14 August 1987 to ‘capture’ the essence of Britain in the pattern of their lives. 348 ‘winning’ photographs were selected for inclusion in the *One Day for Life* book (published November 1987) and an overall winning photograph was chosen to appear on the cover. Money was raised for British cancer charities through entry fees and book sales. The *One Day for Life* archive, now housed in The Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, consists of almost 55,000 photographs. Pollen attempts to define a place for the archive within contemporary scholarship in vernacular photography using a broad range of theoretical and interpretative tools from anthropology and ethnography, literary criticism, photography theory, and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary approach aims to “locate the missing context for the photographs, to flesh out their cultural biography and to situate them in their historical period.” (Pollen, 2016, p. 209) She achieves this by positioning them within the broad context of vernacular and humanist photographic practices, and situating “everyday” documentary photography within contemporary photography discourses.

Pollen considers the cultural and social context of mass-participation events, analyzing the focus on the “ordinary” and “everyday” as the theme of the competition and interpreting the use of the term “mass” for events that aim to produce large-scale participation and record-breaking statistics. Although the *One Day for Life* publication was promoted as a “showcase” of the creativity of ordinary people and a record of ordinary life in Britain, ten percent of the images in the book were by professional photographers and celebrities. The *Through Well Known Eyes* sections contain large images and longer text captions, suggesting the invited celebrities are special and have more important things to say. Because the first and last photographs in the book are by members of the royal family Pollen notes the term “the people” could denote “subjects” rather than “everyone”.

Because *One Day for Life* was set up to raise money for cancer charities Pollen also takes an anthropological approach, viewing the submitted photographs as gifts and charitable donations. Through questionnaires and interviews with participants she analyzes how this emphasis changes the function of the photographs, producing an expectation that they perform “emotional work” as messages of hope when depicting cancer survivors and memorials when they depict photographs or objects belonging to deceased family members.

Pollen considers the timing of the chosen day – a Friday in August – and how this affected the subject of the images. A working day was chosen to emphasize the ‘ordinariness’ of the day and a large proportion of the images in the archive show forms of employment. Surprisingly “of all of the jobs depicted, the craft industries are most frequently pictured, despite large scale and service industries being more prevalent during the 1980s. Images of spinning, lace making, thatching and potting seem to have been singled out for their relative rarity by photographers contributing to a project that is conscious of historical change.” (Pollen, 2016, p. 52) The images are interpreted as acts of preservation and idealization. Quoting the journalist Andrew Pulver (2013) saying “the hive mind produces a cheery consensus” Pollen provides a short analysis of the difference between depictions of labor in the archive and the reality of the working classes at the time. (Pollen, 2016, p. 23) The depiction of labor offers another prism through which an in-depth analysis could be produced.

There are also some interesting gendered questions to ask in relation to the archive. For example the author discusses the gendered nature of family photographs, stating that women tend to be viewed as “carriers of memories and keepers of the family album” (Pollen, 2016, p. 124) suggesting that more women than men would enter a competition that produces a historical record of life in Britain. This is confirmed in the appendix: approximately sixty-seven and a half percent of participants were female but women produced only forty-two percent of the images in the final publication. This disparity points to an aesthetic or semiotic privilege favoring male photographers. Because the initial and most substantial selection of images was carried out by camera club members Pollen says that “patterned eliminations” took place removing the images that did not conform to a traditional view of what is “photographable”. Analyzing styles and subject-choices in relation to gender would provide the basis for a wider study of gender-bias in visual culture, producing a model that could be used with other large bodies of images such as those found on Instagram and Facebook.

It is clear from the multiple theoretical approaches used by Pollen that the archive contains heterogeneous views of Britain in the 1980s, including protest images that aim to draw attention to social issues and stimulate change. Pollen refers to the humanist tradition of documentary photography to consider these images, she writes “photographs as acts of resistance can also be found in the archives in the form of images that use the project as a forum to express opinions on, for example, environmental issues – in the case of a photograph of a river drained for a road bypass, entitled ‘Rape’ – or feminist, anti-hunting or anti-nuclear causes.” (Pollen, 2016, p104)

The varied content of the archive supports the idea that mass-participation photography competitions are democratic and inclusive, offering the public an opportunity to record and present their opinions on a large public stage. However, as Pollen notes, the winning images selected for the publication are not representative of the archive as a whole, and tend to cleanse British life of anything negative or challenging. Pollen not only uncovers the class implications of this trend but also hints at the latent value of studying the “acts of resistance” in the archive. Pollen refers to the theories of Michel de Certeau and Mikhail Bakhtin as ways to analyse photographs of everyday subjects “as both a site for the unthinking reproduction of dominant norms and as a subversive space where such norms may be resisted.” (Pollen, 2016, p. 75) However de Certeau and Bahktin's theories are not described or used to analyze the potential enjoyment experienced by participants of mass participation events. For example, there is a prevalence of humour in the archive: “Nose-picking, urinating, bared bottoms and rude gestures show the traditions of fooling for the camera as well as the carnivalesque inversions of acceptability associated with ‘the special day’. Such images were also part of the very present critique of contemporary life in Britain throughout the archive.” (Pollen, 2016, p. 53) Elsewhere Pollen says “Similarly, a photograph of an Alsatian chewing a rubber caricature of Margaret Thatcher’s head disarms what could be read as a damning political statement through comedy. Whether literal, symbolic or satirical, each of these photographs makes a critical statement about national experience at odds with the familiarity, warmth and reassurance of the book’s image tropes of national pride and tradition”. (Pollen, 2016, p. 104) The prevalence of grotesque subject matter and carnivalesque clowning could be interpreted as a transgression of social boundaries or the controlled release of a safety valve that dissipates the energy of civil unrest. It is not clear what “critiques of contemporary life” and “critical statements” the photographs in the archive make.

Pollen provides an overview of the theoretical models needed to interpret multifaceted mass-participation photography archives. The book cites numerous interpretative tools and would be even more useful if footnotes were included. For example, the format of the “single day” model is described as a circadian narrative device, a literary structure in which a single day is used as a metonym for everyday life, a “microcosmic organization scheme” commonly used in Greek tragedy and popular in nineteenth-century journalism and twentieth-century modernist literature. Although this provides a historical base for the chronological ordering of the photographs in the publication it does not explain what it means to produce a narrative in this manner and the way circadian narratives may affect the reception and interpretation of the images. Some literary examples with explanations of how the device impacts on audience engagement would be useful for non-specialist readers to engage more fully with the arguments put across by Pollen.

Pollen uses Ariella Azoulay’s idea that photographs should be “watched” rather than “viewed” because their meanings are not stable and values can change with different audiences and during different time periods. What and how photographs communcate can be subverted so they hold the potential to resist dominant authority and emancipate marginal groups. Pollen says “attentiveness to the activity, agency, and affect of photographs as embodied acts and relationships can animate their understanding. (2016, p. 14) “Watching” enables complex cultural objects such as mass-participation events, to be analyzed using a variety of criteria, maintaining the slippery, changeable nature that makes them so interesting. However, examples of the political-activist potential of *One Day for Life* could be more clearly drawn out in Pollen's argument. It would also be useful to explore how individuals can use mass-participation events as a platform for self-expression when the organizing groups, celebrity endorsers, and professional judging panel determine selection criteria based on the ideology of dominant classes. Although the images that receive most publicity offer a heavily sanitized, rose-tinted view of Britain could “tricks” and “poaching-raids” (de Certeau 1988) be performed in the production of user-generated content? “A Truer View”, a photograph by John Bradley was chosen to appear on the cover of the *One Day for Life* publication. The professional photographers who judged the competition did not select “A Truer View” as the winning image. Instead *One Day for Life* organizers insisted that it should win because it most resembled the stock image used on the large promotional mock-up of the *One Day for Life* book. Pollen describes how the winning image was heavily cropped and edited to further resemble the image on the mock up. Despite the arbitrary nature of its success the photograph could also be viewed as a subversion of the aim to present a positive view of Britain devoid of political unrest because it depicts ‘Derry’ during the Troubles. Bradley says “There are many, including myself, who would not have considered Derry to be in Britain.” (Pollen, 2016, p. 105) That this contentious image became the most prominent photograph in the competition could be interpreted as a “poaching raid” on the dominating ideology at the heart of the competition although Pollen does not explicitly use de Certeau's ideas to interpret the phenomenon or discuss the subversive potential of other images in the book.

*Mass-Photography* provides multiple methodological approaches to select from according to the type of vernacular photography and academic area of interest. Although Pollen presents methods of interpreting the content of the archive images the methodologies are not always fully described or used. The omission of deeper analysis is frustrating at times but also demonstrates how thought provoking and useful *Mass Photography* will be as the foundation for future research on vernacular photography. If the intention of the publication is to generate interest in the *One Day for Life* archive and produce further research in this overlooked resource I am sure it will achieve its aim. In a visual culture in which social, cultural, and commercial images are increasingly indistinguishable from one another, photographs inhabit multiple positions and perform a variety of tasks, this form of interdisciplinary approach to interpretation will provide a useful model.

Reference List

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