

Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography

edited by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg and Brian Wallis

Gottingen: Steidl/Walther Collection, 2020, 432 pages

ISBN: ISBN 978-3-95829-627-5 (paperback) Price €45.00

Reviewed by Annabella Pollen, University of Brighton, UK

I confess that I first picked up the heavyweight book, *Imagining Everyday Life*, with a heavy heart. In my own work on the subject, I have long argued for the limitations and even redundancy of the term vernacular as a photographic qualifier. I saw the Walther Collection on the cover and thought of the 2000 exhibition and publication *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*, which took a celebratory ‘lost masterpiece’ lens to its decontextualised subject matter and was part of a wider and often uncritical boom in publications that developed an expanding art market for orphaned imagery. I assumed that this book would continue in the mould, and I wondered why so little progress had been made, some 20 years on from the special issue of *History of Photography* that gathered curators, collectors and scholars to debate the form and the term.

I am pleased to be wrong in many of my assumptions. *Imagining Everyday Life* brings much needed fresh perspective to the subject, with original and reflective contributions from major names and emerging voices alongside some 432 images. The collection on which the volume is based is that of Artur Walther, a German-American former banker turned art dealer, who has been buying large quantities of international photographic work, both well-known and anonymous, particularly from China and Africa, since the 1990s. The Walther Collection, opened to the public in 2010, boasts a four-building site at Neu Ulm, Germany and also, since 2011, at a dedicated project space in New York City. The huge wealth that underpins the collection has enabled multiple endeavours over the last decade, including four New York shows, 2017-2019, dedicated to vernacular photographs, and an accompanying scholarly symposium in 2018. This event, with its presentations and discussions,

alongside portfolios from each of the exhibitions, provide the title, content and structure of this substantial book.

Each of the contributors was invited to explore the Walther Collection in advance; the essays that populate the volume are thus, to a greater or lesser extent, about material in the collection as well as the broader subject area. Most illustrations come from the collection, although essayists contribute further images as context and contrast including, at times, personal photographs from their private lives. The largest emphasis is on portraiture, whether this is in family albums, identification photographs or studio studies. (A final section, 'Destruction and Transformation of the Built Environment' relates to the final exhibition in the series but it is out on a limb in both subject matter and scholarly engagement, as it did not form a conference theme.)

Three main themes are explored: 'Troubling Portraiture: Photographic Portraits and the Shadow Archive', 'Performance and Transformation: Photographic (Re)visions of Subjectivity' and 'Space, Materiality and the Social Worlds of the Photograph'. These are foregrounded by a scene-setting section: 'Why Vernacular Photography? The Limits and Possibilities of a Field'. Here, photographic historian Geoffrey Batchen and curators Clement Cheroux and Brian Willis (among others) discuss the origins and purposes of the complex term. Batchen sets the ball rolling by noting that he only ever used 'vernacular' as a provocation to disrupt hierarchies of value; as such, now it is fully institutionalised, he suggests that the time has come to abandon it and all other adjectives that limit photography's depth and breadth. Cheroux, too, is hesitant about its utility; he notes that it is 'one of those words one keeps safely in quotation marks; it is always too broad and too vague for what one is trying to describe' (22). Wallis' definition of the form as an 'interdisciplinary matrix of affective signifiers and performative communications' (18) captures some of the broad multiplicities of the photographic vernacular but Batchen's assertion that 'the vernacularity of a photograph is not to be found in what it is, but in what it *does* and *where* it does it' (35) opens out the greatest possibilities for new directions in practice.

Several of the authors note, pointedly, that the Latin root of vernacular is *verna*, meaning slave; this signals that the vernacular object is one that performs a service and is utilitarian, but the attendant power relations of the term and its associations are kept in sight throughout the volume. Patricia Hayes, for example, notes that in an African context, the term vernacular leaves existing hierarchies intact and it contributes to the 'ongoing misconception of African photography as derivative and belated' (42). Ariella Azoulay makes the strongest point about the hierarchical relationships that sit within the term; these are not simply hierarchies internal to photographic values but also to persons.

Azoulay argues that the history of photography should not be dated, as is usual, to 1839 but, radically, to 1492: it does not stand alone in history but is part of the imperial world view that produced it. Photography, as an extractive mentality and practice, is deeply implicated in the dissection of the world and, as such, collecting, studying, displaying and interpreting photographs are not neutral. They cannot be separated from 'the conditions under which they are produced and circulated' (59). She states baldly, in relation to images in the Walther Collection, that she cannot see photographs as vernacular when they are depictions of slaves. Although the volume undoubtedly valorises the Walther Collection by gathering esteemed scholars around it, Azoulay will not comply. As the collection is world's largest collection of African photography, it perpetuates inequality: restitution, she argues, is the only option for justice.

These critical readings of photographic material labelled vernacular offer a bold counterpoint to the sometimes utopian claims made of the form as inherently oppositional. Ali Behdad, for example, in exploring her family's collection of studio portraiture in early twentieth-century Iran sees its repressive aspects as it idealised men and controlled women by exclusion or erasure. As an art collection, the Walther photographs were purchased with aesthetic and financial value in mind but the market for decontextualised nineteenth-century prison photographs, for example, is dramatically disrupted by Nicole R. Fleetwood, who contrasts them with more recent family photographs of her incarcerated cousins taken in contemporary studios in US prisons. Laura Wexler

notes that in our current world of visual data-tracking, 'the people's archive' is now a disciplinary carceral space; we are 'pinioned by those very same ordinary images that were to set us free' (135). Vernacular photography now does the dirty work.

The emphasis of the book is to restore the complex subjectivities of both photographic subjects and makers, and to return the photographs to their communities, whether this be Viet Cong soldiers, US black beauty queens or queer collectives. Rather than viewing vernacular photographs as static, anonymous *objets d'art* that celebrate the vision of their collectors, the scholars in this volume ask what the photographs *do* in their particular conditions of production and circulation. It asks its scholars to consider their ethical responsibilities to the images, and the extent to which their research may contribute to inequality. As Wexler reflects, in relation to a recent legal case brought against Harvard by a descendant of a slave sitter in a daguerreotype in the university's collection, the incarcerated and enslaved, by definition, could not give consent to be depicted. Scholars and collectors who engage with these images must reflect on their complicity as these images become deracinated as 'vernacular photographs' in their afterlives.