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The published, illustrated version:

Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, 'Amateur Photographic Communities, Real and Imagined: Collective Identity in Camera Clubs and Mass-Participation Events', *Photoworks Annual 21: Collaboration*, 2014, pp. 160-167

can be found here:

<http://photoworks.org.uk/projects/issue-21-photoworks-annual/>

**AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHIC COMMUNITIES, REAL AND IMAGINED:
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN CAMERA CLUBS
AND MASS-PARTICIPATION PHOTOGRAPHY EVENTS**

Photographic historians Juliet Baillie and Annebella Pollen share a common research interest in the study of amateur photography, past and present. Here they discuss how the themes of collaboration and participation intersect with their particular research areas, and also how they figure in the writings they have commissioned for Reconsidering Amateur Photography, part of National Media Museum's online photography project, EitherAnd (www.eitherand.org).

JB: How have issues of collaboration and community played out in your work on amateur photography?

AP: I have a longstanding interest in amateur photographic practices, addressed through a range of historical case studies. In particular, I spent some years analysing 55,000 photographs taken on a single day in 1987 for a national charity fundraising project called *One Day for Life*. This project used the entry fees from an ambitious photographic competition as a means of securing large-scale charitable participation. It resulted in a bestselling photographic book and, later, an archive of the entire collection of submitted prints. The project was initially interesting to me because it offered a means of accessing amateur photographs on a scale rarely possible in the pre-digital period. It also allowed me

to see how judgements about good and bad photographs played out through a complex selection and editorial process.

I've since developed this work to explore what I call mass-participation photography. By this, I mean the popular photographic projects that are frequently structured around a life-in-a-day model. These have a long history, but have become increasingly popular with the advent of digital and networked photography. Large numbers of, usually, amateur photographers are enlisted to create collective photographic events that variously function as time capsules, portraits of a nation, global snapshots of daily life, and so on. These kinds of projects clearly intersect with the theme of collaboration, as they often seek to use photography to build temporary communities around collective identities, shared causes and group activities.

JB: My own work over the past few years has been concerned with skilled amateur photography, looking at the photographic practices of camera club members, particularly in 1930s London. Although I am focusing on a different time and context to you, I am also interested in examining the photographs produced by amateur photographers and, particularly, the role their interactions with each other played in shaping their practices. The informal photographic clubs built communities of photographic activity and participation. But they also existed within a broader network of clubs and federations—a broader community, in a sense—which governed, or at the very least influenced, the activities of individual members.

AP: Ideas of collaboration also intersect with our shared work around the reconsideration of amateur photography, conducted for the National Media Museum. Several of the essays we commissioned closely examine—and take seriously—amateur photographic *practices*, in terms of what they mean to their participants, rather than simply evaluating the aesthetic or technical inadequacies of sometimes less-than-perfect amateur photographs. In the work of Jonas Larsen on tourist photography, Peter Buse on the photographic communities developed in the pages of photography magazines and, most of all, Elizabeth Edwards on Edwardian photographers' leisure excursions, we encounter efforts to explore how

communities are created and performed through collective photographic acts that articulate shared values.

This approach requires an understanding of photography as a complex social and cultural practice that precedes (and often exceeds) the resulting images. In so much photographic analysis, the final photograph is the privileged central focus, while the conditions of its production can be demoted to mere context. Do you think this is a valid way of approaching the practices of a camera club? Should we be thinking about the social production of the photographs—achieved through collective participation, discussion and judgement—as much as the photographs themselves?

JB: Yes, I think it is important, if not crucial, to consider amateur photographic practices in this way.

AP: Only *amateur* photographic practices?

JB: No, I suppose all photographic practice should be considered in this way. But I think it is particularly important in the case of amateurs, due to the tendency for their photographs to be seen as hapless or lacking in originality in light of models of scholarship based on the conventions of Art History. In reality, skill or originality might not necessarily be central to their purpose. Skill was central to camera clubs but, in some respects, the photographs produced in this context could be considered straightforward reflections of the social interaction which was part of amateur photography's function as a leisure activity. Whether it was reading photographic magazines, attending club meetings, going on excursions, visiting or exhibiting in photographic salons, all of these activities fed into a particular approach to photography which was seen in camera clubs at the time. This sociability, and its shaping effects, was fundamental to the practice of photography in these clubs, which were dominated by a kind of pictorial photography, predicated on a narrow field of aesthetics, and the production of fine prints.

AP: It is interesting that you use the term 'sociability', because the group projects that I have been examining are rather different in that sense. With events such as *One Day for Life*,

mentioned above, or more recent global collective media projects such as *One Day on Earth* (2010), the YouTube-generated *Life in a Day* (2011) or the *A Day in the World* project (2012), the thousands, even tens of thousands, of participants rarely, if ever, meet. Rather, individual contributors respond to a broad and inclusive invitation to participate and are therefore constituted as a photographic community only *through* their participation.

In a way, this shares many characteristics with Benedict Anderson's famous theories of national identity as an imagined community. Members of any nation will rarely meet, but they are brought into collective relationships by national practices, and experience what he calls 'deep horizontal comradeship'. For many contributors to the photographic events that I have studied, it is the act of collaboration in a project that is much larger than themselves that creates the meaningful experience. It is less about their identity as a photographer or their individual submission, more about the part their photography plays in a collective vision. If there's a sense that a photograph can go beyond the personal circumstances that generated it into some sort of larger conversation, then a sense of group identity and even belonging can be forged.

JB: What do you think is it about photography that lends itself to these kinds of community-building projects?

AP: First and foremost, it is no doubt because photography is popularly seen as an accessible and democratic medium. But I also think that photographs, with all of their inbuilt ambiguity, lend themselves nicely to symbolic projects. A photograph of your child can become a photograph about something more abstract, such as the concept of childhood, in another context where the impetus may be to create a national portrait or make a historical statement. The ease of new technology and photography's supposed universal legibility can also make it adaptable to collective and, increasingly, globally ambitious projects that seek to harness the mass-ownership of cameras and the mass practice of photography. Their newly networked status also facilitates collective projects that would be logistically complex, if not impossible, in analogue and pre-internet formats.

But we have begun to talk freely about photographic communities here—whether they be 1930s camera clubs or 21st-century global photographic events—without actually saying what we understand community to mean. Clearly, the demographic make-up of any community matters as much as the fact that photography is shaped by collective decision-making. Who are the communities who take part in club activities, in terms of your work?

JB: When I started looking at this area, it seemed as though all the clubs were going to be very middle class: people, mainly men, with disposable income, who had a bit of leisure time to spend tinkering around with cameras and photographic equipment, meeting up in the church hall once a week to chat about it. Those kinds of photographers *did* make up a large proportion of what I found, although their relationship with photography was more nuanced than the stereotypes suggest, and their sense of community and group identity was strong.

What was especially interesting for me, though, was to discover the clubs that didn't fit that mould. In the East End of London, for example, Cambridge and Bethnal Green Boys' Club—a club where teenage boys could go after school or work to take part in a kind of enlivening or productive leisure—had a photographic section and ultimately a photographic club. Despite having relatively basic cameras, they had photography lessons and outings and produced photographs for exhibitions.

AP: That's interesting. Who organised those kinds of activities? Did they come from the boys' own interests or was there a sense that photography might be a way of inculcating improving moral values? That is, was this a community that was shaped from above or from within?

JB: There was a combination of activity, some of which was of their own making, but also from above, being influenced by their teacher at Cambridge and Bethnal Green Boys' Club and wider associations for Boys' Clubs at the time. Their photographic activity fit with the rhetoric around leisure between the wars, which encouraged using free time for self-improvement. Whether you worked in a factory or as an accountant, monotony was considered conducive to exhaustion, boredom and seeking improper leisure pursuits. There

was a fear, as writer Lawrence Pearsall Jacks noted at the time, that 'ready-made pleasures' and 'entertainment in which the sex flavour is uppermost' (!) would prevail. Engaged and productive leisure, on the other hand, could help to create better citizens and build community.

As an example, the Star and Garter Home was a residential home in Richmond for wounded soldiers, veterans of the First World War, many of whom were paraplegics. It had a camera club from the early 1920s and there is a very real sense that it helped these soldiers to be a community in themselves, but also to be part of the local community. They went on trips, interacted with other local camera clubs and even printed photographs commercially. There is a sense that photography was part of their rehabilitation and also allowed them to be productive members of society.

AP: The idea of photographic engagement as a form of civic identity-building is also important to many of the projects I have studied. Many of these seek to use photography as a vehicle for other causes, whether this is as nebulous a concept as 'raising awareness', fostering a sense of 'global citizenship' or in providing an effective and imaginative means of raising funds. The latter was particularly true of 1980s and 1990s photography projects in aid of cancer research or heart disease charities. Others are envisaged as historical repositories. The History Channel, for example, organised *Photos for the Future* projects around the time of the millennium in order to make a kind of time capsule, and there were very many 'people's photography' projects clustered around the turn of the twenty-first century that used photography as a means of cementing local or national identity.

Some of these were ultimately commercial ventures that may well have paid mere lip-service to some of the more abstract and wholesome concepts of community engagement. Very few are community photography projects in the sense that some of the radical 'committed photography' projects of the 1970s aimed to be. But participants nonetheless attribute powerful personal and public meaning to their participation. That's worth taking seriously, and it moves the debate on from fairly circular arguments about the political effectiveness of such projects. Photography can't change the world.

One of the things that is interesting is that, sometimes, little reference to the sociable production of knowledge—the sense of community participation or the performance of citizenship—is visible in the surface of the resulting print. I think this raises some complex questions, both methodological and philosophical. Is this something that you observed in relation to camera club photographs from the 1930s? It is certainly something that I have noticed in my work. Participation as a feeling is hard to picture, unless you literally take a photograph of multiple people holding cameras (as some meta-photographers in these projects do).

JB: I have come across some really fantastic photographs of club members posing with their cameras. Those pictures always get a good reaction—there is something irresistible about them—but they also show how these photographers identify themselves as a certain kind of photographer, often with a certain kind of camera. They often prefer to look through the lens of their own camera rather than directly at the photographer making the exposure.

In the case of camera club photography, the participation and sociality of the activity is literally inscribed in the surface of the print. Photography in the clubs I studied was quite regimented. The set-up of the clubs, and the wider networks to which they belonged, meant that the aesthetics of the photographs were really quite narrow—they continued to be inspired, to some degree, by turn of the century Pictorialism. What I found to be most significant to this kind of photography was the print as a showcase of craftsmanship and technical skill. The community worked together, sharing hints and tips which would make their photography technically better and help them to produce a fine print. The same judges were used for many competitions and exhibitions, and you could say that a formula developed for how these photographs looked and the quality of finish that was expected. Competition amongst peers was viewed as productive in this respect.

AP: Is that incompatible with community, then? Competition sounds like photographers working against one another rather than coming together.

JB: I suppose it does sound that way but, actually, it was a means of encouraging photographers to be active in their hobby, to really participate, and to develop the skills

which club membership supported. A club would be better represented in inter-club competitions if members were encouraged to compete with each other. Ultimately they would improve their craft. I could turn the same question back to you. The events that you examine are sometimes structured as competitions. Does this conflict with their simultaneous attempts to build a photographic community?

AP: Great question! It's tricky. I think perhaps there's an idealised gloss on all of the terms we are using here: community, collaboration and participation. They all seem to embody such deeply wholesome values that competition can easily be placed in opposition. In practice, the terms are not mutually exclusive. While both have a shaping effect on the content produced, many participants who I interviewed in my research on *One Day for Life* took the position of 'it's not the winning, it's the taking part'. In any case, there are often multiple reasons for people to take part in these kinds of events. For some, winning the competition and getting their photo seen was all. For others, charitable donation, a sense of national pride (or critique), or even a sense of keen historical consciousness prompted their participation.

Most participants enjoy photography and believe that it can play a distinctively expressive role, but photography is often only part of the appeal. In terms of competition, even in collective photographic events that are not consciously constructed in that way, some element of selection usually takes place in the resulting book, film, exhibition or web pages. This necessarily positions some photographs as more visually appealing, emblematic or otherwise more highly valued than others; the resulting public face of community photography projects is managed and filtered.

JB: There is certainly a sense that competing with each other in the club, and more broadly with other amateur photographers, helped to create a cohesive sense of identity, as skilled photographers. I found very little evidence of dissenters in the camera club community. In one case, a club member wrote some satirical articles which mocked stereotypical club photography and photographers—deeming them to be technically obsessed 'old bores'—but they were stopped by the club committee. It may be that conflict of that sort was not generally recorded!

AP: I did find plentiful examples of participants who aimed to go against the celebratory grain of their mass-photographic projects. Interestingly, they still take part, but use the opportunity to make a critical statement with their photograph. The emphasis on national celebration, for example, that was so prevalent in *One Day for Life*, caused concern for those who felt marginalised or excluded from its national boundaries or political agendas, and this resulted in a range of fascinating, dissenting images that stick two fingers up or show modern life at its dirty, materialistic worst. They want to show a different kind of 'we'.

More generally, I think it is all too easy to be cynical about the limits of photographic participation, as if only those projects that are fully and transparently collectively devised, conducted, edited, circulated and received can achieve the gold standard. In practice, many collective projects that involve a degree of collaboration and participation may not be so democratically articulated or carried through, and editorial boards, competition judges, curators and others may all play a part in shaping and controlling the meaning and outcome of content generated through collective amateur and voluntary contribution. The term 'community' is also open to critique, not least when it is used in some dubious political contexts. We could argue that photographic communities that only exist as symbolic entities—formed around a short-lived collective event or activity—are rhetorical figments rather than actual communities. But such symbolic communities can produce a powerful sense of belonging, even when they are themselves contrived. Collective identity may well be imagined, as Anderson and other scholars have indicated, but it is not *imaginary*. If individual actors believe in it, it is socially real and has important consequences.

Further reading:

Juliet Baillie, 'Homemade Gadgets and Makeshift Darkrooms: Skilled Amateur Photography in 1930s Britain', *Recording Leisure Lives, Everyday Leisure in 20th century Britain* / ed. by Robert Snape, Helen Pussard and Matthew Constantine, (Brighton: Leisure Studies Association, 2012), pp. 149-163.

Juliet Baillie, 'Camera Clubs, Interwar Amateurs and Photography for Profit', *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. by Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, EitherAnd, 2013
www.eitherand.org

Peter Buse, 'The Photographer as Reader: The Aspirational Amateur in the Photo-Magazines', *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. by Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, EitherAnd, 2012 www.eitherand.org

Elizabeth Edwards, 'The Amateur Excursion and the Sociable Production of Photographic Knowledge', *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. by Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, EitherAnd, 2013 www.eitherand.org

Jonas Larsen, 'The Aspirational Tourist Photographer', *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. by Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, EitherAnd, 2012 www.eitherand.org

Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie (eds.) *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, EitherAnd, www.eitherand.org

Annebella Pollen 'Historians in two hundred years' time are going to die for that! Historiography and Temporality in the One Day for Life Photography Archive', *History and Memory* (25:2, Fall / Winter 2013), pp. 66-101

Annebella Pollen *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life* (I. B. Tauris, forthcoming 2015)

Annebella Pollen 'Researching the One Day for Life Project: An interview with Annebella Pollen' in Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Historical and Social Research* (Sage, 2013), pp. 110-114

Annebella Pollen 'The Book the Nation is Waiting for! One Day for Life', book chapter in Patrizia de Bello, Colette Wilson and Shamoon Zamir (eds.) *The Photobook from Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond* (I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 145-163

Annebella Pollen 'When is a photographic cliché not a cliché? Reconsidering mass-produced sunsets', *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. by Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie, EitherAnd www.eitherand.org