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Fungible Photographs

Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography

edited by Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye (London and New York: 2014)

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Between the fast-moving world of technology and the slow-moving world of academic publishing, any volume claiming to represent 'the new' always runs the risk of being outmoded before it even hits the shelves. In the case of *Digital Snaps*, the book's claim to 'demonstrate how and to what extent the traditional social practices, technologies and images of analogue photography are being transformed with the movement to digital photography' coexists with growing discussion around the concept of the post-digital. Joanna Zylinka and Sarah Kember's book *Life after New Media* (2012), for example, argued that the common occurrence of Facebook, Twitter and smart phone technologies in many people's everyday lives means that the time has come to move beyond the initial fear of and fascination with so-called new media and, indeed, to challenge its alleged newness. Florian Cramer, in his 2013 writings on the post-digital (a term, he notes, 'sucks but is useful'), acknowledges that in an age when the digital is all pervasive, the notion of the post-digital can seem counter-intuitive. Nonetheless, he argues, it helpfully exposes the hidden teleology of 'new media' and signals that 'the destruction brought by digital information technology has already occurred'. In other words, for many critics, the digital revolution is over.

In the context of these debates, the editors of *Digital Snaps* may appear to be rather caught on the back foot in their aim to outline transformations from analogue to digital; certainly the introduction and several of the case study chapters seem constructed around the temporal structure of 'old' and 'new' photography and appear more concerned with mapping continuity and change between these poles than with developing new conceptual frameworks. Notable exceptions to this can be found especially in the book's first and final contributions. Martin Lister opens the volume with a bridge-burning essay ('Overlooking, Rarely Looking and Not Looking') that makes several provocative but persuasive claims. The first is that photography studies over the last decade wasted time by resisting engagement with the recent developments in its field. Studies of digital photography from the social sciences (including those from cultural anthropology, human-computer interaction and communication) were thus the first to fill the gap but tended to provide what Lister describes as 'rather unilluminating conclusions'. As an example, Lister refers to the empirical research conducted by Nancy Van House into camera phone usage in 2005. She concluded that the technology was used to preserve memories, to sustain relationships, for self-presentation and self-expression; Lister notes that it would be hard to argue with such a general statement but that it is hardly ground breaking.

Lister suggests instead that the wrong questions are being asked in these studies, and he takes the 'audacious and unorthodox thinking' of Paul Frosh and Geoffrey Batchen on image banks and snapshots – especially in relation to methodologies for understanding the impossible quantities of

photographs produced by digital technologies - as his preferred point of departure. As he puts it, '[e]mpirical surveys whose data is interpreted using concepts formulated in the analysis and judgement of photography and art in the earlier twentieth century do not serve us well.' Given this specific complaint – and the fresh and exciting theoretical approaches outlined in Lister's essay – it is somewhat curious that the chapters that immediately follow Lister do not take up his gauntlet. Each offers a modest, small-scale study assessing how people talk about their photographic practices, which results in some sound if fairly pedestrian observations, and hinges on analytical concepts borrowed from Sontag and Barthes. It is surely precisely this model that Lister is railing against.

Working from the basis that 'photography must be understood simultaneously as a social practice, a networked technology, a material object and an image', *Digital Snaps* as a whole has a clear emphasis on everyday photographic practices; 'snaps' are understood very broadly. Of the eleven short chapters that follow the introduction, there is a strong presence from Scandinavian contributors (around half of the total) and of case studies: the photographic practices of Danish tourists, Finnish military servicemen and a Norwegian high street studio all come under scrutiny, although the uses of photographs by British mothers, Japanese photo booth users and on American celebrity websites are also considered. Given the focus on practice there is also a tendency towards ethnographic research methods, although some of the most interesting chapters take a different tack. Tanya Sheehan's 'The Pleasures and Politics of Digital Cosmetic Surgery' - unlike almost all the other chapters - is deeply rooted in historical knowledge as well as current example, and her fascinating analysis of the advice given in image editing handbooks is seen in parallel with contemporary makeover culture and sociological ideas about the body as a project. Other contributors, such as Gillian Rose, usefully foreground the theoretical implications of their case studies for wider commentary on contemporary photographic concerns. Rose's chapter on the changing family album notes, like several others, that digital practices have engendered an *intensification* rather than a dispersal or dilution of former practices, but Rose is careful to warn against the perils of generalisation about 'the digital, or indeed the vernacular, as if it is just one field.' As she puts it, 'It is highly differentiated.'

The final, theoretical chapter is a further highlight and acts as an excellent response to Lister's opening sally. Michael Shanks and Connie Svabo – interestingly, from archaeology and performance design rather than photography or media studies – assert that the concept of fungibility ('the ability to transform and morph from one form into another while retaining the fidelity of an original') is central to digital photography. This concept, which celebrates fluidity and adaptability, offers a productive frame for understanding of its complex intermedial status and the spatial and temporal modes of engagement it engenders. As the authors note, we may experience a digital photograph collectively or singly; we may scrutinise it or merely glance in passing; it may be projected on a wall, printed in a photo album, or held in a mobile phone in the palm of your hand: just as vision is mobile, dialogical and ever in conversational flux, so too is pervasive mobile media photography. Shanks and Svabo also make a brief but welcome critique of the commercial institutions whose shaping influence is of central importance to the analysis of 'digital snaps'; probing analysis of technology and, in particular, industry is disappointingly missing from the book as a whole. *Digital Snaps'* ambition to develop 'a new media ecology' may be patchy in its coverage and modest in its achievements but, for my money, the first and final essays are worth the cover price alone.