



Encounters in the Museum

The Experience of Photographic Objects

Sophie Hackett

From 1992 to 2012, Toronto artist Max Dean collected and cared for a group of about 600 family photographic albums, along with thousands of loose snapshots and 35 mm slides. This intense period of collecting grew out of a need to feed one of his interactive kinetic sculptures, *As Yet Untitled* (1992–95), in which a robotic arm presents snapshots to gallery visitors, who must make a choice to either save them or watch them get sent to a shredder (fig. 9.2). Dean bought three albums at Seattle’s Pike Place Market in 1992, intending to take them apart and use their snapshots for *As Yet Untitled*, as the piece runs continuously during gallery hours and thus requires a steady supply. But as Dean leafed through the pages of his new albums, he quickly realized he could not bring himself to take them apart. He saw himself in those photographs, made and arranged by someone he had never met. That emotional connection led him to comb flea markets, paper shows, and photographica dealers, in Toronto and on his travels abroad, to add to his collection.

After twenty years of being the albums’ sole custodian, Dean decided it was time to pass the responsibility on to new owners. The steps he took to ensure this were many, involving negotiations with an encyclopedic art museum—the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)—that resulted in the donation of part of his collection and the creation of a new multipart project, *Max Dean: Album, A Public Project*, which debuted in late April 2012. The project took three related forms: a series of performance events, an exhibition, and a dedicated Facebook group. Taken together, Dean’s initiatives offer a sophisticated meditation on the status and circulation of photographic albums in the Internet age, making a case for and enabling their ongoing public life.

The *Album* project became possible in part because of broadening interests within the field of the history of photography. In recent decades, snapshots, pop photographica, press photographs, advertising, fashion, investigations of

Figure 9.1
Looking at Photographs, 1962
(detail). Chromogenic print,
12.7 x 8.9 cm (overall).
Collection of the Art Gallery
of Ontario, 2014/816,
purchase, with funds
generously donated by
Martha L. A. McCain, 2015.
2014/816. © Art Gallery of
Ontario, 2016.

scientific phenomena, film stills, and ephemera have all seen the light of gallery walls and continue to be objects of sustained study. *Album* could easily be counted as a smart artist's project in the context of an annual photography festival, a quirk of programming never to be repeated. In fact the opposite is true: *Album* is a robust actualization of the long-standing commitment of Maia-Mari Sutnik, the AGO's first photography curator, to collecting and exhibiting a broad range of photographic objects. She was supported in this goal by Matthew Teitelbaum, first in his role as the gallery's chief curator and later as director, as he re-envisioned the gallery's mission in the early 2000s as part of a capital campaign and building expansion.

Album also stands as a significant example of a project that sidesteps past either-or debates about photography's place in the art museum—art or not art? high or low? Though it encompasses these dichotomies, Dean's project does not engage with them. Instead it shifts the emphasis away from questions of the *status* of photographic objects in art museums to the *experience* of such objects—to the encounter between visitor and object. It is an argument for creatively staging photographic objects in exhibitions and how effective this can be for transmitting a sense of the significance of a historical form, in this case the family album. And in so doing, *Album* also highlights how collecting and exhibiting photographs has changed art museums.

Collecting Visual Forms

The years that Dean spent living with the family albums he had collected led him to conclude: "Photo albums are the one, and possibly only, story many of us write."¹ The particularities of these individual visual narratives moved him deeply; he felt responsible for them. This sense of responsibility—custodianship—profoundly motivated Dean and influenced the shape that *Album* would ultimately take.² He was also keen to find a way to keep the collection together, if only conceptually. As with the individuals who had

1 See Art Gallery of Ontario, "Max Dean: Album," <http://www.ago.net/max-dean-album>.

2 Heather Rigg documents the project in detail in "The Public Lives of Private Family Albums: A Case Study In Collections and Exhibitions at the Art Gallery Of Ontario and Max Dean: Album," master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2012.



Figure 9.2
Installation view of Max Dean, *As Yet Untitled*, 1992–95, artist's studio, Toronto, 1996. Photograph by Isaac Applebaum. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2007/670. Courtesy of the artist.



created each album, Dean's collection also became a personal story, albeit in aggregate. As the collection grew, his personal identification with the subjects and situations depicted evolved into a more general appreciation for the form.

Dean initially approached the AGO about donating the full collection of albums to the gallery. Curator Maia-Mari Sutnik and I proposed instead to select a smaller group to represent his collection as a slice of the history of album-making. Dean countered with one condition—that we work with him to find individuals to take responsibility for the remaining albums—and we agreed.

The acquisition ultimately comprised 237 albums and related ephemera spanning 100 years of album-making activity, from the 1880s to the 1980s (fig. 9.3). To arrive at this selection, we carried out a three-part triage: first looking for a singular “personality,” next by nationality and decade, and finally for condition, setting aside those that would need extraordinary conservation treatment. Elements that informed the assessment of “personality” included the quality of the photographs, the quality of the layout, captions, covers, places depicted, and events depicted. Quality in this context meant a certain representativeness of the practice of making snapshots and albums, expressive of family and social bonds and life events. These criteria drew heavily on the work of scholars such as visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen, whose study *Snapshot Versions of Life* identifies the conventions of domestic picture-making, particularly in North America, or “snapshot renditions,” as he refers to them.³ Nonetheless, within these conventions it was possible to discern a distinctive character in many of the snapshots and in the albums’ construction. Common subjects or materials were balanced by less common ones; typical photographic events of Western cultures, such as the celebration of new babies, new cars, and weddings, were balanced against atypical ones such as funerals, hunting trips, the circus, and drag queens performing (figs. 9.4-9.6).

In justifying the acquisition, I argued that one key aspect of this collection is in fact its size.⁴ Beyond the specific character of individual albums,

Figure 9.3
Max Dean's collection of family photograph albums, October 6, 2011. Photograph by Sophie Hackett.

³ Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

⁴ “The significance of this collection of albums lies in its numbers. With a group this size, we can begin to discern the conventions that governed the albums’ creation, from materials and favored subjects to persistent aesthetic strategies. The impact of photography in our lives becomes evident as these family photo albums represent personal, individual engagement with the medium and in a narrative form.” Unpublished research report, Art Gallery of Ontario, February 2012.



Figure 9.4
 Caramasico, *Album 1*,
 1950-90. Spiral-bound
 album with waterfall motif
 on cover, 30 x 26.5 x 4.3 cm,
 containing 115 chromogenic
 prints, 14 gelatin silver
 prints, and 1 Polaroid print.
 Collection of the Art Gallery
 of Ontario, AGO.102807. ©
 Art Gallery of Ontario, 2016.



Figure 9.5 and 9.6
 Ringling Bros and Barnum
 & Bailey, *Season 1922 Coast
 to Coast*. Black album,
 21 x 27 x 3.1 cm, with 95
 pages containing 114 gelatin
 silver prints and 1 gelatin silver
 print with applied colour.
 Collection of the Art Gallery
 of Ontario, AGO.102955. ©
 Art Gallery of Ontario, 2016.



delightful though they might be, the entire group together allows for examination and analysis of what each generation found photo-worthy in its time. The number of albums also makes it possible to see changes in photographic materials, changes in cultural norms, and differences across cultures. For instance, gelatin silver photographic paper in Germany has a higher silver content than North American papers, yielding more luminous prints; layouts in the Japanese albums feature fewer photographs than in North American albums, and in minimal arrangements; Israeli albums open on the left. Notable world and national events appear throughout the albums—for example, the world wars and royal visits—tying them together in yet other ways, aggregating these ordinary observations and highlighting the albums as repositories of individual experience in visual form. In short, it is only with such a critical mass that it becomes possible to identify and assess the aesthetic conventions at work in the albums as visual expressions of social relations.

From the time she began at the gallery in the late 1960s, Sutnik sought to ensure that photographs had a place alongside all art forms at the AGO, a point of view many others advocated for at art institutions across North America and Europe at the time and over the ensuing decades.⁵ Where other AGO directors had only passively supported a modest program of collecting and exhibitions, Sutnik found a champion in Teitelbaum. Teitelbaum's motivations were distinct, however. Building a more robust photography program coincided with a new capital campaign and an ambition to renew the gallery's mission, to forge stronger relationships with its core visitors, and to attract new visitors.

"Transformation AGO" was launched in 2002 with three key components: "New Art, New Building, New Ideas." The building expansion and renovation by architect Frank Gehry would showcase the growth of the AGO's permanent collection with recent acquisitions of thousands of works of art, including medieval ivories from Europe, ship models, African sculpture, Canadian paintings, and "landmark collections of photography." The latter includes such diverse collections as nearly 1,000 photographs by Czech photographer Josef Sudek; the Klinsky Press Agency Collection of

5 For an account of this discussion, see, for example, Douglas R. Nickel, "History of Photography: The State of Research," *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (September 2001): 548–58.

18,000 press photographs from the 1930s; and 495 photographic albums from the World War I era, to name only a few acquired since 2000.⁶

I will address the question of "new ideas" more fully in the next section, but it's worth noting that what this meant with respect to the photography collections had found its roots decades earlier. Sutnik had long championed working with a heterogeneous range of photographs. In the absence of a permanent collection, she drew entirely on private collections in Toronto for her first major exhibition at the gallery, in 1984, *Responding to Photography*. Among the 156 works in the show were painted totypes and conceptual work by Michael Snow, topographic views by the Ontario Centre for Remote Sensing (a branch of the Ministry of Natural Resources), and a surreal still life by Herbert Bayer; it included well-known photographers and unknown makers alike.⁷ Sutnik did not, however, have an adequate platform from which to bring her vision to light until she and Teitelbaum began discussions in 2000 about formalizing a department of photography. They agreed that embracing the broadest range of photographic materials—what one department document describes as the "collective states of photographic expression"—was the best way to further build and distinguish the AGO's permanent collection.⁸ This approach aimed to "contribute to the fabric of new ideas and studies of how invention, discovery, science, and art have combined to form an account of photography that was unimaginable previously (at the time

6 See Art Gallery of Ontario, www.ago.net/transformation-new-art; www.ago.net/new-art-thomson-collection; and <http://www.ago.net/photography>.

7 See the checklist found in Maia-Mari Sutnik, *Responding to Photography: Selected Works from Private Toronto Collections* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), 90–94. Sutnik was profoundly influenced by the collecting ethos of Sam Wagstaff and was responsible for bringing an exhibition of his collection to the AGO in 1981. See also Anne Kavanagh, "Private Collection and Public Exhibition: The Art Gallery of Ontario's 'Responding to Photography,'" master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2014.

8 Art Gallery of Ontario Photography Department, "Departmental Guidelines," April 2007. The statement of purpose continues: "The department is committed to exploring not only the photographic canon of renowned historical figures and the acknowledged 'front line' modernists, but also the larger universal scope of photography that has played a seminal role in our visual culture. It believes in taking initiatives to explore the uncharted [sic] creativity in the development of the vernacular, such as the visual forms of anonymous photography of the past, and in the larger body of picture-making that has embraced the documentary, photo-journalism, reportage, popular photographic objects of everyday life, and the wide-spread attention to 'other pictures' assembled in personal albums."

when the medium re-affirmed practices as a collecting activity in the late 1960s),” a move that fulfilled both of their ambitions.⁹

In the introduction to the catalogue for the AGO’s 2003 exhibition *Pop Photographica: Photography’s Objects in Everyday Life, 1842–1969*, guest-curated by historian and collector Daile Kaplan, Sutnik writes: “if we were to reflect on photography’s history and examine its evolution within Kubler’s ‘history of things,’ it would support ideas and objects as visual forms, a term that includes both artifacts and works of art, both replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions”¹⁰ (fig. 9.7). She is referring to art historian George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, his 1962 book that proposed considering art objects in the context of a broader continuum of invention. Sutnik continues:

Kubler’s position on the retention of “old things” is that they are central to rituals in societies and that objects made for emotional experience—one way of identifying a work of art—provide for themselves a framework that is valid in actual experience. As collectors and preservers, public museums are the contemporary expression of such records and experiences.¹¹

Where some have argued that photographs produced for artistic ends form only one small slice of photography’s many uses, Sutnik has argued instead that *all* photographs could be called art, per Kubler’s continuum of invention.¹² This is something of a provocation, but one that nonetheless strives to encompass a spectrum of uses, intentions, and the always thorny fact of the aesthetic fascination of many photographic works not initially created for the artistic context.¹³ Sutnik’s assertion is ultimately an argument for a single category for all photographs, a maximum openness to engaging with

9 Ibid.

10 Maia-Mari Sutnik, “The Shape of Photography,” in *Pop Photographica: Photography’s Objects in Everyday Life, 1842–1969* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2003), 9.

11 Ibid, 12.

12 See Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (2000), 262–71.

13 Sutnik’s 1989 article “Collecting Photographed Images: The Dilemma of Intent,” *Muse* 6, no. 4 (Winter/January 1989): 22–25, engages postmodern critiques of photographs in art institutions and aims to highlight that a photograph’s intention and/or context of production are not always discernible.



Figure 9.7
Installation view of *Pop Photographica*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2003. Photograph by Sean Weaver. © Art Gallery of Ontario.

the relationship of photographs to broad social, political, and cultural forces over time. In this context, then, Dean's family albums as testaments to family relationships are no longer unusual. Their common aesthetic attributes reveal social conventions and, by extension, social desires and aspirations, the rituals of visually narrating one's life.

Sutnik's point of view notwithstanding, the albums do test the definition of what most people consider art. This was a challenge that found fertile ground in the context of Transformation AGO and Teitelbaum's interest in rethinking what objects merited to be seen in encyclopedic art museums, and how they could most effectively be presented. Indeed, in his preface to the *Pop Photographica* catalogue, Teitelbaum declared:

In traditional histories of photography these objects are securely on the margin. *Pop Photographica* argues for their place as markers of meaning in a profound and directly personal register. It makes a claim for the photograph to be regarded as an intensely personal way in which we ground our life in our own identity and the personal associations that we make. As an argument for the social history of photography, and as a challenge to the seamless history of modernist photography, *Pop Photographica* speaks directly to the medium's power to create a world in which we can all believe.¹⁴

Teitelbaum clearly makes the case for two things with respect to photographic objects like these (often described as "vernacular," an imprecise but now accepted umbrella term). First, they provide a way to confront existing canons and orthodoxies in the history of photography—and, by extension, in the history of art more generally—but they are also objects that, in his view, invite broader engagement. Claims about photography's status as a democratic art are certainly not new, but by highlighting the personal impulse for commemoration and self-identification through the range of personalized objects in the exhibition, Kaplan and Sutnik gave new shape to that claim. And Teitelbaum, by supporting the exhibition, made it possible for the AGO's gallery spaces to contest received art-historical wisdom and present new ideas.

14 Matthew Teitelbaum, "Director's Preface," in *Pop Photographica: Photography's Objects in Everyday Life, 1842-1969* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2003), 7.

Exhibiting Visual Forms

Max Dean deeply understands the rituals around the production and viewing of family albums and their role as touchstones of emotional weight; he designed his project with these key aspects in mind. The nearly 400 remaining albums underwent several steps consistent with most museum collections management practices: numbering, photo-documentation, housing in custom archival boxes, and labelling. The albums were then stored in the "Waiting Room," a space Dean constructed in the AGO's Community Gallery; the floor and walls were lined with old school chairs, on which each album took a seat (fig. 9.8). The Waiting Room also served as a processing centre where the albums were readied for their public appearance in the "Foto Bug," a specially configured 1966 Volkswagen Beetle fitted with a cube-like structure that opened up into display shelves (figs. 9.9 and 9.10). The Bug, with its crushed back end, became a fitting vehicle for the albums, themselves in varying states of condition.

The Foto Bug made thirteen appearances during the CONTACT photography festival at various locations in Toronto (and five more at elementary schools). At each Foto Bug event, Dean invited people to browse through that day's selection of albums. If they felt so moved, visitors were encouraged to adopt an album and take it home. The only thing Dean asked for in return was the visitor's reason for their choice and a photograph of them with their new album (fig. 9.11). Volunteers recorded the new custodians' email addresses and reasons and took the portraits; each image was then uploaded to the Facebook group page and linked to its relevant album image.

Album is a work that addresses not only the passing of a form—the family album—but also the process by which it has become an artifact. The project parallels the museum's processes of selection, cataloguing, and housing and thrusts each album's new owner into the position of curator, of custodian, a role of responsibility. The playfulness of the Foto Bug (Dean referred to it as "the magic"), the bazaar atmosphere of the event, the surprise of the gift of an album, the custom archival box, the precise numbering and labelling—all of these elements operated as an elaborate stage—a smokescreen, even—for the work's central concern: who is responsible for caring for these objects?



Figure 9.8
 Installation view of the Waiting Room, from *Max Dean: Album*, Community Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario, May 2012. Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival and Art Gallery of Ontario. Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.



Figures 9.9 and 9.10
 Installation views of *Max Dean: Album*, May 20, 2012. Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival and Art Gallery of Ontario. Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.



Figure 9.11
New album owners, from *Max Dean: Album*, 2012. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

What Dean staged for those who visited the Foto Bug was an opportunity to create a connection with an object. Though the specific individuals and scenes in each album may have been unfamiliar to someone looking at it for the first time, the format was nonetheless familiar, as was the impulse to create it. The reasons people gave for adopting the albums, diverse and personal though they may have been, nonetheless confirm their ongoing social and cultural interest. Generally speaking, two types of adopters emerged: those who chose an album because it reminded them of the past, and those who chose their album so that it could serve as a guide for the future. For instance, one woman, who was going on a trip to Germany, adopted a German travel album and planned to retrace its itineraries. In either case, the custodians' new albums served as a vehicle for narrating their own stories, even though they had not personally made the album, nor did they know anything about those who had.

In recognizing the strong impulse that exists to quantify one's experience in visual form, Dean was able to highlight that these family albums are objects "made for emotional experience," and in ways that transcend the specific context in which they were made. By injecting them anew into a domestic context, Dean found them new homes and new narrators and forged new connections between individuals and the album form. Most significantly, the collection—now safely in the hands of these new custodians, both public and private—remains conceptually intact virtually, via the Facebook album.

Some see the exhibition of vernacular objects such as Dean's albums as proof that an art museum cannot do justice to the full range of photographic objects. Geoffrey Batchen believes the art museum is "constitutionally unable" to acknowledge boring pictures, to assess photographs on anything other than an art historical basis. Martha Langford argues that narration is essential for the experience of family albums, and Catherine Zuromskis finds museum displays of snapshots unable to reveal the "social and affective function of this pervasive yet surprisingly elusive image culture."¹⁵ This is true if you believe two things: first, that all exhibitions are equivalent and second,

¹⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, "Snapshot: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 132; Martha Langford, "Introduction: Show and Tell," in *Suspended Conversations* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001), 3-21; Catherine Zuromskis, "Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2008): 428

that meaning in an exhibition can be derived only from precise re-enactment of the original circumstances of viewing. The latter is a stricture that we do not require when exhibiting other types of artworks, be they medieval, modern, or contemporary; it remains one exhibition mode of many for engaging art's histories. There is no question that bringing a photograph into an art institution changes the viewing context for that work. But what if the opposite is also true: the photograph changes the institution?

Such changes can most clearly be noted in an institution's exhibition program. At the AGO, the acquisitions made in the years leading up to the launch of the new building in 2008 allowed curators to put forward new perspectives in their fields. For the reopening, the 110 galleries were installed with works from the permanent collection, along with dedicated spaces for collections of Canadian and European art made possible by the philanthropic leadership and gift of Ken Thomson. The "new ideas" part of the "New Art, New Building, New Ideas" campaign meant an emphasis on "new ways of thinking about and engaging with art."¹⁶

In discussions with curators in each collecting area, Matthew Teitelbaum encouraged new conceptual approaches and methods of display, including more thematic and cross-medium displays and pairings of historical and contemporary works. These approaches were not new, but the aim was to renew the experience of the permanent collection for visitors in each collecting area across the gallery. For instance, in the Canadian Art galleries, long dedicated to the male modernist painters of the Group of Seven, the curators expanded the narrative by inserting more work by women and indigenous artists. The twentieth-century European galleries combined World War I photographic albums with paintings and prints by Expressionist painters, and Henry Moore's 1964–65 plaster model for the sculpture *Atom Piece* was paired with Bruce Conner's 1976 film *Crossroads*, all highlighting how artists respond to world events, no matter their medium.

In Photography, in a newly assigned permanent collection gallery, we presented moments in the history of the medium according to five themes: "Pioneer," "Perform," "Document," "Remember," and "Wonder."

¹⁶ Art Gallery of Ontario, "Creating an Innovative Art Experience," 2007, www.ago.net/creating-an-innovative-art-experience.

These themes served to emphasize the range of photography's uses and its reception, as well as collection strengths and recent acquisitions (fig. 9.12). For instance, early negatives and prints by Charles Nègre in France and Linnaeus Tripe in India and Burma showcased nationalist and colonial views of the landscape and competing pictorial approaches. A range of staged images brought an uncut sheet of carte de visite studio portraits by Disdéri (c. 1861) together with Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy's film *Ballet mécanique* (1923–24) and Lotte Jacobi's improvised darkroom production *Large Photogenic* (c. 1950–56). And 1930s press photographs from Germany in a wall case, designed to echo a picture editor's selection wall, faced Danny Lyon's 1967–68 Texas prison series *Conversations with the Dead*, contrasting the system of visual news production with an individual's self-assigned documentary project (fig. 9.13).

The range of objects in the inaugural installation made a clear case for the aesthetic importance of all of photography's forms. Up to this point at the AGO, photography exhibitions—with a few notable exceptions such as the 1984 exhibition *Responding to Photography* and *Pop Photographica* in 2003—had largely been monographic or genre-based shows. The acquisition of press photographs, albums, and photographic objects, along with other in-depth collections in the years leading up to the 2008 reopening, meant that it now became possible to make this case in exhibition form using objects from the collection, a fact that would begin to establish a new, more distinctive identity for photography at the AGO.

As part of the building campaign, the AGO's mission statement became "We bring art and people together and boldly declare art matters."¹⁷ The emphasis here is on the encounter—the art experience—as the primary vehicle for aesthetic appreciation and understanding. In this light, *Album* stands as a strong example of the gallery's declared purpose. Dean made that encounter as direct as it could possibly be, by not only allowing visitors to handle the albums on view but even to take one home.

¹⁷ *Art Gallery of Ontario 2004–2005 Annual Report* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005). The current mission has evolved to read "We bring people together with art to see, experience and understand the world in new ways." See <http://www.ago.net/mandate>.



Figure 9.12
 Installation view of cased
 objects, albums, and
 pop photographica, from
Connecting with Photography,
 “Wonder” section, 2008.
 Photograph by Sean Weaver.
 © Art Gallery of Ontario.



Figure 9.13
 Installation view of the
 Klinsky Press Agency
 collection, from *Connecting
 with Photography*,
 “Document” section, 2008.
 Photograph by Sean Weaver.
 © Art Gallery of Ontario.

Encounters in the Museum

Part of what makes *Album* so compelling is the way that it essentially erased the boundary between public and private, between an album in the care of an individual and an album in the care of a public institution. Indeed, Dean's former collection is now held simultaneously by a group of individuals as well as by an art museum. This is something that could only have been possible with photographs, and vernacular ones at that, chiefly because of their low monetary value and their ubiquity. Dean was able to use the ubiquity of this mass form and to make it meaningful, all the while honouring the albums' original function. In the way he staged the interaction with viewers, Dean's project also opened up the museum in unprecedented ways by mirroring its processes, and it provides a great example for how to more creatively and engagingly display such works.¹⁸

The question now becomes: has collecting and exhibiting photography seeded changes in other art museums? There has certainly been an increase in physical space allotted for the medium at a number of museums in recent years. For instance, in 2014 the Centre Pompidou opened a free gallery for exhibitions from its permanent collection of photographs.¹⁹ In November 2015 the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) announced the creation of the Canadian Photography Institute (CPI), a research centre and permanent exhibition space, larger and more prominent than the current galleries.²⁰ The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) also opened a centre for photography, in May 2016, on a single floor of 15,000 square feet (1,400 square metres), the largest space in any art

18 Heather Rigg notes: "Through Dean, the AGO was able to provide their audience with the opportunity to interpret the albums for themselves . . . It is inevitable that the art gallery cannot fully make up for the loss of the personal context of these objects and perhaps we should not just focus on reconstructing it; we should also look for generative solutions that provide new ways of personally connecting with them." Rigg, "Public Lives," 75.

19 artnet News, "Centre Pompidou Opens First Permanent Photography Gallery," May 29, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/centre-pompidou-opens-first-permanent-photography-gallery-29495>.

20 Sandra Abma, "National Gallery of Canada to Launch Canadian Photography Institute," CBC News, November 27, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/canadian-photography-institute-1.3339738>.

museum in the United States.²¹ More than simply a question of greater real estate, these institutions have in many cases also accompanied this increased physical presence with a declaration of interest in reflecting a broader history of the medium.

Interest in vernacular material has become increasingly prevalent among photography curators at art museums since the late 1990s. Following on this interest and on the pioneering work of curators at centres uniquely dedicated to the research and exhibition of photographs—such as the International Center of Photography, the Ryerson Image Centre, the Photographers' Gallery, and the Fotomuseum Winterthur—the website for the newly formed CPI declares:

Although it has long emphasized the photograph as a category for fine art, in recent years the National Gallery has taken a much broader interest in the medium, in tandem with a contemporary artistic culture that explores the whole photographic field in its rich diversity, as a subject, a source of ideas, or a bank of shared cultural references.²²

This represents a major shift for the NGC, whose collection-building and exhibition programs have until recently been firmly planted in the modernist history of the medium.

At SFMOMA, a museum whose collections largely date from 1900 onwards, photography is the only area that casts further back into the 1800s with its collections and exhibitions program. The idea of the close links between modernity and photography isn't new, but it underscores how art institutions—SFMOMA and others—may have had to reconsider certain cornerstones of their identity or mandate because of the presence of photography. Corey Keller, curator of *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900* at SFMOMA in 2008, when asked why it made sense to show X-rays, scientific studies, and spirit photographs as part of the show, stated:

21 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "SFMOMA to Open New Center for Photography in 2016 as Part of Snøhetta-Designed Expansion," press release, April 9, 2014, <https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/sfmoma-to-open-new-center-for-photography-in-2016/>.

22 Canadian Photography Institute, "About the Institute," <http://www.gallery.ca/cpi/>.

The pictures were certainly not intended as art, but their aesthetic value was not discounted. . . . And scientists then, like scientists now, always needed support for their work, whether it was government or private support. They used these pictures as a way to draw in the public. . . . The pictures needed to be interesting as well as informational.²³

Here Keller argues that the aesthetics of these photographs were key to their public and persuasive uses; their reception was as important as their context of production. Ultimately, though, the abstraction inherent in the aesthetics of many of the works in *Brought to Light* may have made their appearance in the museum less surprising, since so much modernist work also courts abstraction in aiming to express non-visible states.

At the Centre Pompidou–Metz, the 2014 exhibition *Paparazzi! Photographers, Stars, Artists* also provides a good example. The curators, Clément Chéroux, Quentin Bajac, and Sam Stourdzé, aimed to define and exhibit a “paparazzi aesthetic” and also to show the circulation of this aesthetic as a source for artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and Cindy Sherman, through 600 works covering a fifty-year period. A central concern of the exhibition was the system of production and consumption of paparazzi images, the relationship of the paparazzo to his subjects, and the relationship of consumers to such images. The exhibition design cannily framed the experience by thrusting visitors onto a red carpet as they entered the show, complete with relentless flashbulbs—an art installation by Malachi Farrell, *Interview (Paparazzi)*, from 2000—and as they exited they were faced with a newsstand, thus completing the cycle. Press coverage of the exhibition, for instance, in *Le Monde*, focused in no small amount on the fact that an art museum—the Pompidou, no less—was exhibiting not only press photographs but paparazzi images, images that are normally overlooked except to be scorned (or enjoyed) as trashy.²⁴ The curators made the case for paying attention to these images and how

23 Suzanne Stein, “Interview: Corey Keller on *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900*,” December 9, 2008, <http://openspace.sfmoma.org/2008/12/interview-corey-keller-on-brought-to-light-photography-and-the-invisible-1840-1900/>.

24 Claire Guillot, “Le joli coup du Centre Pompidou–Metz,” *Le Monde*, February 28, 2014, http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/02/28/le-joli-coup-du-centre-pompidou-metz_4375278_3246.html.

their aesthetics reveal certain cultural values over time, and in so doing asked the exhibition’s visitors to grapple with the question of how we judge what is acceptable for the museum’s walls.

The question of what is art in photography is, in my view, a question that now belongs in the past. For both of these exhibitions, the curators relied on defining the aesthetics of the photographs at hand as sufficient condition for exhibiting them in an art museum. For Keller it was the formal aspects of phenomena made newly visible through photography, and for Chéroux and his colleagues, the visual conventions of a system. This is distinct from—though nonetheless linked to—the intention or use of the photographs. By arguing for the significance of the aesthetics of these visual forms, the curators also argued for a shift in where the meaning resides: in an experience of those aesthetics.

In addition to exhibitions dedicated to specific phenomena or image-making systems, we now regularly see photography exhibitions that juxtapose works by established makers with other photographic material, to reflect the circulation and exchange of images in a wider visual culture. Indeed, the exhibition context holds many possibilities for presenting diverse works and for designing modes of display that best highlight the distinctiveness of contexts of creation, use, and circulation, as well as specific object qualities to heighten the visitor’s encounter. For instance, juxtaposing ethnographic portraits by Jacques-Philippe Potteau, created for Paris’s Museum of Natural History, with Julia Margaret Cameron’s evocative literary portrait of her niece Julia Jackson, *La Santa Julia*—all from the 1860s—brings visitors closer to debates about what facial features in photographs can reveal, both then and now (figs. 9.14).

I would also argue that this proximity of different types of photographs in an exhibition renders categories irrelevant, not from the standpoint of the contexts of their production and consumption—which are still necessary to identify and historicize—but for the viewer. The gallery space thus becomes an equalizer. This equalizing has been criticized in the past as robbing photographs of their particularities,²⁵ but providing varied works with an equal platform does not have to mean making them the same or flattening their

25 See, for instance, Christopher Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 14–46.

particular attributes. It can present a powerful way to expediently, graphically, and experientially exhibit these relationships.

What Max Dean was able to create was an experience using family albums in which they are simply that—family albums. He felt no need to alter them or to justify their interest on any other terms. As an artist who has worked for several art museums, he opted to parallel the museum's own processes. He also created a parallel between the individual, private act—gathering and arranging photographs to reflect a life—and the institutional, public version of this act—collecting and exhibiting photographs to reflect the histories of the medium's forms. Dean ultimately humanized the museum and set a new precedent.

Currently at the AGO, a group of 170 snapshots from the permanent collection—of cross-dressers who visited Casa Susanna, a resort in upstate New York in the 1950s and '60s—occupies a gallery between works by Diane Arbus on one side and Nan Goldin on the other. The snapshots together visually establish the existence of a small but growing network of cross-dressers, connections that were maintained in part through the circulation of these snapshots, ultimately mirroring the community back to itself and creating greater visibility for this group on the margins (fig. 9.15). They are, in their way, powerful visual expressions of a particular social and historical moment in the United States. These snapshots hold their own beside the photographs by their well-known peers: as snapshots, as photographs created during a similar time period, that highlight (among other things) the transformation—even emancipation—of identity through clothing and poses, and the way photographs participate in that process. The question of what to call them becomes irrelevant.

Considering the way the photography collection at the AGO has evolved, particularly since 2000, it isn't far-fetched to think that collecting photographs made collecting other compelling yet unusual objects possible: British ship models, a Tsimshian mask, Dogon sculptures from Mali, medieval reliquaries—all captivating visual forms in their own way. Bringing a photographic object into a museum collection is no longer an act that pre-determines its meaning. Rather, it is a new stage in the life of the object, likely the first of many as subsequent exhibition contexts deliver new meanings. As collecting strategies and exhibition strategies evolve, they push museums to evolve. Along with the increased emphasis on contemporary art



Figure 9.14
Installation view from *Light My Fire: Some Propositions about Portraits and Photography*, Art Gallery of Ontario, May 4–October 20, 2013 (detail). Photograph by Ian Lefebvre. © Art Gallery of Ontario, 2016.



Figure 9.15

Looking at photographs,
1962. Chromogenic print,
12.7 x 8.9 cm (overall).
Collection of the Art Gallery
of Ontario. Purchase, with
funds generously donated by
Martha LA McCain, 2015.
2014/816. © Art Gallery of
Ontario, 2016.

in many encyclopedic art museums, the growing presence of photographs also marks one of the most visible changes in these institutions in recent decades. Photography's ubiquity and its multiplicity have forced us to reckon with the fact that aesthetic experiences can be sparked by a broad range of objects. This puts the aesthetic experience—that encounter between viewer and object—at the forefront. The work now becomes a question of how best to stage an experience of the aesthetic relationships at hand, and thus best animate the significance of these visual forms through time.