

PHD Defence

Networks of Memory: Vernacular Photography, (New) Media, and Meaning Making by Megan Robertson

This is a news update from School of Communication, Simon Fraser University
News Editor: Siboc Chen

Our dear colleague, Megan Robertson, will defend her PHD dissertation on Wednesday, January 25th, 2017 at Harbor Center Room 2245 (10:00 am – 13:00 pm). Here is the abstract of her dissertation “Networks of Memory: Vernacular Photography, (New) Media, and Meaning Making”.

Abstract

Vernacular photography can be broadly defined as “ordinary photographs, the ones made or bought (or sometimes bought and then made-over) by everyday folk from 1839 until now” (Batchen, 2001, p.57). At first glance, with digital media and online communication technologies that allow us to send and receive countless images on a daily basis, contemporary social conventions associated with vernacular photograph appear vastly different than they did in the mid-nineteenth century. What persists in the use (and reuse) of vernacular photographs is how they are called upon in meaning making activities to help understand the past in and for the present.

In this dissertation I examine meaning-making activities linked to recalling and reflecting on the past in specific ways: how historical exhibitions of vernacular photographs time have influenced current practices of online exhibition, and; how vernacular photographs are remediated and taken up in memory practices involving two particular projects, Collected Visions and Dear Photograph, that display crowd-sourced vernacular photographs in both gallery and online spaces.

My research is informed by Actor-network theory (ANT) approaches that emphasize how action takes place in nodes where different actors meet and influence one another (Latour, 2005). Vernacular photographs and their exhibitions are the result of complex interactions between people, media, and technologies where information and meaning making is transformed, translated, and modified (Latour, 2005, p. 39).

Research for this dissertation included visits to museums and archives and interviews with artists and curators who work with vernacular photographs. The variety of methods employed complement one another and allow for a type of ‘process-tracing’ where a variety of different data from different sources that are examined to consider “the links between possible causes and observed outcomes” (George & Bennett, 2004, p. 6).

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Through analytical 'origin stories,' I present narratives of *Collected Visions* and *Dear Photograph* tracing how vernacular photographs are used, remediated, and displayed in ways that allow for the possibility of online spaces of exchange. I then offer 'microstories' that describe encounters with specific images and texts in *Collected Visions* and *Dear Photograph* in an effort to document memory work processes that emerged during my research.

Keywords: vernacular photography, exhibition, remediation, memory, online communication