

THE IMAGE BEHIND THE DOOR

Final Project for a Degree in Photography, 1995

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1 INTRODUCTION

Almost every home has a camera, and photographs are taken of family members, friends, holidays and various celebrations. Through photographs, we preserve memories, tell stories about our lives and construct an image of ourselves and our surroundings. At the same time, photographs also reveal something about our values, attitudes and ways of seeing the world.

A photograph is not merely a mechanical record of reality. Every photograph involves a choice: the photographer decides what is worth photographing and what is not. This choice is influenced by cultural norms, learned ways of understanding images, and shared ideas within a community about what kinds of photographs are considered acceptable, interesting or meaningful. Photographs can therefore also be examined as cultural messages that reflect the values of a society and the established ways in which things are represented visually.

This study is based on a situation in which I hand a camera to the person who opens the door and ask them to take one photograph. The photographer is entirely free to choose the subject. The resulting photographic material provides an opportunity to examine what people consider worth photographing when the purpose of taking the photograph has not been defined in advance. At the same time, I examine differences in image selection between age groups, men and women, and participants living alone compared with those living with a partner or family. The photographs also provide an opportunity to consider what people choose not to photograph.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines the everyday use of photography in a situation where participants are given the opportunity to take only one photograph, without any specific instructions. What do these photographs reveal about people's conceptions of photography and what is considered worth photographing?

The central research question is:

What do people choose to photograph in their own homes when the subject has not been defined in advance?

Through this main question, I examine the following more specific questions:

- What do people consider worth photographing?
- Can distinct subject choices or culturally established types of photographs be identified in the images?
- Do the photographs taken by different age groups, by men and women, and by people living alone and those living with a partner or family differ from one another?

The photographic material used in this study consists of photographs that I personally collected from participants. My aim was to gather as extensive a body of photographic material as possible in order to interpret the photographic culture of ordinary Finnish people. The subjects people chose to photograph may reveal something about the values, norms and messages conveyed through photographs.

3 RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

I visited apartment buildings, selecting the buildings at random while concentrating on one city and a variety of its residential neighbourhoods. Altogether, I visited approximately 40 apartment buildings. I gave the camera to the person who came to the door. The exception was when a child under the age of 15 opened the door; I asked them to bring one of their parents to the door.

I made all my visits to the apartment buildings on weekdays between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. I rang doorbells and asked people to take one photograph with my camera. I tried to avoid influencing their choice of subject and emphasised that they could photograph absolutely anything. To reduce any pressure to perform, I did not emphasise the significance of the photograph. Finding the right words was difficult at first: I needed to motivate people to take a photograph while at the same time avoiding anything in my own communication that might limit or direct their choice of subject.

The basic form of my introduction was as follows:

“Hi! Sorry to bother you. I’m Sanna Liimatainen, a photography student. I have an assignment where I’m supposed to overcome my fear of approaching people, have the courage to talk to strangers and ask them to take one picture for me with this camera. [I show the camera.] It works like this: I give you the camera to take inside your home, and I stay out here in the hallway behind the door while you take one picture – absolutely anything you like. The camera is fully automatic, so all you have to do is press this button and just make sure you don’t put your finger over the flash. Here you go.” [I hand over the camera.]

I made notes of my own as I went along. I recorded some of the conversations I had with participants as well as other comments they made. After each photograph had been taken, I talked with the participant and asked, among other things, what they had photographed. Some wanted to tell me about their photograph, while others preferred to leave it as a surprise. I recorded the photographer’s gender and living arrangement (living alone / couple / family) and estimated their age using the following categories:

1. under 35
2. 35–55
3. over 55

I wanted the photographers to remain anonymous, so I did not record their names or addresses.

To distinguish the photographs from one another, I photographed the door of the apartment in which each photograph had been taken. This allowed me to see immediately from the contact sheets that if two photographs of doors appeared consecutively, the person associated with the first door had not taken a photograph. The contact sheets also revealed if someone had become enthusiastic and taken more than one photograph. I therefore personally spoke with every participant whose photograph was included in the study. I framed the door photographs so that nameplates were excluded and the photographers could not be identified.

The photographs were taken on 400 ASA colour negative film using a fully automatic compact camera. The camera needed to be easy and straightforward to use, with autofocus and an automatic flash when required. I did not consider the technical quality of the photographs particularly important; what mattered was the subject the participant had chosen to photograph.

4 THE PHOTOGRAPHY SITUATION AND PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

People reacted to my request in many different ways. One person laughed, "What a funny assignment you have," while another grumbled, "I'm not taking any pictures." Some were suspicious or afraid. I remember once explaining what I was doing to someone peering at me through a gap of only a couple of centimetres, with the security chain still fastened. When the person heard that I would remain in the hallway and would not come inside, they agreed to my request. The camera was passed in and out through the narrow opening in the door – a camera can enter places a person cannot.

On average, two out of every twelve people who opened their doors declined to take a photograph. I consider this a fairly good response rate, given how unusual my request was. The most common reasons for refusing were: "I don't have time right now" and "I'm too old." There were also people who became enthusiastic and wanted to take more than one photograph: "Could I take another one? I've just thought of an even better place."

I also met a handful of older people – around five – for whom this was the first photograph they had ever taken themselves.

Although I asked people to photograph "anything at all," their assumptions about what they were supposed to photograph often became apparent in their comments: "Who am I supposed to photograph?" "But there's no one else at home?" "You mean a person?" "Well, we have these ones to photograph" [pointing to the children]. "Oh, so we're not taking a picture of you, but of us!" "Oh dear, the place is such a mess!" "You mean something important?"

Choosing a subject was either self-evident or painfully difficult. When I asked one woman what she had photographed, she replied: "I went back with the camera and sat in the same place where I had been sitting before the doorbell rang, and I photographed the view in front of me." From the photographs alone, it is impossible to determine how many such "what I was doing at the time" photographs are included in the material.

Although I heard "Oh, there's nothing here to photograph" more than once, no one ultimately gave up for that reason. After struggling with the decision for a while, people generally found a subject they considered suitable and returned the camera feeling satisfied. The longest I spent hanging around in a hallway was about ten minutes, but on that occasion the participant had completely forgotten about the whole photography task and left the camera on the kitchen table.

One encounter, however, has remained particularly vivid in my memory. I was making my rounds through apartment buildings when, on the top floor of one building, I noticed that one of the doors had no doorbell at all. I was already about to leave when I noticed a small button on the wall and pressed it. An elderly woman opened the door and looked extremely startled to see me. I began by telling her about my school assignment and explaining that I was trying to overcome my "fear of people" and learn to approach strangers. She visibly relaxed and told me that she, too, was "terribly afraid" of people. For this reason, she had installed a separate doorbell that she could switch off from inside her apartment. She normally kept it switched off, but that day she was expecting her son to visit and had turned it on.

As our conversation became more relaxed, the woman took the camera and willingly went to take her photograph. When she returned to the door to give the camera back, she burst into tears. "I took a photograph of my late husband and my late sister." We talked for a little while longer about her deceased loved ones, and then I continued on my way.

5 PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

In this study, I have considered the choice of subject more significant than the technical quality of the photograph. The photographic material therefore includes images that are out of focus, blurred or underexposed, provided that the subject of the photograph can still be identified.

Altogether, I collected 350 photographs. The final research material consists of 313 photographs. Most of the photographs excluded from the material were technically unsuccessful to the extent that their subjects could no longer be identified. The most common reason was underexposure, for example as a result of photographing against the light. Seven photographs were excluded because my notes concerning the people who had taken them were incomplete.

In addition, I excluded three photographs of myself taken at the front door. I wanted all the photographs in the material to have been produced under the same basic conditions: the participant was inside the home with the camera while I waited outside the door. Several people intended to photograph me, but I was able to decline these requests.

6 PRINCIPLES OF IMAGE CLASSIFICATION

When choosing what to photograph, consciously or unconsciously, people passed their choice through two “filters”. The first filter was their conception of what is worth photographing. The second was a form of “censorship”: what they wanted, or considered appropriate, to show or reveal to a stranger – or, conversely, what they did not want to show. This second filter also included people’s assumptions about what they thought I expected them to photograph. The photographs therefore do not directly correspond to the kinds of images people would spontaneously take for their own family albums or for other purposes. Rather, they reflect more general conceptions of what is considered appropriate or worthwhile to photograph.

The photography situation differed from familiar photographic situations because of the particular time (a weekday evening), the limited setting (the home) and the undefined recipient (me). Because the photograph had to be handed over to a stranger, its ultimate recipient remained undefined. Usually, photographers already have an intended recipient or viewer in mind when taking a photograph: they may take it as a personal memory, to show to friends or relatives, and so on. The subject–photographer–recipient chain remains incomplete when the recipient is left open. By asking people to photograph “anything at all”, I placed them in a situation without clear rules. This is precisely what makes the photographs interesting to me. What is considered worth photographing on an ordinary weekday, in one’s own home?

I also compare the material according to the photographer’s age, gender and living circumstances. In this context, living circumstances refers to a comparison between photographs taken by people living alone and those taken by people living with a partner or family.

The photographs were divided according to two classifications:

A. Subject

B. Meaning

I attempted to classify each photograph according to its visually identifiable primary subject. In some cases, however, determining the primary subject of the photograph proved difficult. In these situations, I referred to my notes on the participants' comments. Surprisingly few photographs were difficult to classify – approximately ten in the entire material.

To reduce the influence of my own conception of photography on the analysis, two other people, working independently of one another, classified the photographs in addition to myself. I classified the photographs from the perspective of a photographer. The other classifiers were photography researcher Hannu Sinisalo and Marja-Leena Liimatainen, an ordinary "ten-out-of-ten photographer". I based my final conclusions on the averages of these three independent classifications.

Subject (A)

For the subject classification, the photographs were grouped according to the most frequently occurring subjects:

1. People – adults and children
2. Pets – including aquariums
3. Decorative objects – this group also includes photographs of what I refer to as the "home altar": a shelf or tabletop on which objects intended for display have been arranged, such as photographs, decorative objects and lace doilies. I have also classified teddy bears and dolls as decorative objects.
4. Functional objects – for example, musical instruments, toys, food and drink
5. General views of interiors – for example, photographs of a living room or another interior space
6. Pictures of pictures – paintings, posters, printed images and photographs
7. Plants – flowers and flower arrangements
8. Views – photographs taken through a window or from a balcony
9. Media – televisions, newspapers, magazines and books

Meaning (B)

I analysed the meaning of the photographs by dividing them into images that conform to the norms of "ten-out-of-ten photography culture" and images that deviate from those norms.

By "ten-out-of-ten photography culture", I mean the general conceptions associated with family-album and family photography, which I discuss in greater detail in the theoretical section of this study. In brief, ten-out-of-ten photographs are conventional images that communicate positivity and happiness. They depict things that are valued and accepted within our society and culture. Their subject matter consists primarily of people and culturally shared ideas of beauty. A ten-out-of-ten photographer often takes photographs while standing, readily places the subject in the centre of the frame and aims to make the subject clearly recognisable. In this study, I have extended the concept of the ten-out-of-ten photograph to include images that reflect the same photographic conventions

but whose subjects differ from ordinary family-album photographs because of limitations relating to time, place or other circumstances. Examples include photographs of the “home altar”.

Ten-out-of-ten photography culture does not include the representation of everyday realities or the less presentable side of life. Photographs of laundry, dirty dishes, the inside of a refrigerator or a messy room reflect a different conception of what is worth photographing. I have classified these as photographs that deviate from ten-out-of-ten photography. Subjects that are generally undervalued or considered taboo in our society also belong to this group. The category also includes photographs that are radical in the way they are taken, such as a view beneath a bed photographed from floor level or an image with a deliberately tilted horizon.

The ten-out-of-ten photographs were grouped as follows:

1. Loved ones – people and photographs of people close to the photographer
2. Aesthetics – photographs reflecting ideas of beauty, such as paintings, flowers, decorative objects, “home altars” and general views of a “beautiful” living room
3. Objects of affection – pets and teddy bears
4. Interests – hobbies, music, literature, religion, etc.
5. Other photographs conforming to ten-out-of-ten photography culture – for example, views

Photographs deviating from ten-out-of-ten photography were grouped as follows:

6. Everyday realities – subjects representing the less presentable side of everyday life, such as piles of laundry, messy rooms, dirty dishes and food
7. Radical photographs – images that deviate through either their choice of subject or the way they are photographed, such as bottles of spirits, toilet bowls or deliberately tilted views

The groups formed according to subject cannot, however, be transferred directly to the groups based on meaning. For example, the category of general interior views includes both a tidy living room that conforms to ten-out-of-ten photography and a chaotic children’s room that deviates from it. Of the subject-based categories, only photographs of pets and views belonged without exception to the ten-out-of-ten category.

In the presentation of the photographic material following the written section of this study, the photographs are grouped according to the meaning classification (B). In the lower right-hand corner of each photograph, a code indicates its subject classification (A). The colour of the code also indicates whether the photograph was taken by a man (blue) or a woman (red).

7 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONCEPTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Culture and experience influence people's conceptions of photography. Our visual history, from the earliest cave paintings to contemporary pop videos, has shaped the way people perceive the visual world. Photography has played a significant role in this visual history. At the same time, the visual arts have provided an important foundation for the visual conventions of photography.

The history of photography can be seen as a tension between two ways of defining the medium. On the one hand, photography has sought to present its subjects beautifully, an ideal rooted in the visual arts. On the other hand, photography has been associated with truthfulness, reflecting both a conception of truth inherited from the natural sciences and the moral idealisation of truth. (Sontag 1984) Photography's ability to record a precise reflection of reality has helped reinforce the idea that photographs are truthful.

Fear of images has a history almost as long as humanity itself. In many early cultures, there has been a mythological belief that a visual representation contains some of the psychic energy belonging to the original subject. Although today we do not fear, as some early cultures did, that an image will take away our soul, we too often respond to images emotionally: a photograph of a loved one may be kissed, while a disliked person may be cut out of a photograph. A photograph therefore functions not only as a representation or substitute for its subject but may even be experienced as a part of the subject it represents. (Uitto 1989)

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, fear of images is also connected with the Old Testament prohibition against images. In the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus, the making of images of God or other beings as objects of worship is prohibited (Exodus 20:4).

8 PHOTOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH TOOL AND OBJECT OF STUDY

Photography has been used in ethnology, folklore studies and cultural anthropology since the late nineteenth century. It has, however, primarily been used as a research tool rather than as an object of study in its own right. Photographs taken by researchers examine communities from an outsider's perspective and convey the researchers' own values and conceptions of the people they study. The use of photographs themselves as research material has been less common. The following is a brief overview of some forms of research in which, according to ethnologist Hannu Sinisalo, photography can be used as an object of study.

CUSTOMS AND EVERYDAY CULTURE

In the study of customs and everyday culture, photographic material has been used particularly to examine celebrations and special occasions. Everyday life is barely visible in these photographs because ordinary daily activities have not been considered worth photographing. Over the decades, however, photographic practices have changed, particularly since the 1960s, when increased travel contributed to the growing popularity of amateur photography.

NORMS AND VALUES

Photographs can also be used to study systems of norms and values. People generally photograph things that are highly valued within their community. At the same time, photographs can reveal the internal hierarchy of a community: subjects with high status appear in photographs more frequently and in more prominent positions than others.

In the early twentieth century, status was communicated in photographs through, for example, new technological innovations such as bicycles, cars and telephones. The number of status symbols has increased as society has modernised. Changes in systems of values can be readily observed by comparing, for example, photographic material from the 1920s with contemporary material.

INNOVATION STUDIES

An innovation is an element adopted into a culture and perceived as new by those who adopt it. Most commonly, innovation has been studied in relation to the spread of a new technological device within a community, but an innovation may equally well be a new idea or way of doing something.

The diffusion of an innovation can be examined as a three-stage process of social change:

Innovation – the creation of a new idea

Diffusion – the communication and spread of the new idea within a particular social system

Change – the result of adopting the innovation

The innovation stages of the invention of photography have been studied quite extensively, whereas diffusion and particularly change have received less attention. The practices of taking photographs and having photographs taken are also innovation processes that have not been comprehensively studied. My final project, *The Image Behind the Door*, examines the process of change associated with the innovation of photography.

COMMUNICATION

Photographs and photography are, above all, forms of communication. They have influenced the communication systems of culture. Research can examine, for example, what has been communicated through this medium, how the communication has taken place, who has communicated and to whom the messages have been directed.

Almost any cultural phenomenon can be communicated through photographs, but the material environment is particularly frequently photographed. Objects in themselves have no inherent meaning; their meaning becomes apparent only when they are placed within their social and ideological context. Photographs have most often communicated relationships of ownership and use between people and objects. The message conveyed is therefore one of social status. Another common message in photographs is the expression of group affiliation: the individual shown as a member of a group. (Sinisalo 1983; 1985)

9 FAMILY ALBUM PHOTOGRAPHS (“TEN-OUT-OF-TEN PHOTOGRAPHS”)

Photographs were initially expensive and difficult to produce. Having one's photograph taken was possible only for members of the upper classes. People went to be photographed dressed in their finest clothes and posed against studio backdrops constructed from curtains, columns and other props.

As photographic techniques developed, photographs became less expensive, making family portraits accessible to the middle and working classes as well. Different social classes were photographed in the same manner and against similar studio backdrops – the photographic image became democratised. Photography contributed to creating a more equal representation of the dignity of the family. Today, almost everyone has the opportunity to own a camera. As a result, the majority of photographic production has shifted from professionals to amateurs.

Formal Family Photographs and Rites of Passage

Judith Williamson divides contemporary family photographs into two categories: formal and informal. Formal photographs serve as a kind of evidence that a family has reached the expected milestones of life. These photographs still have much in common with early posed portraits. Examples of formal photographs include those taken at weddings, christenings and graduation celebrations. (Williamson 1988) Such photographs may still be taken by professional photographers.

In cultural anthropology, such formal events are referred to as rites of passage. Rites of passage involve publicly marking changes in an individual's social status – making these changes known to other people. At the same time, the rituals also serve to ensure the successful completion of the transition. (Jokela and Siekkinen 1987)

Informal Photographs and the Imperative of Happiness

Informal photographs include images of holidays and other leisure activities. With informal photography, an entirely new element has entered the family photograph: the imperative to have “fun” – in other words, to be happy. It is not enough that people are expected to be having fun; the fun must also be visible, otherwise it is as though it never happened.

Family albums generally contain no photographs of crying children or angry parents. (Williamson 1988) Everything unpleasant can be forgotten. What has not been photographed might as well never have existed.

Photographs also serve as evidence of consumption that has taken place beyond the presence of family, friends or neighbours. Travel photographs provide evidence that the photographer really visited a particular destination and had a good time there. The camera is a device that makes experiences and memories real. (Sontag 1984)

Children are frequent subjects of photographs. A child is loved – and therefore photographed. Through photography, happiness can be captured and preserved at the moment it is experienced. (Uitto 1989) Not taking photographs of one's children, particularly when they are young, may be regarded as a sign of parental indifference.

One of the general, everyday purposes of photography is to affirm life. Photographs repeatedly depict what certainly and positively exists: happy children, the smile of a loved one and relatives gathered together. (Jokela and Siekkinen 1987)

One photograph of a loved one is often not enough; there may be many photographs of the same person. A photograph confirms that the person depicted exists – and for this reason, there can never be too many photographs of them. (Sontag 1984)

Family Albums and the Institution of the Family

Photography became a family ritual at precisely the time when the institution of the family itself was beginning to weaken in the industrialised countries of Europe and the United States. The family photograph album often represents the extended family. By extended family, I mean the group of close relatives who, in earlier agrarian societies, lived together, including grandparents and siblings with their own families.

In industrialised countries, the photograph album is often the only thing that remains of the extended family. Photographs help people manage situations in which they experience insecurity. Photographs are a way of binding reality – a way of making it stand still. Reality cannot be controlled, but images can. (Sontag 1984)

The family album presents the tidy image of the family expected by society. It exists on the boundary between private and public life. The form of the photographs and the choice of subjects follow strict, unspoken rules. The motives behind family-album photography are generally free from artistic ambition and considerations of practical usefulness. (Uitto 1989)

The criterion for a good and successful photograph is recognisability. A photograph is not considered unsuccessful because of its composition, exposure or lack of sharpness, but because the subject can no longer be recognised. (Hietaharju 1992-1993)

The photographer is not an outside observer taking a picture but a participant in the situation. The conventions include an awareness among everyone present that a photograph is being taken and the opportunity to pose for it. It is also important that everyone fits within the frame, often positioned in the centre. (Uitto 1989)

Conceptions of Beauty in Photography

Photographs are also taken because something is perceived as beautiful. Photography combines the demand for truthfulness with the desire to see the world as beautiful. Most people who take photographs simply reproduce the conceptions of beauty they have acquired. (Sontag 1984)

When we photograph something we consider beautiful, we assume that the resulting photograph will automatically be beautiful. Because our conceptions of beauty have often been acquired from painting, we may praise a good photograph by saying, “It looks just like a painting.” (Hietaharju 1992-1993)

10 SEEING AND THE FORMATION OF CONCEPTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Every sighted person receives most of their daily information through their eyes. We are accustomed to thinking of sight as the most reliable of our senses. The Finnish saying “A Finn won’t believe it until they see it” aptly reflects our tendency to equate seeing with truth. On the other hand, seeing is also a matter of experiencing: things told to us by others have not been experienced first-hand. It is only by seeing something ourselves that we become the experiencer. (Hietala 1993) A photograph can therefore be understood as communicating: “Because I photographed this, I was there myself; I saw and experienced it.”

Our knowledge and beliefs influence the way we see things. We can see only what we look at, and looking always involves a choice. That choice is shaped by prior expectations about what is worth seeing. We tend to interpret external stimuli in ways that correspond to the concepts and patterns of thought we already possess. Our way of thinking is subjective and culturally conditioned. We never look only at an object; we always consider the relationship between the object and ourselves. Every act of looking involves an expectation of meaning. (Berger 1991; 1987)

Photographs are not, as is often assumed, merely mechanical records. Whenever we look at a photograph, we are at least to some extent aware of the photographer who selected that particular view from countless other possibilities. This applies even to the most ordinary amateur snapshot. The photographer’s subjective way of seeing is reflected in their photographs and in their choice of subjects. Likewise, the way we as viewers perceive or evaluate a photograph depends on our own way of seeing. (Berger 1991)

According to John Berger, a photograph contains the message: “I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.” If everything that existed were photographed continuously, all photographs would become meaningless. A photograph therefore always also refers to what has not been seen. Berger further argues that the extent to which something is considered worth seeing can be assessed in relation to everything the photographer has chosen not to show, because what has been excluded is also implicitly present. (Berger 1987)

Advertising can shape people’s visual conceptions and desires. A packet of photographic prints might, for example, carry a slogan such as “This is how memories are made” or “Capture the best moments”. Advertising also relies heavily on images of families. Rather than simply imitating family photographs, advertisements offer a model of what a family should look like. (Williamson 1988)

11 SIGNS, CODES AND COMMUNICATION

Signs

Signs are created by people. They refer to things beyond themselves and thus serve as means of creating meaning. Communication is based on signs and the meanings they convey. Communication is essential to culture – without it, culture would die. (Fiske 1992)

The subjective meanings we give to signs derive from cultural conventions: our beliefs, education, political or religious convictions, and so on. The ultimate meaning of a sign is therefore a psychological and individual phenomenon. The same applies to our perception of reality, which also requires a process of completion by our consciousness. (Hietala 1993)

Defining meanings precisely has proved almost impossible. Meaning is therefore best defined through the relationship of a sign to other signs, or by establishing what we do not, at least, mean by a particular sign. (Fiske 1992)

Codes

Codes are systems that organise the use of signs. They determine how signs can be combined with one another. Codes are most often accepted through convention and habitual use. Convention is based on repetition.

Convention creates expectations: that people will dress or behave in certain ways, and that the subject of a photograph should be of a particular kind – for example, a person or a “beautiful” landscape. Without shared codes, we would be unable to experience ourselves as belonging to our culture or to express that membership. Shared codes create a sense of security. (Fiske 1992)

The Meaning of a Photograph

The formal organisation of a photograph does not explain anything in itself. The photograph’s true message is invisible. It arises through an interaction not with form, but with time. Borrowing a fraction of a second from the continuum of reality creates a discontinuity, which is reflected in the ambiguity of photographic meaning.

A photograph can acquire meaning only to the extent that the viewer is able to read into it a duration that extends beyond the photograph itself. We lend the image a past and a future. The truth a photograph can tell – the truth it can itself substantiate – is limited. (Berger 1987)

12 IMAGE SELECTION AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Taking a photograph is not merely a technical act; it is also a cultural and social choice. Every photograph frames a small part of reality while simultaneously leaving a great many things outside the frame. According to John Berger, a photograph tells us not only what has been seen, but also what has not been chosen to be shown. The meaning of an image is therefore constructed through both what is included and what is excluded. (Berger 1987)

The act of taking a photograph can also be understood as a form of social presentation. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, people attempt to manage the impressions they give to others during social interaction. A photographic situation can similarly be interpreted as a situation of self-presentation: the photographer selects a subject through which they present something about themselves, their home or their life. The choice of subject therefore tells us not only what is important to the photographer, but also what kind of impression they wish to give of themselves and their surroundings. (Goffman 1959)

According to Susan Sontag, a photograph also functions as evidence that something has taken place. A photograph creates the impression that what it depicts genuinely existed or occurred. Photographs are therefore often used to reinforce memories, experiences and social relationships. (Sontag 1984)

From these perspectives, the choice of what to photograph can be understood simultaneously as a cultural, social and personal act. A photograph reveals something about how the photographer sees their surroundings, but also about how they want others to see them.

13 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

In the following section, I examine the photographic material collected for the study and analyse what the choice of subjects and the meanings of the photographs reveal about conceptions of what is considered worth photographing.

13.1 DISTRIBUTION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

The subjects, ranked by frequency, were:

1. People – 90 photographs
2. Decorative objects – 43 photographs
3. Pets – 33 photographs
4. General views of interiors – 32 photographs
5. Functional objects – 31 photographs
6. Pictures of pictures – 30 photographs
7. Views – 24 photographs
8. Plants – 21 photographs
9. Media – 9 photographs

I was surprised by the number of photographs of people, as I had expected participants to censor those closest to them as photographic subjects, given that the photograph was being handed over to a complete stranger. The participants' comments, however, suggested that a person was considered such a self-evident subject for a photograph that the choice was not even questioned.

The photographic material was distributed among the age groups as follows:

1. Under 35: 42%
2. Aged 35–55: 45%
3. Over 55: 13%

Ten-out-of-ten photographs accounted for 87% of the material, while 13% were classified as photographs deviating from ten-out-of-ten photography.

Of the participants, 67% were women and 33% were men.

A total of 69% of the participants lived with a partner or family.

More detailed information on the distribution of the photographs is provided in the accompanying tables.

13.2 GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

Well over half of the people who opened their doors were women. Of the photographers, 67% were women and 33% were men. There are undoubtedly several possible explanations for this. In our

culture, the traditional role of women has included caring for the home and children, which has meant that women have often been the ones at home. It also seemed to be customary that when the doorbell rang, a child or a woman was the family member expected to answer the door. In most cases, a woman opened the door even when a man was also at home.

If a child opened the door, I asked them to bring one of their parents to the door. And, almost invariably, it was the mother. On a few occasions, a man who had opened the door also passed the task of taking the photograph to his wife: "Come here. Apparently we're supposed to take some kind of photograph." Men seemed quite willing to leave the photography to women. I often asked who in the household usually held the camera. Most of the answers reinforced the impression that the camera was commonly in the woman's hands. Perhaps, as an easy-to-use means of preserving memories and maintaining family ties, the camera was regarded as something that naturally belonged in the hands of women.

13.3 MEN / WOMEN

Men chose pets as their subjects more often than women did. Of the photographs taken by men, 15% depicted animals. Functional objects were particularly popular among younger men and ranked as the third most common subject in men's photographs, after people and pets.

Aesthetics was clearly more prominent in women's photographs: even photographs of loved ones ranked second to aesthetic subjects. Women's greater interest in subjects emphasising beauty and men's more practical choices of subject were not in themselves surprising, but the relatively strong interest among men in photographing pets was.

One possible interpretation is that animals provide men with a socially acceptable way of expressing affection. Emotional expression directed towards an animal may not require the same degree of emotional openness as relationships between people.

The prevalence of pet photographs among men can also be interpreted from a cultural perspective. A pet occupies a position somewhere between a person and an object: it is a living being to which a person can become attached, yet it does not form part of the social hierarchy between people in the same way as, for example, a family member. Photographing an animal may therefore provide an opportunity to express affection without directly engaging in emotional expression between people.

From the perspective of photography, a pet is also an easily approachable subject. It is present in everyday domestic life, and photographing it does not involve the same social expectations as photographing a person. When photographing another person, the photographer often has to take into account the subject's response, posing and the social situation, whereas photographing an animal can be more spontaneous.

This phenomenon can also be considered from the perspective of social interaction. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, people attempt to manage the impressions they give to others in social situations. A photographic situation can similarly be regarded as a situation of self-presentation: the photographer selects a subject through which they present something about themselves, their home or their life.

Photographing a pet may therefore be a safe way of constructing a positive image of one's life. An animal often suggests domesticity, care and affection, while at the same time revealing less personal information about the photographer than, for example, a photograph of family members might. Through an animal, it is therefore possible to communicate an image of a warm and lively home without directly placing either the photographer or other people in front of the camera.

When interpreting the photographs, it is therefore important to recognise that choices of subject do not reveal only what is important to the photographer, but also the kind of image they wish to present of themselves and their surroundings.

13.4 PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY PARTICIPANTS UNDER 35

Almost all of the photographs that deviated from ten-out-of-ten photography were taken by participants under the age of 35. These photographs accounted for 22% of all images taken by this age group. The only category they photographed more frequently was loved ones. In my view, the photographs taken by younger participants suggest a shift in conceptions of what is considered worth photographing. Everyday reality appears to have become accepted as a photographic subject. The photographs no longer seek merely to present the positive and orderly image of family life associated with the conventions of ten-out-of-ten photography. Could this indicate a change in the accepted model of family life and its values? Or is it a reaction against a more “traditional” conception of photography, or perhaps an attempt to surprise me by producing an image contrary to what the participant assumed I expected?

The radical photographs that departed strongly from ten-out-of-ten photography in their subject matter, camera angle or composition were also taken by participants under 35. These photographs show similarities to the visual language used in advertising and, in particular, music videos.

According to Jean Baudrillard, we already live in a state of “hyperreality” composed of endlessly circulating texts and images. Baudrillard introduced into discussions of postmodernism Plato’s concept of the simulacrum, an “image without an original”. Within the visual flood of mass media, images have lost their relationship to reality: the simulacrum ultimately represents only itself. (Hietala 1993)

In light of the above, it is understandable that aesthetic subjects were less common among younger participants than among the other age groups. Photographs relating to hobbies and other interests were likewise characteristic of the younger participants.

13.5 PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY PARTICIPANTS AGED 35–55

The middle-aged photographers conformed quite clearly to the expectations of ten-out-of-ten photography culture. Of the photographs taken by this group, 93% were classified as ten-out-of-ten photographs. Loved ones and aesthetics were equally popular categories and together accounted for 67% of all photographs taken by this age group.

13.6 PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY PARTICIPANTS OVER 55 AND THOSE LIVING ALONE

The participants over the age of 55 were predominantly women. Their conceptions of photography corresponded almost entirely to those of the 35–55 age group.

Aesthetic photographs were particularly prominent in this group. Photographs of loved ones were less common than in the other groups, probably because many of the participants over 55 lived alone. Their photographs did, however, frequently include an existing photograph of a loved one, which in this situation appears to substitute for a conventional portrait of the person themselves.

Compared with participants living with a partner or family, those living alone more frequently photographed pictures of pictures and media. Photographs of teddy bears were also taken

predominantly by people living alone. I have wondered whether, in the photography situation, teddy bears might have functioned as a kind of substitute for a person.

Most interesting, however, was the observation that the majority of photographs showing views were taken by people living alone. A view through a window or from a balcony – these were not beautiful postcard views – was the second most common choice of subject among participants living alone. Why did they turn their attention to the view outside?

“Generally speaking, the way the world looks is the broadest possible confirmation that the world is there.” (Berger 1987)

From a cynical perspective, a photograph of the view could be interpreted as evidence that I am alive. Even if very little happens inside my home, something is happening in the world immediately around me.

14 WHAT WAS NOT PHOTOGRAPHED

According to John Berger, photographs can also be evaluated in terms of what has not been chosen to be shown, because what is excluded is nevertheless present in them.

Most strikingly, the entire material contains not a single photograph of a coat rack in an entrance hall, shoes, or the inside of a front door. These might be expected to be the subjects closest to the participant at the moment they receive the camera and I remain on the other side of the closed door. In my view, this clearly demonstrates that even when a person might wish to complete the photography task quickly and without much thought, they nevertheless select a subject in accordance with their own conception of what is worth photographing.

There were only a few close-ups or photographs in which a single object filled the entire frame, and those few were taken by younger participants. The photographs taken by participants under 35 also contained fewer general views of interiors than those taken by older participants.

Older participants, in turn, avoided photographing anything ordinary or “ugly”. Traditional conceptions of photography therefore appear to remain strong: happiness and beauty are regarded as subjects worthy of being photographed.

Among the 313 photographs, there was only one self-portrait – a photograph in which the photographer was also the subject. There were no photographs, for example, of money, make-up, a shower, feet or hands.

15 MESSAGES CONVEYED BY THE PHOTOGRAPHS

As I have already noted, it is difficult to define the messages conveyed by a photographer. A photograph contains a multiplicity of meanings: signs refer beyond themselves, and an image does not have only one meaning. (Karttunen 1990)

Nevertheless, I would like to present some of the messages that I have interpreted from the photographs:

- we are a close-knit and well-balanced family
- I do not want to reveal anything about myself; I am afraid
- I have nothing to hide; this is what our home is like
- this is important to me
- I am different from others

The photographs also include a distinct group of humorous images. Because humour would have been difficult to define in this context, I did not include it in the actual classification.

16 CONCLUSION

In this study, I have examined ordinary Finnish people's conceptions of what is worth photographing. What is considered worth photographing on an ordinary weekday, in one's own home?

Looking always involves prior expectations about what is worth seeing. In photography, these expectations are combined with our conceptions of what is worth photographing. Despite their internal censorship, people inevitably express these conceptions through the photographs they take.

The photographic material I collected makes it possible to develop a broader understanding of what people consider worth photographing and what they communicate through photographs. The material, consisting of 313 photographs, was classified according to both subject and meaning. I also examined differences in the distribution of the photographs between age groups and genders, as well as between participants living with others and those living alone.

The photographs indicated that the range of generally accepted photographic subjects is relatively narrow. Even in a situation in which traditions and established habits did not require any particular course of action, people generally reproduced the conventional conceptions of photography associated with family albums.

The study also produced some unexpected observations. For example, men tended to photograph pets more often than women, while the majority of photographs showing views through windows were taken by participants living alone. The study also suggested that, within families, photography was often regarded as women's "work".

Clear changes in traditional conceptions of photography were visible only in the photographs taken by younger participants. It appears that the age of hypermedia will change our conceptions of photography.

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