

Gillian Rose *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) 158pp. £50.00

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There has long been a need for a substantial ethnography of family photography and Gillian Rose's book goes some way towards providing it. Historical and theoretical studies of the vast realm of photographs outside of the canon of art history remain few and far between and all too frequently proceed without an adequate empirical base. In a very recent overview of the area, Stephen Bull rightly describes family photography as 'undertheorised', while in James Elkins's *Photography Theory* Diarmuid Costello admits, 'Whenever we talk about photography outside of the art historical frame of reference, it's as if the conversation just dies. We don't know what to say or how to proceed.'

Amateur photography, especially in its domestic manifestation in the family album, has long been characterised, Rose notes, as trite, banal, stultified and stereotyped in subject matter. Rose, a cultural geographer, argues that almost all the literature on family photographs has concentrated on the semiotic content of what family photographs picture, rather than thinking of such photographs as objects with which a complex array of things are done. The approach of *Doing Family Photography*, then, is explicit in the title: photography is considered as a practice rather than a particular kind of image, and photographs are material objects that move through a 'visual economy' of social relations and institutions as part of their production, circulation and consumption.

To put this approach into practice, Rose draws together and reworks two areas of her previously published research. The first half of the book explores the role of photographs in the maintenance of familial relations through detailed interviews with middle-class mothers in the South East of England. Although the focus on a specific (and arguably rather privileged) group of photography practitioners could be said to lack extensive coverage, Rose draws fine-grained analytical understanding from her close-up research and presents a number of findings that challenge existing photographic theory. Arguing in particular against the continuing dominance of Barthes' theories of indexicality and punctum to photography studies, Rose shows

how these are, respectively, taken for granted or barely evident in domestic practice. There is little evidence among Rose's subjects of photographic wounding: her 'mums' are reflexive about their practice and fully aware of their complicity in producing photographs that singularly emphasise happiness. As such, Rose argues, the characterisation, by feminist critics, of the family album as a site of oppression is 'somewhat misplaced'. She states, 'women are using photography as a technology that helps to picture and perform the things that they want: a family that is together, children who are developing, a home that is happy, a mother who is good enough.' (p. 131) While all may not be traumatic in the family album, equally all is not rosy. Rose develops the innovative idea, for example, that the almost pathological desire on the part of new mothers to photograph their first born babies at every stage of their relative inactivity is bound up with the emotional management of maternal ambivalence.

The second half of the book concerns the use of the domestic photograph in the public domain, in particular, the reproduction of photographs of the dead in British newspapers immediately after the London transport bombings of 7 July 2005. Faced with these photographs, Rose admits, 'It was hard to know where to look.' (p. 122) She suggests that the sense of identification that newspapers sought to produce between their readers and the victims was a manifestation of Lauren Berlant's 'politics of sentiment', where the experience of shared emotions is used to take the place of active citizenship. Seeking to construct a 'postsentimental' way of looking at these images, Rose tests out strategies borrowed from Judith Butler and Kaja Silverman, among others, that seek to construct an ethical phenomenology of the face-to-face encounter, compelling the viewer 'to look again, differently'. Typically grounded, Rose combines these philosophical approaches with practical questions about the photographs' origin, circulation and use in their 'halfway' presentation in the newspapers. Returning to the research in the first half of the book, she fuses her knowledge of how newspapers worked to crop, caption and thereby make such photographs poignant with her understanding of what people do with their personal images. In so doing, Rose presents a persuasive and synthesised argument for the reappraisal of the widespread family photograph, whose affective resonance extends beyond the domestic setting and into the public sphere.

References:

Stephen Bull *Photography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) p. 192

James Elkins (ed.) *Photography Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 199