

# Objects of Denigration and Desire

## Taking the Amateur Photographer Seriously

*Annebella Pollen*

**Abstract:** The study of amateur photography presents a distinctive methodological challenge to photographic studies. For too long considered as a sub-category of photography or even as a photographic genre – when not ignored entirely in canonical histories - amateur photography has nonetheless represented, for over a hundred years, the single largest area of photographic practice. Too broad to see as a whole, and notoriously slippery to categorise, a range of adjectives from snapshot to vernacular have attempted to pin down this vast and heterogeneous domain across a range of disciplinary frames. Through an in-depth analysis of photographic hierarchies across a range of periods and places, with a specific focus on the culture and practice of the ‘serious amateur’, this chapter argues that, as the focus for both cultural dismissal and desire, amateur photography offers the prime site for ascertaining the moral values and social expectations made of the medium.

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In 2007, an exhibition in Musee de l'Elysee in Lausanne, Switzerland, celebrated the fullest flowering of photographic practice – as the organizers saw it – embodied in the development of digital technologies, the integration of cameras into everyday phone hardware, and the growth of image sharing platforms and social media. Entitled ‘We are All Photographers Now!’ the exhibition, curated by William A. Ewing, seemed to signal the destruction of old hierarchies and the coming of a new era, one that was widely heralded as ‘the age of the amateur’ (Rusbridger 2007). A few years down the line, and from another perspective, however, a backlash has arisen. The popular press across the English-speaking world now regularly perceives the growth of amateur photography practice as a destructive force. Articles with inflammatory titles such as ‘The death of photography’ ask, ‘Are camera phones destroying an artform?’ (Jeffries 2013) or note, ‘Humanity takes millions of photographs every day. Why are most so forgettable?’ (Brown 2013) In discussions such as these, amateurs are characterized as unthinking in their use of the camera, indiscriminate in their subject matter, and lacking in aesthetic vision. A 2015 exhibition in Montreal, Canada, with the theme ‘The Post-Photographic Condition’, devoted in part to exploring the wealth of photographs now circulating in cyberspace, concluded, ‘We are bedevilled by an unprecedented glut of images’ (Fontcuberta 2015: 8). Amateur photography was given free rein, these prosecutors seem to say, and it has spiraled out of control. Simultaneously seen as the bearer of visual democracy and the destroyer of its own potential, the amateur photographer carries enormous symbolic and moral weight in the twenty-first century. And yet, perhaps it ever was thus. More than a hundred and twenty years before *The Guardian* would make

the same claim, *The Times* newspaper observed in 1892 that 'the present is the age of the "amateur", not only in photography but in everything else' (quoted in Pritchard 2010: 237)

For well over a hundred years, amateur photography has represented the single largest area of photographic practice. As such, apprehending and understanding it presents a distinctive methodological challenge to photographic studies. For too long considered merely as a sub-genre of photography or even as a photographic style – when not ignored entirely in canonical histories – amateur practices seem too broad to ever be seen as a whole and remain notoriously slippery to categorize. A range of adjectives from ‘snapshot’, ‘family’, ‘domestic’ and ‘vernacular’ attempt (and frequently fail) to pin down this vast and heterogeneous domain across a range of disciplinary frames. As noted, these issues have taken a new and more pressing turn with the enormous expansion of digital images in the context of the internet’s mass-amateurization. A bewilderingly wide range and quantity of amateur photographic material now proliferates and yet core questions remain about how best to define and interpret it.

This chapter evaluates these issues through an analysis of past and current historical accounts, looking into the shifting perceptions of amateur photographers while also exploring amateurs’ motivations and aspirations, as expressed in the discourses of their own photographic culture. Through its examination of photographic hierarchies across a range of periods and places, this chapter assesses the ways in which amateurs have been variously celebrated and denigrated (and back again), as aesthetically privileged elites, banal copyists, unthinking ‘snapshotters’ and carriers of cultural authenticity. Via a survey of photographic theory, this chapter examines and challenges photographic categories and constituencies, past and present, while indicating overlooked areas and suggesting productive new directions. With a central focus on the so-called ‘serious’ amateur, this chapter illuminates the historical and contemporary discourses that circulate about the reality and fantasy of the amateur in relation to photographic

technology and the market; to photographic education, training and skill; to photographic subjects and styles; and to social class and gender.

### **Who is the amateur photographer? A historical view of categories and hierarchies**

The history of photography offers useful accounts that chart the shifting status of the amateur in the earliest years of the medium in Britain and America (for example, Pritchard 2010; Seiberling and Bloore 1986). By necessity – due to the early patent restrictions of Henry Fox Talbot - the earliest of photographic practitioners in Britain were amateur in status. Those who wished to experiment with the new technologies tended to emerge from educated elites with leisure and means. The pre-existing interests of this small but prestigious group – including scientific study, antiquarianism and landscape painting – shaped the early development of photography while providing a valued continuity with aesthetic traditions and scholarly pursuits.

A shift in the balance of photographic culture towards professional practitioners from the mid-1850s led to the first changes in the status of the photographic amateur. On the one hand, a broader range of photographic practitioners across the middle classes, including shopkeepers and clerks, entered the photographic community, often with commercial ambitions to capitalize on the growing demand for photographic portraiture. As Seiberling and Bloore note, these new amateurs often did not share the educational and cultural background of the first generation. They quote photographer Francis Frith on precisely this point. He complained in 1859: ‘The class of persons, now a very large one, who practice photography, is undoubtedly a very different class from the old regime of ‘artists’. It certainly includes a vast number who know nothing, and if we judge them by their crimes, care less for the principle, we will not say of Art, but of common sense and decency’ (in Seiberling and Bloore 1986: 91). Photographic

judgements about amateur photographic practices had a class dimension from the very earliest days.

In part in response to these demographic changes among photography practitioners, in the 1850s the first photographic societies were formed in Britain and North America – very much in the model of the learned and respectable societies with which the established gentlemen-amateurs would have been familiar. These were mixed in their membership make-up but attracted those who considered themselves to be serious practitioners. Numbers were always small; Michael Pritchard estimates that, at best, there were probably less than a thousand society members at any one time in Britain up to the late 1870s (2010: 95). Nonetheless, the traditional meaning of the term amateur – as one who undertakes an activity for love not for money – became a badge of honor to the minority of photographers interested in the medium's artistic and scientific potential, and who sought to distinguish themselves from both 'trade' and the apparently unfeeling and uninspired emerging mass practitioner. The distinction between professionals – commonly commercial portrait photographers - and the amateur was one that preoccupied the photographic press and societies from the 1850s, not least because from this time, according to Pritchard, 'there was little to distinguish between the amateur and professional photographer from a technical perspective' (2010: 95, 97). The issue was more than just a commercial concern about who sold prints and services; an amateur was seen only to be worthy of the name if he or she was able to prepare, coat and process his or her own materials and understand all aspects of the photographic process. In the early decades of photography amateurs had also been valued as the innovators and experimenters in photography. By the 1870s, however, the expansion of commercial photographic business and the introduction of commercial dry plate technologies rendered these claims redundant (Pritchard 2010: 98).

Debates about classification were further complicated in the 1880s by the rapid development of a new category of amateur photographer who had little interest in the process or

practice of photography for its own sake, but was more interested in photography as a means to an end, that is, as a record of personally significant people and places. The role of Kodak as a manufacturer and supplier of cheap and simple to operate camera technologies and extensive advertising campaigns that addressed and also defined this market is well known in the history of photography (Ford 1989; Collins 1990; West 2000). Requiring no specialist knowledge of developing and printing, the new camera culture led to the development of a new, and dominant category in amateur photography: the pejoratively titled 'snapshooter', or 'push-button operator'.

The tripartite system of professionals, amateurs and snapshooters, first established in the 1880s and consolidated apace in the early years of the new century, offered a positioning structure for photographic practice that has proved remarkably durable. While rather crude, the classifications have nonetheless been widely adopted and have, in turn, created spaces for self-defined communities to flourish, sometimes firmly in opposition to other categories. Classification is not a neutral device, however, and the linear structure – with the snapshooter always positioned at the bottom of the ladder – betrays value judgements that have also served to harden hierarchies. This is particularly the case when art photography is introduced as a fourth category in the system.

Long-standing debates about photography's nebulous status as an art form reached a peak in the final years of the nineteenth century, and the determination to secure its artistic position was led by amateurs. The development of a distinctive aesthetic mode known as Pictorialism – which applied the sensibilities, subjects and styles of painting to photography - gained traction on both sides of the Atlantic jointly in response to photography's commercial expansion and the opening up of the practice to large numbers of camera users without technical or aesthetic ambition (Sternberger 2001). The establishment of specialist societies, publications and exhibition spaces for artistic amateurs consolidated these practices into a coherent style and a self-consciously separate photographic community.

The traditional art historical narrative asserts that these styles and photographic communities were dismantled in the mid-1910s, led by the modernist aesthetic preferences of Alfred Stieglitz, New York tastemaker and former Pictorialist pioneer (Gee and New Jersey State Museum 1978). Stieglitz's latter promotion of a more 'straight' style of photography, which confronted urban realities and communicated messages graphically, without romance or retouching, was seen to correspond to a machine aesthetic emerging among avant-garde professional arts practitioners across the US, Europe and Russia in the 1910s and 1920s. This narrative, however, celebrates singular names as part of the heroic modernist history of stylistic innovation. It pays no attention to the much larger practice of amateur photography taking place at the same time. Once at the heart of photographic culture, as technical innovators and community makers, the amateur photographer – despite or perhaps because of the massive expansion of practice – seems caught on the back foot in this telling of history, inhabiting a retrogressive position. While the tiny minority of professional avant-garde photographers have been canonized in the art history of photography, those who used their cameras for other ends and styles have not had their names recorded. Despite their large numbers, they became 'othered', defined in negative relation as non-professional and non-artistic outsiders, apparently unworthy of attention and producing photographic work of little public consequence.

### **Amateur photographic historiography: clusters and gaps**

After many years of analytical neglect, following a renaissance of interest in the study of photography from the 1970s, a large body of research now exists on the study of family photography, as one distinctive category of amateur practice [for further discussion of this, see also Martha Langford, this volume]. The first generation of work includes early explorations emerging from the social sciences and social history (Jacobs 1981; Hirsch 1981) with the most significant ethnographic study, of what he calls 'home-mode' photography, being that by Richard

Chalfen (1987). In Britain, valuable explorations emerged from feminist and Marxist critiques of the nuclear family as a dominant cultural institution (Spence and Holland 1991), which has proved an enduring point of departure (Hirsch 1999). Methodological approaches to family photography have been productively applied from orality (Langford 2001) and cultural geography (Rose 2010) to, in particular, memory studies (Langford 2001; Kuhn 2002; Hirsch 2002; Batchen 2004). The personal photograph album as a form has frequently been the chosen site of study (Levine and Snyder 2006; Di Bello 2007) but manufacturers of products and processes for a domestic market – from Kodak and Polaroid to Boots the Chemist - have also been topics for analysis (for example, West 2000;; Pasternak 2015; Buse 2016, Pollen 2019). Studies of so-called snapshot photography – usually used as a shorthand term to indicate photography taken of and for personal and domestic contexts with simple camera equipment – have emerged from sociological and ethnographic bases (Chalfen 1987; Sarvas and Frohlich 2011) but also, with increasing regularity, from art histories that seek to expand and sometimes challenge photography's canon (Nickel 1998; Batchen 2008; Zuromskis 2013).

The emerging popularity of the term 'vernacular photography' since the 1990s – used most commonly to indicate photographs produced without artistic intentions – includes family and snapshot photography, sometimes among other categories of photography produced for commercial or functional purposes (Batchen 2000, 2002; Kaplan 2003; Cutshaw and Barrett 2008). Often intended as a form of praise in publications that celebrate the aesthetic creativity and variety of the form, the term is sometimes used as a synonym for folk art, positioning its producers as romantically unsophisticated; charming but ultimately unwitting (Cardinal 2004). The assertion that the formally untrained are automatically or even accidentally unselfconscious and honest, is intended to invert the usual hierarchies, but it ultimately offers a condescending position that denies sophistication and purpose to the vast numbers of the population who make photography among the most popular leisure pastimes. Much writing about popular photographic practice implicitly or explicitly assumes a lack of awareness and intention (for

better or for worse). Don Slater, as one example, has dismissively noted that the mass photography practice ‘is hardly a conscious activity at all’ (1983: 245). In relation to the so-called point-and-shoot technologies usually associated with popular photographic practice, the limited technical prowess required to work a simple camera has implied, for some, a corresponding simplicity in the user.

With its porous parameters and unmanageable scale, the term ‘vernacular’ has been thoroughly critiqued, not least for its tendency to classify all photographs as ‘non art’, that is, as negative inversions of what is, in fact, a minority category of photography (Batchen 2000). In a useful demolition of the term, Bernard L. Herman (2008) has stated that it is ‘ideologically suspect’. He notes the term is usually evoked as a means of conferring legitimacy to a photography widely understood as marginal. As the term achieves its own canonical authority, however, it serves to embed the value judgements on it is based. Despite these critiques, the use of the term ‘vernacular’ endures, perhaps due to the absence of any truly satisfying alternative. Terms such as ‘majority photography’ – to mirror the term Majority World, coined to counter the inequalities bound up in the term Third World - and ‘mass photography’ have been proposed as substitutes (Pollen 2015); each more fully represents the balance of quantity if not power.

The currency of the ‘vernacular’ qualifier has coincided with a noticeable growth in popular publishing and museum exhibitions that aestheticize popular practice, usually operating on one of three levels: an ‘accidental masterpiece’ model of celebration, one that cherishes the ‘good eye’ of the collector rather than the work collected, or, finally, the alignment of amateur photographs with art-world tastes for a so-called snapshot aesthetic or surrealist *objet trouvé* (for example, Walther 2000; Frizot and de Veigy 2006; Johnson 2004). Joel Smith has offered a useful survey of practices of amateur photographs in the museum context and concludes that ‘[f]or all the sincere flattery paid it by artists, the real snapshot [has]...played scarcely any larger part in the academy’s or the museum’s histories of photography than house painting [has] played in

histories of modern painting (2001: 5). An updated survey (Zuromskis 2013) confirms Smith's point of view. The tendency of the art world, including the art museum, to valorize amateur photography on aesthetic grounds could be cynically understood as a means to expand the canon; certainly it reflects and reinforces the art market's rising prices for found photographs - the accepted name for serendipitously apprehended, although sometimes solicited, images (Cross 2015).

Newer work exploring the changing practices of amateur photography in the digitally networked public domain (Larsen and Sandbye 2014; Sarvas and Frohlich 2011; Hand 2012) has provided a challenge to the enduring concepts of the 'private' or 'domestic' photograph, and a counterbalance to the sometimes overdetermined convulsions of the so-called digital revolution. Exhibitions, including those cited at the start of this essay, also attempt to apprehend amateur photography in the digital domain in the space of the gallery; a useful survey by Areti Galani and Alexandra Moschovi (2013) shows the prevalence of this ambition in Britain and the USA as a technique of museum audience engagement through user-generated content. Literature that examines amateur photography in the context of tourism (Urry and Larsen 2012; Langford and Langford 2011), conflict (Guerin 2012; Pasternak 2010; Struk 2011) and new practices of so-called citizen journalism (Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2011; Schmieder 2015) has also added to knowledge about the amateur practitioner in relation to specific and emerging territories outside of the family and the home.

Very few studies have paid attention to those who are sometimes described as serious or dedicated amateur photographers, even though for well over a hundred years a distinctive culture of clubs and societies, instructional literature and classes, exhibitions and competitions have marked out photography as a particular kind of hobby attracting a particular kind of amateur enthusiast who utilizes, in turn, a particular kind of equipment, style and discourse (Pollen and Baillie 2012). As such, the following section explores the literature in this area in order to assess the state of knowledge, to draw out common themes and to highlight lacunae.

### **Social and aesthetic analyses in search of the serious amateur**

One of the earliest and most frequently cited studies of camera club culture is that conducted by Pierre Bourdieu and his team of French sociologists in the 1960s. Published in French in 1965 as *Un Art Moyen*, and in English translation in 1990 as *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, from the title outwards Bourdieu established photography as a relational practice, where popular photographic practice and photographic preferences act as markers of social class. Bourdieu argues that it is photography's uncertain status as a cultural form that means that it offers an index of taste; within this he notes that aspirational photography provides a 'privileged opportunity to observe the logic which may lead some members of the petit-bourgeoisie to seek originality in a fervent ... practice freed from its family functions' (1990: 47).

Within the text, a dedicated chapter by Robert Castell and Dominique Schnapper explores the aesthetic preferences and social aspirations of camera clubs, from suburban youth and 'avant-garde' art groups in Paris, to the 'petit bourgeois' of Bologna, by way of provincial Lille. Club members, described as self-conscious 'deviants' (1990: 103), are argued to raise photography to the level of scholarly activity in order to achieve legitimation for a practice that is 'legitimisable' but not as 'fully consecrated' as other, more established, forms of culture. Despite characterizing camera clubs as marginal, the authors nonetheless ascribe to them an 'autonomous aesthetic' (1990: 113). Club photographers have their own 'preoccupations and debates' and are united in their ambitions to avoid hackneyed subjects and reject everyday subjects and styles. This is seen as a classed attempt to infuse photography – understood as inherently arbitrary and lacking in meaning – with moral narratives expressed through 'weighty subjects' (1990: 120). Class is a determining – and somewhat overdetermined – factor in the organization and interpretation of photography in Bourdieu and colleagues' studies, and one that reinforces the position of the serious amateur in the middle of photographic as well as class hierarchies. Bourdieu's work fails to consider gender, generation, geography or ethnicity as similarly shaping

aspects of identity and therefore cultural apprehension. As such, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* offers only a partial analysis of serious photographic practice, but it remains an important foundational work, albeit one open to challenge in other locations and periods.

A further set of publications appeared in the 1980s without reference to Bourdieu. Emerging from three years of historical research and participant observation in the Miniature Camera Club of Philadelphia, USA, by ethnographer Dona Schwarz and her husband Michael Griffin, the authors argued – making a point that still stands - that too little attention had been paid to the social experience and function of camera club activities, leading to ignorance of ‘a major sphere of photographic activity’ (Schwartz and Griffin 1987: 200). Across papers that explored the customs and characteristics of a club competitions, and the competing aesthetic codes deployed by serious amateur photographers and arts practitioners (Schwartz 1987, 1986; Schwartz and Griffin 1987), Schwartz and Griffin complained that camera club photographs - when they had been considered at all - had tended to be considered aesthetically; canonical histories, such as those by Beaumont Newhall in the mid-century, for example, had derided them as ‘banal’, ‘sentimental’ and ‘redundant’ (Schwartz 1987: 279). Schwartz argued that fine art standards were inappropriately applied to camera club photography when qualities cherished by the former – such as innovation, experimentation and personal expression - were not always valued by the latter. Amateurs, she noted, ‘have built and maintained their own distinct “world” of photography’ (Schwartz 1986: 175). Within this, amateurs inhabit a complex range of social roles, acting as creator, viewer and critic (Schwartz and Griffin 1987: 199). They argued that achievement, to camera club photographers, is manifested through their demonstration of historical unity with traditional pictorial values, and that ‘expertise and creativity are communicated through conspicuous technical skill and mastery of the pictorialist code’ (Schwartz and Griffin 1987: 220). Schwartz understood that the camera club aesthetic is ‘highly prescribed and narrowly defined’ (1987: 273) but she observed that the maintenance of a stable, conformist aesthetic functions to emphasize group solidarity (1987: 280). As such, Schwartz and

Griffin argued that the aesthetic code is but one aspect of a photographic activity that aims at a unified and historically durable cohesion of values.

A parallel strand of photographic literature in the 1980s, from British cultural studies scholars informed by Marxist critique, appraised amateur photography at all levels and found it wanting from every perspective (see, for example, Williamson 1986; Slater 1983). Don Slater comprehensively dismissed both ‘the nostalgia, selective amnesia, totemism of family photography’ and ‘the sexism, fetishism, aestheticism of the camera clubs’ (1983: 256). Across all of its categories, amateur photography was seen ‘as a vast wasteland of trite and banal self-representation’ because, as Slater later reflected, ‘it represented the repression of an extraordinary political potential’ (1999: 173). Like John Tagg, as another example of a photography critic writing from a mass culture perspective, who similarly dismissed amateur photography’s ‘stultified repertoire of legitimated subjects and stereotypes’ (1988: 19) and its disappointing absence of political activism, Slater positioned amateur photography as imprisoned within the frame of an oppressive capitalist system of manufactured leisure and inauthentic consumer culture, at once ‘conventionalized, passive, privatized’ (1983: 245).

Gaby Porter drew on these debates in her short but useful analysis of the profit basis of the amateur photographic industry in the radical *Ten.8* photography magazine in 1989. Here she observed both the particular appeal of serious amateurs to the photographic industry and their specific demographics:

the 'serious' amateurs with whom the industry communicates ... directly and sympathetically, man to man as it were, are mainly male, socio-economic groups ABC1 and aged 25-44. They are seen as actively making opportunities and occasions for picture-taking. They expose about ten or more films a year and use their cameras for hobbies or with a committed interest in photography itself. They are likely to be club

members, subscribers and readers of magazines, and to own or have access to darkrooms. They are likely to circulate their photographs beyond immediate family and friends to wider audiences, through competition, exhibition and publication. They are seen as discerning and exacting consumers.

She noted, 'Products and services for these users are dressed with offers of quality, precision and excellence, of control, flexibility and expression' (Porter 1989: 46).

The apparently natural relationship between consumer technologies and serious amateurs was explored in other British analyses in the Marxist mold. Dave Kenyon's *Inside Amateur Photography* (1992) offers a rather basic appraisal of photographic culture targeted at a student audience, but he nonetheless provides a useful challenge to those who try and classify photographers as mere market fractions. He helpfully observes that stratifying amateur photography practice into types, such as the snapshooter, the upmarket and the 'serious', does not account for the shifts between categories that can occur. As Kenyon puts it, '[t]he fact that one's practice falls into one category *for the moment* (and therefore more-or-less under its economic logic) has no bearing on one's abilities' (1992: 92). Kenyon's text is also useful for its contribution to the study of amateur photographic literature of the period. Here he noted the predominance of advertising at around 60% of each magazine's contents. This, he observed, is rather different from the quantity in other hobby magazines, such as those aimed at the amateur cyclist; it has more in common, in fact, with fashion and lifestyle magazines such as *Vogue*. When added to editorial content that also discusses products and offers, Kenyon estimated that as much as 75% of photography magazines are dominated by discussion and promotion of goods for sale; as he concludes, their volume seems to say 'amateur photography is about consuming' (1992: 66).

Julian Stallabrass' scathing attack on amateur photography in his essay 'Sixty Billion Sunsets' (1996) offers perhaps the most damning of all published accounts of serious amateur

practice. Again deploying a hierarchical structure, he positioned the ‘charm’ and ‘liveliness’ of the snapshot (1996: 23) and the purposefulness of the professional at opposite poles. The earnest, organized and structured culture of amateur photography was described as ‘the despised middle’ (1996: 31). Stallabrass also created a fourth category for ‘the artist’ but this hallowed position – at once critical and imaginative - floated free of the confines to which other photographers were tethered. For Stallabrass, amateurs are ‘governed by rules’ and ‘enamoured of clichés’, resulting in ‘an isolated pursuit of the aesthetic which has generally adopted the norms of an average taste’ (1996: 22). Stallabrass found the images to exemplify ‘a saturated mannerism amounting to boredom’ and the practice itself to be defined by ‘social and professional uselessness’ (1996: 14). Like Kenyon, he concluded, ‘[t]he amateur is defined more by consumption than photographic activity’ (1996: 17).

To test out photographic hierarchies in practice, in 1998, photographer and lecturer Stephen Bull set up an ‘experiment’ in which he took contemporary art photographs, including those by Martin Parr, John Kippin, and Joachim Schmid, to be appraised by a camera club in Ilkley, a small town in rural Yorkshire. With his tongue firmly in cheek, Bull’s project was, in truth, not designed to break down the barriers between photographic judgement systems, as asserted, but to make play with them. The amused write-up in the British national newspaper, *The Independent*, gleefully belittled amateur practice as ‘sentimental portraits and winsome landscapes presented to OAPs in provincial church halls’ and positioned it in the opposite corner to art photography’s ‘provocative subjects hung on the whitewashed walls of elite metropolitan galleries’. With internationally famous photographers’ work marked out of twenty by a judge clearly not familiar with either the photographers or their oeuvre, the article concluded, mockingly, ‘Art had come to Ilkley and been given an average score of fourteen and three-quarters’ (Higgins 1998). In Bull’s appraisal, ‘photographs produced in British camera clubs appeared to have solidified into a timeless loop of idyllic pastoral landscapes, flattering portraits

and studies of flowers. These', he argued, 'along with a handful of other genres, have been the focus for camera club competitions and displays for decades; the work of club photographers seems hermetically sealed from any outside influences.' In an interesting subtext that would seem to accord with Schwartz and Griffin's research, Bull implied that the predictability of the camera club judges' appraisals may even represent a self-conscious performance of tradition, for he noted a certain 'acting out' of expected responses (1999: 12). Dismissive of the 'anachronism and repetition of club photography', Bull was generous enough to note that art practice is itself riddled with repetition, and that the rigidity of camera club structures brought the parallel structures of art under scrutiny. Mostly, however, Bull expressed the well-worn opinion that camera club images are whimsical, sentimental and represent an aesthetic 'apres-garde' (1999: 13).

More recent studies of aspirational amateur photography in the twenty-first century include research by Karen Cross undertaken in 2004-2005 on the photographic evening class. This location offers an alternative site of education to the camera club; one associated with a long history of public improvement and where the gendered bias of the club model is corrected. In other ways, however, Cross's appraisal of a London photography class reveals many of the same conventions that previous studies have highlighted as typical of aspirational amateur practice, including a prevailing emphasis on technique over personal meaning. My own research, examining the history of large-scale photographic competitions, involved a survey of 130 photographers between 2007 and 2010 (Pollen 2015). The majority of these characterized themselves as 'keen', 'very keen', or similar, and had taken part in more than one photography event, competition or exhibition. A quarter had been a member at one time of a photographic society or club, and many boasted extensive photographic qualifications. Across the entire cohort a sense of photographic consciousness, determination and ambition was striking. For some, photography was a singularly important activity, even, in some cases, defining who they

were. Across all photographers surveyed, there was a strongly articulated sense of purpose to their submissions, which were sometimes complex and, at many points, not communicated on the surface of the image. Far from being unthinking, uncritical and unselfconscious, the amateur photographers canvassed show a high degree of consciousness and reflexivity (Pollen 2015).

### **Reconsidering Amateur Photography: Gathering expertise**

The discrepancy between these findings and the common and often belittling claims made of amateur photography across the spectrum, led to the establishment of the *Reconsidering Amateur Photography* project. This took the form of a 2012 symposium at the University of Brighton and a two-year online publishing project as part of *Either/And*, a National Media Museum-funded website dedicated to examining the place of the photograph in contemporary culture. With a focus on the ‘aspirational amateur’ – intended to include those with a wide and varied range of ambitions for their practice – *Reconsidering Amateur Photography* featured nineteen contributors including photographic and design historians, photographers, illustrators and picture editors, and was co-edited by myself and Juliet Baillie. Selected contributions have been revised for the edited collection, *Photography Reframed* (Burbridge and Pollen 2018).

Baillie’s research (2012, 2013) revisited the boom years for camera club activity in the interwar period, and makes a valuable contribution to definitions of the amateur, showing how photographers could utilize a variety of styles – including but exceeding Pictorialism – to make photographs for profit as well as pleasure. She also notes how club photographers could also resist the seemingly natural relationship between amateurs and consumerism by making their own equipment and supplies; together these publications emphasize that amateurs were ‘active producers rather than “mere” consumers of the latest photographic technology’ (Baillie 2013).

Contributors included Elizabeth Edwards (2013) whose extensive research has explored amateur photographers’ contribution to public history, in the form of the photographic survey movement 1885-1918, which constitutes ‘the largest ever mass mobilisation of amateur

photographers for a single purpose in Great Britain’, comprising more than four million active participants (2012: 78). Through this work, Edwards contributes valuable new knowledge to the study of the culture of amateur photographic societies and organizations and reflects on the methodological shortcomings in current research. She calls for:

a refigured history of photography written not necessarily through the analysis of photographs themselves but rather through the activities of the huge range of people who constitute the majority practice of photography. In their different ways, they took photography seriously, gained personal satisfaction from photography, and perhaps played out their social and cultural aspirations through photography. It is a study that demands not simply judgements on their aesthetic practices, nor condemnation of their values, but an anthropological understanding of why people - ordinary amateur photographers - thought and acted as they did (Edwards 2013).

Taken together, the contributions to *Reconsidering Amateur Photography* provide a sampler of methodologies that might be utilized in order to examine serious amateur practice past and present including ethnographic studies (Larsen 2012), magazine research (Buse 2018), club cultures (Edwards 2013), competition archives (Pollen 2018), and even arts practice, through Graham Rawle’s (2013) creative collage and fiction. Those who examine new media technologies (Kember 2018) and online communities (Tooth 2012) offer productive suggestions for future directions.

### **Future paths: Amateurs online**

Roger Tooth, Picture Editor at *The Guardian*, has examined the changing status of the aspirational amateur in the online environment, through his case study of the newspaper’s online ‘open journalism’ project, *Camera Club* (Tooth 2012). While the name was initially intended

ironically, many aspects of traditional club culture were transposed to the new digital domain, from an enthusiasm for technology to the gender distribution of its 12,000 members. To be fair, many of the formats of a traditional camera club, from assignments and competitions to advice-sharing were also present, so the model was not much revolutionized by its new networked status. Researchers who have looked at online spaces for photographic sharing and judgement, such as Flickr, have compared them to the camera club as a model and confirmed the reproduction of elements from traditional club activity. Early work on Flickr (Cox, Clough, and Marlow 2008), for example, indicated that the image sharing platform's 'greatest impact' was to encourage photography as a serious hobby. Users likened their experience to a club – in terms of photographic advice, feedback and exposure - and the authors saw the platform as a complement to 'existing hobby institutions'. Like other analysts of amateur photographic institutions, Cox, Clough and Marlow saw Flickr's practices as closely related to the photographic industry but suggested, instead, that to treat it as an offshoot of consumerist culture was too simplistic. As they put it, 'users expressed almost unqualified satisfaction with the system for its direct pleasures and learning opportunities'; these experiences stood outside the market.

In the same year, Susan Murray's work on Flickr argued that the development of a collective aesthetic – identified as 'everyday' imagery of ephemeral subject matter – meant that traditional amateur/professional hierarchies were being eroded: '[s]napshot hobbyists, serious amateurs, and professionals all post photos on Flickr, and it can often be difficult to tell the difference between the latter two groups as most people do not self-identify' (Murray 2008: 151). Nonetheless, as Murray is keen to point out, Flickr is not a utopic, emancipatory space; even through some aspects of traditional hierarchy are cast aside, 'there are still norms and values to follow and judgements to be made' (2008: 158). Former claims to expertise and privileged means of distribution are undermined by accessible new technologies, yet one set of aesthetic codes replaces another.

Others who have considered Flickr in the frame of an online photography club have noted continuities. Eve Forrest (2013), for example, has argued that such platforms become popular ‘precisely because they offer a space where photographers can perform, exhibit and compare their work, as well as discuss their deep passion for photography’; this happens in a way that is explicitly molded on the camera club form. Forrest suggests, following Ben Anderson and Katrina Tracey, that online photographic communities are not, in fact, ‘doing anything new... they are doing old things in new ways’ (Anderson and Tracey 2002). Aspects of the culture, however, have undoubtedly changed. Photographic clubs and societies were always relatively niche activities, although they could and still can be found in most towns across the industrialized world; sites such as Facebook now host more than 48 billion photographs from 500 million users (Sarvas and Frohlich 2011: 149). Following this, it could be surmised that the internet itself may have become a vast, global camera club; now the whole world can see and critique photographs online (Bull 2013).

The debates about whether amateur traditions are transformed by digital technologies thus reflects the larger debates about the so-called digital revolution and its effects; for every jeremiad who asserts a total rupture in photographic medium, values and practices (for example, Ritchin 2009) there is an equivalent cautionary voice moderating the claims (for example, Rose 2014). For some critics it is not only the nature of the digitally networked society that has changed but also that amateur practices themselves – including but exceeding photography – have been transformed by the new publics and accelerated quantities of the online world, and new patterns of work and leisure. Some popular studies of internet activity have lamented the loss of quality seen in the conflation of audience and producer in new amateur cultures of user-generated media (Keen 2010). For others this has been a process of upskilling rather than levelling down, where aspirational amateurs of all kinds in the twenty-first century are optimistically styled as educated, knowledgeable and networked ‘Pro-Ams’ (Leadbeater and Miller 2004). An adaptation of this appraisal, and one that is considerably less idealistic, lies in

the similar neologism, the ‘prosumer’. On the one hand this term indicates a widening baseline of technical and visual literacy as photographers become cultural producers as well as consumers (Hand 2012, 134). However, as user-generated content blurs categories between product and consumer, the one positive thing that Stallabrass could find to say about the aspiring amateur – that his or her goods were not commoditized – is broken down (1996: 24).

As the categories of organization have become more flexible in online photographic practices, so too have the terms of usage shifted in meaning. Risto Sarvas and David M. Frohlich have argued that both words in their chosen terminology of ‘domestic photography’ are now outmoded as digital images circulate as data within ICT infrastructures rather than a clearly identifiable photographic industry (2011: 184). Amateurs have been denigrated and eulogized as a category but some would argue that they are, like everyone else, enmeshed in a technoculture where embedded technologies are ‘everyware’ and none can stand outside of the ubiquity (Kember 2013). As such, is there any virtue in considering and thus privileging one particular group in a place apart? Much work remains to be done to answer these questions and the following closing thoughts offer some tentative conclusions and some possible future lines of enquiry.

## **Conclusion**

The massive expansion of amateur photography has led some to claim – as noted at the outset – that there are too many photographs in the world. The underlying subtext to these accusations, however, is that there are too many photographs *of the wrong kind* (Pollen 2016). Complaints about too many photographs often call for more discernment, more thoughtfulness, more aesthetic development, for a more meaningful practice; all these are the calls made by serious amateur photographers for more than a hundred years. We might say, *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. For all the baleful regular laments for the death of photography over the last few decades, photography is now more popular than ever before. Its expansion and

interpenetration into all aspects of everyday life may have blurred boundaries between picture and document, work and leisure, professional and amateur, serious and casual, and even between technology and persons, but photographic judgement and hierarchies have not gone away; if anything, the debate is intensified and enabled by the interactive forum that is Web 2.0.

Even in the age of the internet, the camera club format remains; complemented and enhanced rather than replaced by online communities, who consciously adopt and adapt elements of its form. Despite the claim that photographic classes and societies entered terminal decline in the 1970s and 1980s (Cheroux 2005), they continue to flourish (Cross 2014). New forms also emerge. Novel communities of photographers cluster around film photography or toy cameras, for example, as objects of an alternative lifestyle (Henning 2007). A case in point would be enthusiasts of the cheap Lomo camera and the community that has developed around it. With a system of ten 'golden rules' - which mostly aspire to rule-break - and a membership of nearly two million, the society offers some familiar camera club experiences, including advice, competitions, events and a community of practice, to a new generation (50% of members are aged between 20 and 30) evenly split across genders. A survey conducted by the Lomography Society canvassed over 5000 photographers and found that around half defined themselves as 'analogue addicts' with 63% of these shooting three or more rolls of film a month (Lomography 2012). The serious amateur is alive and well and expanding its parameters.

For a culture based on historical continuity, it is also worth noting that magazines such as *Amateur Photographer*, established in 1884, continue unabated. The technicalities are now mainly digital and the always-lively letters pages have turned into vigorous web-based discussion threads with tens of thousands of comments. The magazine continues to offer a forum for sharing tips, testing equipment, critiquing techniques and fostering a collective spirit; these activities take place both on the page and online. For aspiring amateurs, regardless of whether they gather in

physical or virtual spaces, the proliferation of amateur photographs in the twenty-first century ramps up the need to mark oneself apart.

New research is needed to explore the meaning of amateur photographic culture as a collective social practice. Whatever form it takes, the mode of analysis should not be one of aesthetic condemnation; the images produced matter but the social practices enacted through them and the messages communicated by them may well exceed the visual (Pollen 2015). Empirical, ethnographic approaches are needed; too often the amateur photographer is a cipher, standing in for mass cultural hopes and fears. Too little has been done to explore the autonomous cultures of the serious amateur with an equivalent level of seriousness, and to assess the variation in methods and meanings of amateur practices across histories and geographies. Broadly dismissed as conformists, conservatives and copyists, amateurs have been framed as professional photography's negative, as a measure of anti-art, as a marginal subgroup. The kernel of promise in the reconsideration of amateur photography is not only that light may be thrown on unexplored and excluded territories and times but that it might present a challenge to the way that histories of culture are written (Pasternak 2013). The history of amateurs is not the story of duped consumers, witless button-pressers and an aesthetic wasteland that we have been led to believe in the dominant top-down accounts. Photography is a relational practice, whose meaning is mobile and whose communities are ever-shifting and ever-growing. By dint of sheer numbers, amateur practice encompasses the widest possible experience of photography. As the focus for both cultural dismissal and desire, amateur photography offers the prime site for ascertaining the moral values and social expectations made of the medium more broadly.

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