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'Memory holes' or 'heterotopias'?: the Bloomsbury Photographs

'Isn't it odd how much more one sees in a photograph than in real life?' (L5 455).

Photographs of Virginia Woolf, from youth and beauty as one of the famous Stephen sisters to maturity are inseparable from her status as a writer and her public image. She was photographed by Man Ray, Lenare and Gisele Freund, as well as by her sister, family, and circle of Bloomsbury friends and artists. But it is the domestic photographs which were important to both Virginia and Vanessa who included very few professional photographs in their albums.

Certainly Vanessa Bell and the Woolfs took photography very seriously. Leonard's diaries record a regular expenditure showing their addiction to photography, and the amounts are as revealing about British class divisions as about technologies. In April 1922 Leonard spent ten shillings on photography (approximately £19 at today's prices) but paid their servant Lottie only two shillings (LW/D). In 1923 the Woolfs spent one pound two shillings (or twenty-two shillings) on photography, and a year later on May 30th 1924 one pound and one shilling, but gave Nellie only five shillings. This was a period in which the income from Virginia's capital 'had shrunk to less than half its original sum by 1918-19' and was even lower in the 1920s at a time when their joint earnings were often in deficit (Spater and Parsons 90). Yet the Woolfs' photographic costs remained fairly constant with expenditure, in August 1929, of one pound and ten shillings (£ 61 at today's prices).

Photographs in photo albums were crucial to their sense of identity because they expose issues of memory and representation. Although it is again fashionable to read an artist's aesthetics through the small lens of subjective experience, and everyday experiences were

very important to Bell and the Woolfs, reading their photo albums is not easy. All albums have their own syntax, their own codes and indices and are hybrid entities. Albums are not only objects of perceptions, they also structure perceptions. They are archives of a sort. Foucault thought of the archive as a system of functioning and certainly Leonard Woolf, as you know, was an obsessive archivist. He kept daily lists including the total number of words he wrote on each day of his life, car mileages, dates of cacti flowering and even the times/days of switching on and off his central heating. But the photo albums of the Woolfs lack this obsessive quality. They are much more associative in organisation. I think we need to look at them more topographically as spatial objects. But to date there is no 'theory' of amateur photography. Although John Szarkowski established a snapshot aesthetic at the Museum of Modern Art, New York as long ago as 1966, with the exhibition 'Toward a Social Landscape', amateur photographers are thought to lack picture awareness. Szarkowski's aim: was to appropriate and formalize a snapshot photographic vocabulary detached from its vernacular tradition, and this aim carries through into more recent exhibitions such as "Cruel and Tender" at Tate Modern, London in 2003.

Histories of photography frequently endorse this formalism by creating a canon of "great" photographers of the everyday (for example, Paul Strand, Garry Winogrand, Martin Parr). Even cultural studies of vernacular photography allow the snapshot only a limited number of features such as "legibility" and "social function". Sociological analyses of cameras clubs and ethnographic accounts of colonial photography see photography in terms of class/occupational groups or in terms of constructions of race and the gaze (Bourdieu, Clifford). Feminist artists and critics have examined the

relationship between women's lack of economic and social status and depictions of femininities and masculinities in the family album - most famously in Jo Spence's 1979 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery "Beyond the Family Album". But Spence and others often aim to 'fix' family photographs in a new feminist framework by means of detailed textual captions. Trauma studies are devoted to amateur photography but necessarily serve as a recovering of a historical project.

Family and memory studies of amateur photography go much further in decoding possible psychic and familial pressures shaping forms of composition (Hirsch, Spence and Holland). Notions of loss, photographic mnemonics and gender constructions are crucial themes that impact on amateur selections and on the Bloomsbury snapshots. But family studies are sometimes content driven at the expense of technical and economic variables. It does matter where and with what cameras photographs are taken. For example, even the National Portrait Gallery, London does not list the place of Man Ray's iconic photograph of Virginia Woolf. Where did Man Ray take the photograph since Man Ray had no London studio? It was Curtis Moffat who invited Man Ray to London and hence his studio is probably the venue. The fact that Moffat was a *Vogue* photographer impacts on the technical quality of the photograph.

My own approach to these photographs is necessarily hybrid - drawing on cultural history, discourse analysis, Bloomsbury biographies and criticism, and photographic and psychoanalytic studies. Constructions of visual identity always involve questions of memory and speculations about how to record the thickness and malleability of personal lives (Lury). In what would now be termed a form of "life caching" or "memory prosthesis", Woolf and Bell used photo albums extensively as autobiographical narrative.

Domestic photographs mounted in albums also invite viewer participation in constructing pictorial narratives from these domestic aide memoires

As Susan Sontag argues, photographs are 'both objective record and personal testimony', simultaneously recording and interpreting reality (Sontag 23). Photo albums are also a safe space from which to view past presences. Both the Woolfs and Bell used domestic photography, as they used their arts, throughout their lives, to capture both conscious and unconscious responses to family, friendships and themselves. Importantly, the Woolfs and Bell's constant photographic documentation suggests a need to critically relate to the past by working through representations of the present.

The Woolfs' Albums and Vanessa Bell's Albums

The Woolfs' seven photo albums, called the Monk's House Albums, together with four boxes containing over two hundred additional loose photographs are housed in the Frederick Koch Collection, the Harvard Theatre Library and are un-catalogued, hence I undertook to catalogue these in *Snapshots of Bloomsbury* (Humm 2006). The main features of the albums are firstly the large number of Victorian photographs, pre-dating the Woolfs' lives, and carefully captioned. This panorama suggests, perhaps, a longing for a confirmed familial world

A second feature is the albums' lack of chronological logic which might match Woolf's refusal of narrative realism in her fiction and illustrates the inter-textuality of past and present in her work and life. In Monk's House Album 3 the past vividly 'narrates' the present. The album is dated 1930 yet the framing frontispiece is a large 6x7½ photograph of Julia Stephen taken probably in 1863-5 because it resembles one in the Mia Album given to Maria (Mia) by her sister the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron and the

Stephen sisters great aunt (Ovenden).

A third feature is that there is no closed, hierarchical system, for example, photographs of servants are not separated from family photographs. A fourth feature is the repetition of monumental portraits. The camera is inscriptive, not transcriptive, in its visibility, for example the portraits of Ethel Smyth and the Keynes's in the 1930s. The psychological consistency of composition in these photographs suggests a subtle relationship between photographers and subjects.

Vanessa Bell's ten albums in the Tate archive are a unique record of her family, friendships and aesthetic interests. The layout of each album is more chronological than the albums of the Woolfs. Bell's mode of collection and organization mimics her family and domestic roles. For example, Bell welcomes into her collection many photographs taken by others just as Bell warmly welcomed visitors to stay in Charleston and Cassis. As a genre, photo albums are conventionally read as documents of 'real' family life.

Indeed snapshot photography is frequently assessed by its ability to document indices of the real. And 'Kodaking' is often seen as a mundane cultural practice. Yet although the scenes and people recorded by the Woolfs and Bell are snapshots of everyday

Bloomsbury, the camera viewpoints and framing look attentively beyond the snapshot moment into the sisters' past and outward into moments of modernity. The seemingly trivial detail and events in the photographs such as household objects and pursuits are elements of the everyday but can be cognitively viewed from different angles.

Reading Albums

A major problematic, alongside the issue of evaluating marginalia, is how to know, except by indexical, cultural and biographical analysis, the photographs' likely

'readership' and Bell's and the Woolfs' reasons for shooting and selection since this is not always evident in the many diaries or letters. To purloin Alex Zwerdling's very pertinent questions about the Bloomsbury memoirs: For whom are the photo albums constructed – 'for the nuclear family, for an inner circle' or the anticipation of a wider circle? 'And for what purpose: to honor the dead?... To make the past cohere? to produce the official record? to amuse and entertain? To illustrate a representative way of life? to confess? to understand oneself?' (Zwerdling, 168-9). Zwerdling concludes, in relation to writing, that the 'multigenerational Stephen internal tradition of memoir writing illustrated all these options' (Zwerdling, 169). The Bloomsbury photo albums equally illustrate all these options.

How then to read this marginal minutiae of modernism? It is both tautological because self-evident, and yet not enough to argue that the portraits represent the sisters' intense desire for a supportive social/cultural group of like minded friends and family. There are questions of appropriate femininities and masculinities that remain unspoken as well as questions of class and generational rebellions and visual inheritances. In many ways photo albums resemble Foucault's concept of 'heterotopology' which Foucault coined to define marginal sites of modernity, virtual sites such as Parisian arcades, whose 'role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect...as ours is messy' (Foucault 27). Foucault's idea has been very influential on contemporary architectural studies. Charles Jencks usefully applies the term 'heteropolis' to Los Angeles's combination of modernism with sites of difference (Jencks).

By applying Foucault's concept to photo albums I do not intend to imply that photography is purely spatial, nor only a collection of measurable representations. This

illusion of clarity would over-substantiate the snapshot world. But focusing on spatial arrangements in album photographs is potentially fruitful not least because it allays a common belief that all amateur photographers are unable to aesthetically manage spatial dimensions. Space is socially produced and actively shapes our subjectivity whether in visual sites such as photographs or in urban geographies. Where everyday representations are often below the threshold of art history, ‘heterotopology’, on the contrary, illuminates the psychodynamics of snapshots. Spaces of representation in snapshots embody complex emotions, the multiple perceived and unconscious spaces of the camera operator, the photographed figures and viewers. These complex symbolisms are sometimes coded for example, by learned artistic conventions, and sometimes not. In third space, or heterotopology, physical, measurable space is interdependent with symbolic and imaginative spaces. For example, in the iconography of nineteenth-century cartes-de-visite, the 1892 photograph of Woolf’s parents reading at St. Ives suggests simply an intimate family space. But heterotopologically, Virginia’s look to Vanessa behind the camera suggests an explicit sorority projected in the sisters’ symbolic space of the primal scene.

One good example of a heterotopological ‘method’ is Bell and the Woolfs’ use of photo album captions. Their frequent use of nomenclature, with Virginia captioning her own images ‘VW’ and giving full names to friends – for example, - ‘Roger Fry’ and Vanessa using initials for each individual (including her children) is unusual. The sisters clearly did not need to remind themselves of Fry’s identity and certainly not of their own. At first glance, Bell and the Woolfs’ ‘objectivity’ might seem the antithesis of heterotopology because the function of titles is didactic even mechanistic. Recording titles is a way of

collating information, like a catalogue or dictionary does, into predetermined spaces. But what distinguishes this form of captioning from John Tagg's regulatory archive or from Walter Benjamin's view that captioning 'literalises the relationships of life', is precisely Bell and the Woolfs' heterotopology (Tagg, Benjamin, 25).

The role of photo albums in their lives more resembles Foucault's account of the role of a mirror in heterotopology 'that enables me to see myself there where I am absent' (Foucault, 24). The album captions suggest that Bell and the Woolfs' were motivated by several of the possibilities that Zwerdling outlines: to honour the dead, to make the past coherent, to understand themselves (Zwerdling, 168). The album captions suggest the sisters deep desire for a visual remembrance of life and friendships, reinforcing close-up portraits with verbal stress, and matching Bell's domestic aesthetic and the Woolfs' daily diaries and letter writing. The albums become *momento mori* in the very act of construction. Foucault likens heterotopologies to slices of time, or heterotochronies, precarious spaces of time that are both temporary and permanent. The albums similarly picture present moments shaped by a past that is never permanently past. Objects and places in Bell and the Woolfs' snapshot photographs stand in for the irretrievably lost childhood home St. Ives.

Bell's frequent use of enlargements, and her love of repetitive photographs, especially of her children Julian, Quentin and Angelica, are also a material celebration of the domestic sphere. Bell enlarged her familial worlds into epic 'spaces' with a sure sense of scale and frame. Photographs taken by Bell in 1912 illustrate this issue of framing and relationships. The portrait of Duncan Grant and John Maynard Keynes taken at Asheham in 1912, measuring eight inches by six, is striking. Both figures are in profile in a

carefully structured design. The camera is in marked close-up to each figure. The framing and enlargement of figures might reflect Vanessa's nascent regard for Duncan in 1912 when she shared Christmas Day 'reading passages aloud from her father's Mausoleum Book' and painting alongside Duncan at Asheham (Spalding, 119). Keynes's relaxed pose also hints at a residue of his former sexual relationship with Duncan.

In addition, while Bell and the Woolfs' multiple portraits in this period are documents of friends and family visits and events, they also contain the opposing register of the psychic in vivid personal presences. The earlier portrait of Leonard and Virginia taken by Gerald Duckworth during their visit to Dalingridge Place in 1912 is a good example of the pressure of the psychic. The photograph's low angle (which might derive from Duckworth's use of a Frena rather than a more up to date Kodak) renders the couple with great presence. In July 1912 the Woolfs were engaged and yet the pose is one of two separate 'unengaged' people. It is unusual in Britain to wear wedding clothes before the wedding day itself. A common superstition is the belief that a fiancée's sight of the wedding dress will bring bad luck to the marriage. Yet Virginia unconventionally wore the same clothes here and again on her wedding day.

It would be anachronistic to read the photograph through a contemporary lens by expecting the couple to fondly touch or look to the camera with smiles or mutual gazes. Studio portraits of couples in this period usually depict separate figures with sitting males and standing females or vice-versa. But physical contact is often centred in these studio photographs with one figure's right hand resting lovingly on the other's left shoulder. The scene of the Woolf's engagement is mournful, as taut as Leonard's buttoned-up jacket and Virginia's glove clutching. Both gaze into a distant future rather than at each other or

toward camera.

As Virginia had written very honestly to Leonard the month before ‘I don’t know what the future will bring. I’m half afraid of myself...I go from being half in love with you...to the extreme of wildness and aloofness...As I told you brutally the other day, I feel no physical attraction in you’ (*LI*, 496). And, knowing that ‘Leonard and I shall be alone’ over Bank Holiday, Virginia wrote pleadingly to Ka Cox ‘will you come to Asheham this week, Saturday, and spend Bank Holiday’ (*LI*, 506). The photograph carries Virginia’s corporeal resistance in its intense haptic quality. Engagements are public events often involving a whirl of social engagements, a social technology of public relationships. The photograph, with its poses, incorporates into that sociality Woolf’s more private fears. Perhaps Woolf’s photographic refusal of affiliative looking at the body of Leonard might parallel her attention to the limits of the body in her fiction writing at this time

The Woolfs preference for paired self-portraits of themselves and their friends make this issue of identity part of the portrait and constitute a veritable repetitive visual autobiography. In their 1930s photographs the Woolfs assent to each other’s camera gaze. Each is a very central presence in the frame as if each is making a lengthy visual analysis of the other’s distinctive image. Such close-up figuration creates embodiment disrupting the normal separation of camera and subject. These repetitive paired sequences go beyond the conventions of candid or instant photography. In their use of repetition the photographs are dialogic, encouraging dialogue between the sitters and between husband and wife as camera operators. Similarly, Virginia’s use of a dialogic form in her essays ‘constitutes Woolf’s greatest separation’ from conventional academia in the 1920s

(Cuddy-Keane, 79).

The constant pairing of husband and wife and of friends over decades is a dialogic practice in which relationships are staged in the photographic encounter. The portraits are not static but use space as an 'other space', Foucault's synonym for heterotopologies.

'The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself a heterogeneous space' (Foucault, 23). Taken as a whole the Woolfs' and Bell's albums are transactional, containing performances of intimate exchange within the genre of formal portraiture, going beyond what we normally find in family albums.

I have written before about the photographs of Clive Bell together with Virginia taken by Vanessa at Studland Beach in 1910 (Humm 2002). But I now wish to contrast these with the painting *Studland Beach* by Vanessa. In the photographs Clive and Virginia are cooperative models but their gazes are not fully direct. In both photographs there is deliberate repetition. The two figures are in complimentary positions with arms and legs in synchronic patterns. The visual ordering and spacing of their relationship are compounded by the inclusion of paired shoes and beach huts within the frame. In one photograph the raised seams of Virginia's gloves parallel the swollen veins of Clive's downward pointing hands. The persistence of any photographic motif, for example a pattern of pictorial relations, confirms its importance and accrues excess through repetition. Any choice, whether conscious or unconscious, of organisational pattern necessarily involves a latent language. It is as if the echoing patterns of Clive's and Virginia's positions are a corporeal allusion to other correspondences in their lives. After the birth of Vanessa's first child, Julian, in February 1908, Clive and Vanessa

interrupted their sex life and Clive began to flirt with Virginia. Hermione Lee suggests that 'from this time - May of 1908 - they began to play a game of intimacy and intrigue which lasted for perhaps two years', that is until the Studland photographs of 1910 (Lee, 249). The Studland photographs carry this hidden hint of sororial absorption in the repetitions and patterning of each image. In contrast, in Bell's painting *Studland Beach* the figures, with their backs to the viewer have no gazes. The painting's subjects are all women and children and presented in clear, spatially distinct forms. Lisa Tickner rightly suggests that *Studland Beach* may have evoked, for Bell, memories of St. Ives and her mother Julia (Tickner 138). Bell's sororial photographic tensions are resolved in her painting's maternal phantasmagoric space. The artist is in full control using confident abstractions and a careful colour palette. *Studland Beach* consciously distils experience while the photographs reproduce unconscious experience.

The use of spatial patterning and objects in Bell's and the Woolf's photographs seem to represent this unconscious experience materially. As the contemporary photographer Wright Morris pinpointed in his equivalent use of a chair motif, they are 'saturated with the quality of life that I find both poignant and inexhaustible. I don't want to sit on them; I want to look at them' (Dow Adams 201). Bell and the Woolfs photographic use of objects such as chairs should be read much more in terms of Adorno's idea that the enigmatic quality of art objects is linked to suffering, rather than Benjamin's view of objects and the bourgeoisie in which 'a dwelling place becomes a kind of casing' enabling the bourgeoisie to 'remove objects from the profane eyes of non-owners' (Adorno, Benjamin 1983, 46-7).

At a general level, Bell and the Woolfs' photographs engage in a process that

psychologists, active in photo-analysis, describe as a 'conversational remembering with photographs' (Edwards and Middleton 9). The photos are not some Orwellian 'memory holes' into which the past, like the paper in *1984*, disappears. Photography, even if improvised and provisional, was another way of telling their life stories in which the albums become a fully expressive 'heterotopic' space, a thickly dense 'imagined community', and collective and unique snapshots of Bloomsbury.

All the photographs described above are reproduced in Humm, Maggie. *Snapshots of Bloomsbury: the Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* New Brunswick: Rutgers and London: Tate, 2006.

LW/D: Diaries and related notebooks (1922-69) the Leonard Woolf Archive, University of Sussex.

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