

# Unphotographable

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When I was fourteen I fell in love with photography. When I was eighteen I fell out of love with photography. I found that when my father died, photography could not capture and preserve all of my experiences—it could not show me the loss I felt. In my work I move between my original reverence and my later disillusionment as a way to study and map our relationship to this medium. My work does not take a side or make value judgments about photography—each photographic series is as conflicted as I am about the role photography plays in our lives. I have developed three processes that have become part of my practice studying and creating photographs: I collect, question, and reimagine photography.

## **Collect**

I study a specific subset of photography, often denoted by categories like amateur, vernacular, or snapshot photography. These terms try to categorize these images in dialectics organized around implicit judgments: high/low, expert/amateur, ordinary/extraordinary. I do not believe that these dialectics are helpful—instead I prefer methods of identification based on two qualities: 1) the relationships of the subject and photographer and 2) the motivation for creating the photograph. In the photographs I work with, the relationship of the photographer

and subject is one of self. The photographer is photographing their own world, through their own camera. Even when the subject is not themselves they can be described as part of the photographer's universe: my mother, my sister, my vacation, my walk, my waiter. In the photographs I work with, there are two primary reasons for their creation: preservation or circulation. These photographs are taken to preserve moments from the photographer's lives in a form that is more stable and enduring than biological memories. These photographs are also taken to share with the photographer's community through photo albums, slide shows, camera rolls, or Instagram. Instead of using the common terms for this group of photographs, I think of them as auto-memorial-social photographs. Redefining photographs this way allows me to approach photography more broadly as a social, cultural, and psychological medium, interrogating how it functions in our lives outside of questions of expertise and artistry.

I chose to study auto-memorial-social photographs because of how central these images are to our lives. When I was young, I remember seeing a news story about a family who had to leave their house because of a fire and the mother talked about how the only thing she took with her was her box of photographs. In my collecting and studying of these photographs, it has become clear how deeply we invest them with meaning as memory objects, as sites where the ritual processes of preservation and circulation take place.

I started to study and collect photography using my own boxes of photographs. Then as a way to broaden my archive, I began buying boxes of Kodachrome slides on ebay. Recently I have been downloading Creative Commons licensed photographs from flickr photostreams. In all of these collections I find the same types of images: photographs of babies, holidays, birthdays and vacations, each photograph simultaneously an archetype and a unique record.

## **Question**

My work is shaped by the questions I have found in this archive. In each question there is a curiosity about something that I have seen—an overlapping hand on a shoulder, a frozen leg—or something that I can't see—my father's absence, an imagined cloud. Each question I pose to this archive is part critique and part challenge. Why is photography like this? What would happen if it were different?

This is a partial list of the questions I have asked:

Can you see loss?

What do vulnerability, anxiety and desire look like?

Can I see myself as a mother before I become one in real life?

How do we use photographs to remember, and what happens if we choose to forget?

How does our imagination shape our memories?

Can we see stillness?

When we pose with our friends and family in photographs what parts of ourselves are erased?

What does a canceled person look like?

Is there a way to make a portrait of someone who is missing?

Can we see what could have been?

What would an overgrown photograph look like?

## **Reimagine**

I respond to these questions by creating photographic series. In each series I begin with photographs I have collected that I import into the digital space where I can alter them. In the computer, I build new backgrounds, extend limbs, create masks, and produce new photodigital hybrids. Each response is a genuine attempt to see something new that I can study and learn

from. For example, in my series *Reimagining Erica*, I deleted, or digitally covered, the bodies of one woman's friends and family to see if you could see the parts of her body that they erased. In the resulting photodigital series, you can study the size and shape of the holes in Erica's body over eight years as she changes from single woman to wife to mother. While this series gives us a new way to see a woman's body, it also makes us uncomfortable. It calls into question the practice of collaboration codified by Creative Commons and our complicit presence and active participation in the public spaces of the internet. It creates as many questions about auto-memorial-social photography as it answers.



Fig. 1. Reimagining 025 (March 14, 2011) - by Michael Bentley / CC BY 2.0

I show these photodigital series in galleries and museums as well as auto-memorial-social photographic spaces. I circulated the series *my father died four years ago* as a photo album, *The Forgetting Machine* as an iPhone app, and the series *Reimagining Erica* as a year-long Instagram feed. I have always felt it was important for these images to return to the spaces

that they came from. In these spaces, they are reminders of both the possibilities and the limitations of photography.



Fig. 2. Reimaging 003 (March 14, 2011) - by Michael Bentley / CC BY 2.0



Fig. 3. Andrew and Erica on the Dance Floor (February 3, 2013).