

The Family Analog

Borrowing and Ordering the Many

The Family Analog: Borrowing and Ordering The Many

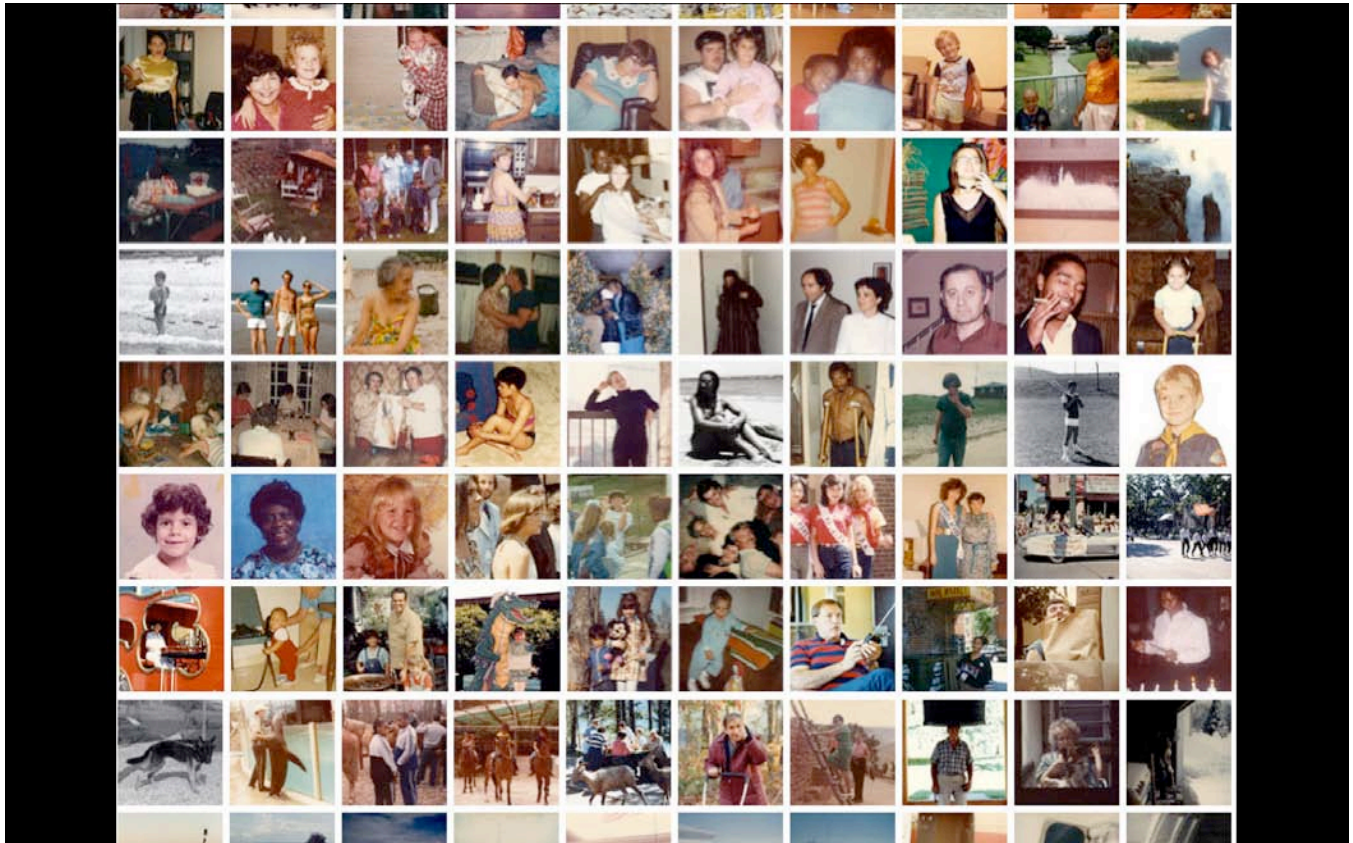
A talk introducing an artist project as part of the panel *Family Resemblances, Personal Archives* at the *Visible Evidence 18* conference at NYU in NYC, August 2011.

Rachel Stevens



"...We cannot describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak," writes Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. With this presentation about *The Family Analog*, a web archive of orphan family photos, I will attempt to describe 'our own archive.' In preparing this presentation I encountered the same kind of confusion that is at the heart of the project, confusion over whether to approach it intuitively, as something personal or analytically, as something theoretically informed. Since I consider *The Family Analog* to be an art project more than anything else, I will mostly present it from that perspective, so please forgive me if I am taking licenses in the process. I will also be using the "I" pronoun more than I ordinarily would. In approaching the project I have encountered many theoretical potholes, a few of which I will touch upon here. What I won't properly address today are issues of privacy, that is, a) the ethics of making public personal images of people that I do not know, who may be alive and well somewhere, or b) the blurry boundaries between private and public engendered by the Internet and mobile media in a more general sense. I also won't focus much on

the idea of the vernacular. What I will focus on is a process of classification. I am presenting this with the caveat that there is still a lot of work to be done in developing the archive as an art project and also as a theoretical investigation, if in fact these two things are in dyadic relationship.



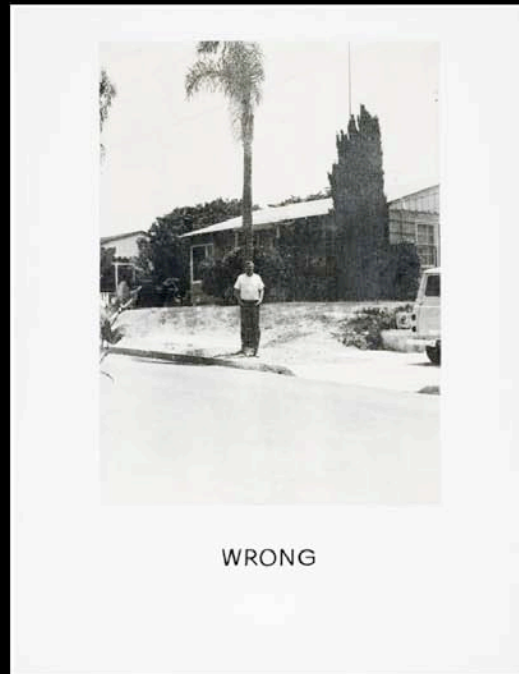
Growing up in Berkeley during the 1970s and early 80s, my upbringing – between divorces, moves, collective households, urban public schools, and even brushes with cults – seemed fragmented, or at least had the quality of a constantly shifting narrative, with various actors and settings appearing and disappearing, and along with them, myriad personalities, values, class identifications, spiritual affinities, and other nodes of identification that make up belonging to a family or community. I hypothesize that this early exposure makes me keenly interested in multiple and ever shifting subjectivities. In the past I have collected pigs, rubber bands, jokes, Kinder Ueberraschung toys, Pyrex bowls, postcards, owls and other miscellaneous things that seemed to speak to me with a particular urgency. More recently I have

been collecting orphan photographs and am beginning to organize them into a nascent archive that currently exists online as a website using the WordPress platform.



The Family Analog project is a critical mass of orphaned images from the late 1960s through the early 1990s that is being digitized, categorized, tagged and added to a database to allow for a nonlinear viewing of the personal lives of the American middle class through contemporary processes of searching, sorting and filtering. Through viewing and comparison of these crowd-sourced images an unscientific portrait of America will emerge that is both analytical and uncanny, exploring the family and its practices in all its diversity and mundane splendor. Hundreds of photographs viewed retrospectively constitute a mass auto-ethnography. While sketching a dynamic and changeable collective portrait of the culture, *The Family Analog* will afford an archaeology of American vernacular photography. The archive is primarily of (apparently) American families and individuals, but can

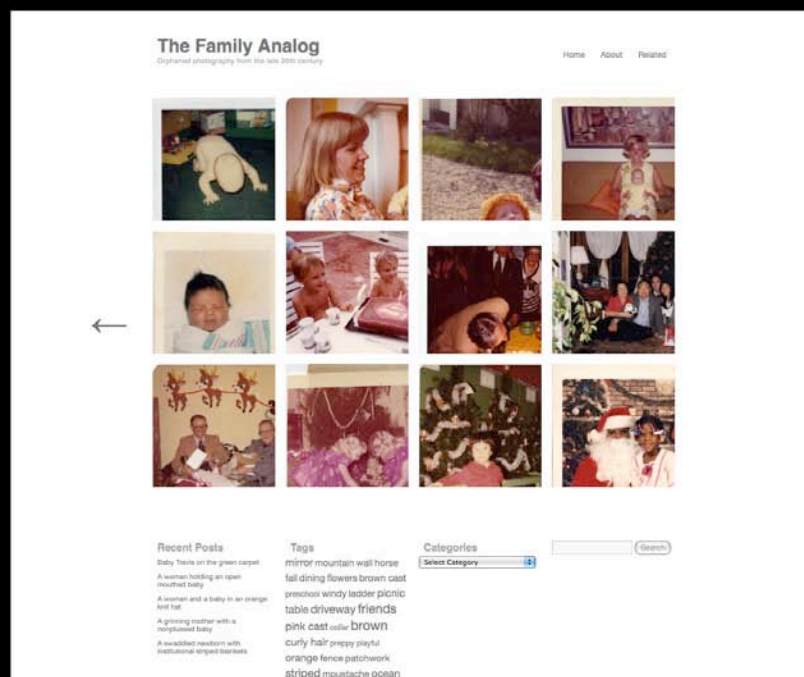
include a range of things that they photograph, such as vacation trips abroad and the people and things that they find there. As the archivist I am the gatekeeper. Others can contribute, but images must be vetted by me.



[By artist John Baldessari]

The guilty and pleasurable act of looking at others, a.k.a. voyeurism, is here given the veneer of a sanctioned activity. The period covered by the photographs roughly corresponds to my lifetime up until the demise of analog photography so here, through acts of appropriation and identification the archive also functions as a kind of self-portrait. I hope this will function similarly for other browsers.

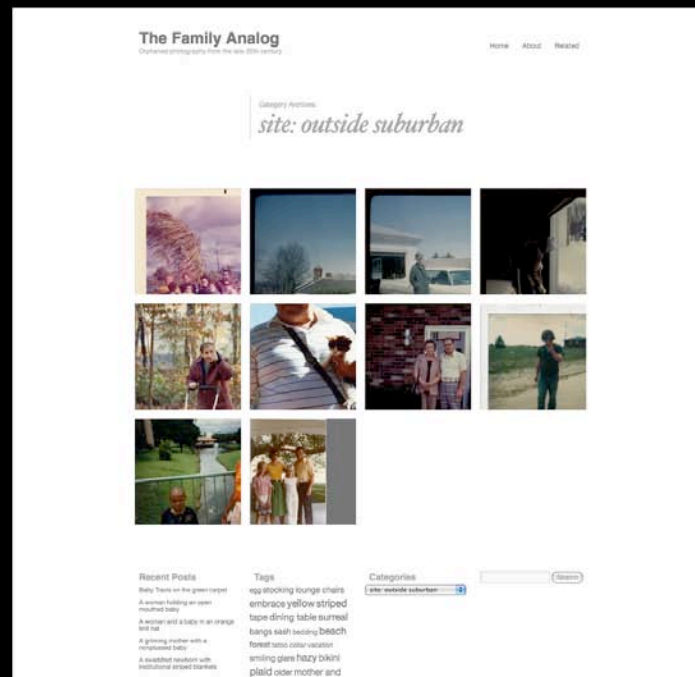
The late 1960s through the mid 1990s was a period in which color analog photography was common and accessible to the general public. It preceded the explosion of digital photography, online photo sharing and mobile media. The archive will be initially populated with 1000 images, but the growth of the archive will be ongoing. It will become a database narrative of sorts, or series of narratives tailored to the individual, depending on the way it is searched, browsed and filtered.



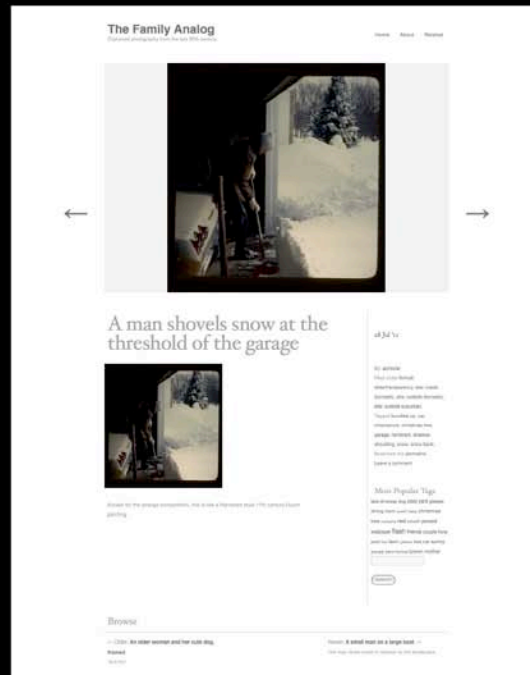


In order to enable searching, sorting and filtering, a taxonomy needs to be developed. A mass of intriguing images begs to be ordered. While we cannot really know about the people in the photos – who they were or are, what they are doing or feeling, their relationships to one another and to their larger communities, we can make speculative observations and order the image based on our perceptions. My librarian friends tell me that the taxonomy, the hierarchical system of terms that allows books to be organized, cross-referenced and retrieved is called an authority language. I am not so naïve as to believe that any ordering system that includes categorization, naming and hierarchies can achieve the qualities of an “archive degree zero” – a system that is invisible or transparent and neutral, but through an emphasis on empirical observation and self conscious perception I have played a game of employing some semblance of objectivity or method. The categories and tag terms have come to me over time as I looked carefully at the photographs. As I add each image to the archive I give it a simple textual description that focuses on actions, relationships and/or obvious objects, settings or emotional

expressions. I hope that this “pretend-neutral” matrix of terms allows other types of information to rise productively to the surface as people explore the archive.



[Category search]

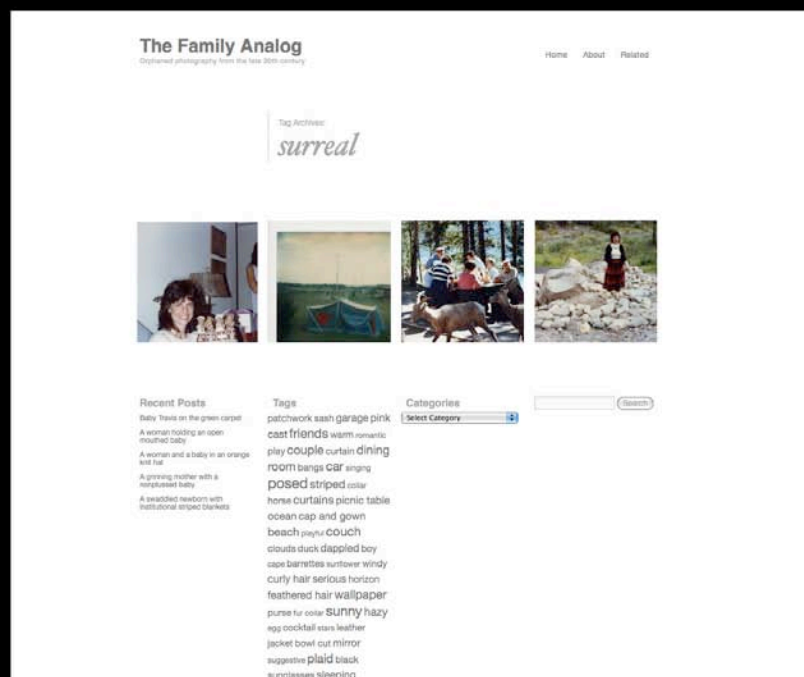


Categories are derived from things that I systematically check for in each photograph. The categories are:

- Age (I added this in later)
- Number of people (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+ or group, 9+ or crowd)
- Decade
- *Perceived* race or ethnicity (this is based on the American census bureau’s system) I do not want the focus of the archive to be explicitly on race and ethnicity, but I also do not want to ignore it, so somewhat awkwardly, I have given the race/ethnicity categories cryptic abbreviations. For example *r/e: a/ea* stands for race/ethnicity: asian/east-asian. These will be spelled out on a “taxonomy page.”
- Notable framing (i.e. off-center, tightly cropped)
- Occasion (i.e. baby shower, parade. graduation)

- Pets (simple yes or no – specific pet types can go in the tags section)
- Photo format (Polaroid, double exposure, photo booth, etc.)
- Site (inside domestic, outside institutional, etc.)

For the time being I have left out categorizations of gender and sexuality, but they can be covered in the tags section or in extra descriptions added to the body of the post.

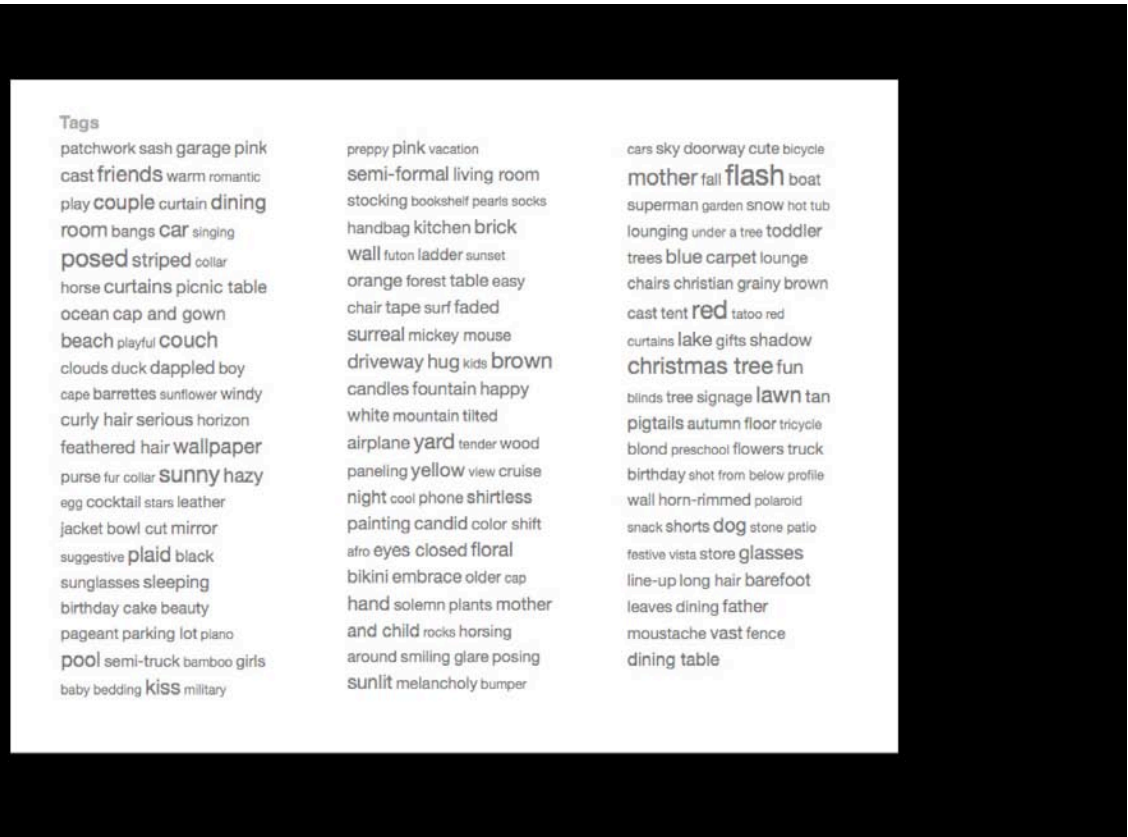


[Tag search]

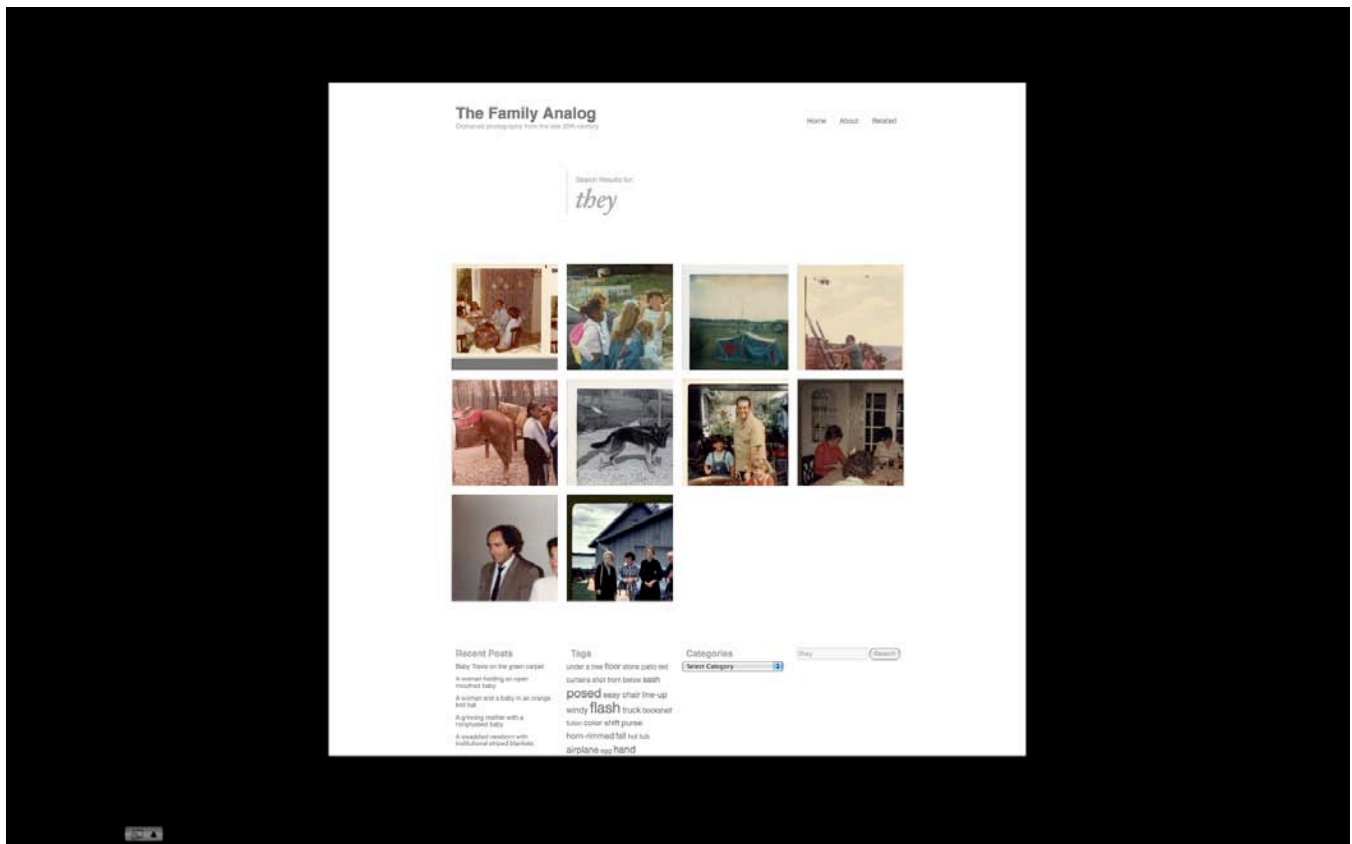
Tags are generated in a more freeform manner and allow for a more subjective classification. Tags are chosen to represent various items or qualities that pop out of each image in particular. Tags fall roughly into these areas:

- Obvious objects and notable examples of material culture
- Mood, tone or other subjective descriptor

- Actions or verbs
- Behavioral concepts such as “play”
- Noticeable effects of the camera apparatus such as obvious flash or an out of focus image
- Notable material condition of the print or slide such as a milky appearance, tear or tape stain



In order to give viewers multiple ways of browsing the archive there is currently an extensive tag cloud that is ordered randomly, highlighting banal details, conventions and subjective elements in the photos. Eventually I would like to develop the site so that the viewer can filter results by more than one term, creating a more granular selection, as on EBay or Amazon.com. Filtering more granularly, getting results perhaps for “Christmas” and “flash” and “melancholy” and “mother” could produce a more meaningful and personalized experience for the viewer.



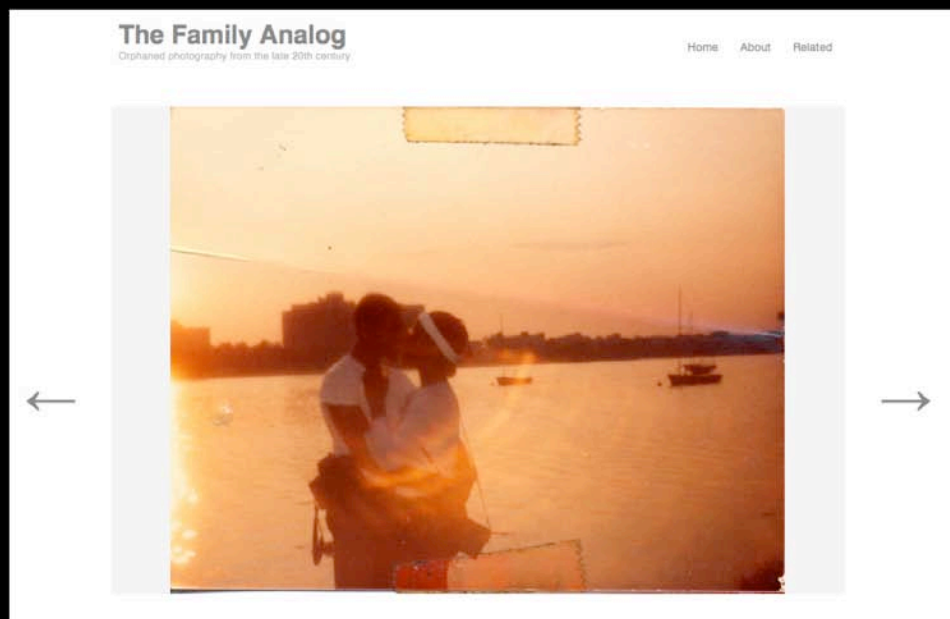
[Random word search]

The out-of-the-box search engine in the WordPress site is very limited, so as an initial fix I have added the “*Search Everything*” plug-in. *Search Everything* enables the search function to search every page, every tag, every category, every comment, every draft, excerpt, attachment, custom field, etc.

Perhaps in the future the algorithms embedded in the system can even suggest images for you. If you liked this image of a young woman in a plaid shirt in her room, you may also like this other photograph of a young woman in a yellow shirt in her room.

Taxonomies have their limitations, of course. Taxonomies are “relatively expensive, not exhaustive, not emergent, authoritative and present a limited view,” according to technologist Thomas Van der Val who developed the concept of the “folksonomy” in the mid 2000s. A folksonomy is defined as the “result of personal free tagging of information and objects for one’s own retrieval, tagging in a shared and open

social environment and when “the act of tagging is done by the person consuming the information. “
The vocabulary generating the parameters of the archive is directly that of its users. Notable examples of folksonomies are the social bookmarking site Delicious and the photo sharing site Flickr. Ideally, in the future, it would be great to expand the taxonomy of *The Family Analog* into a partial folksonomy, allowing many others to add their own tags to images, participating in the classification process.



The study of photography has been perennially concerned with the indexical – the photograph’s status as a trace of the real. This prescription has relaxed somewhat in recent years, as the culture has become acclimated to images manipulated or created in whole by lenseless technologies such as the software Photoshop or Maya. In scanning images for the archive I take special care to leave color shifts, cracks, tape stains and other material traces undisturbed. In this way the digital avatars representing photographic objects in the archive maintain at least the affective quality of the trace. Once digitized, the

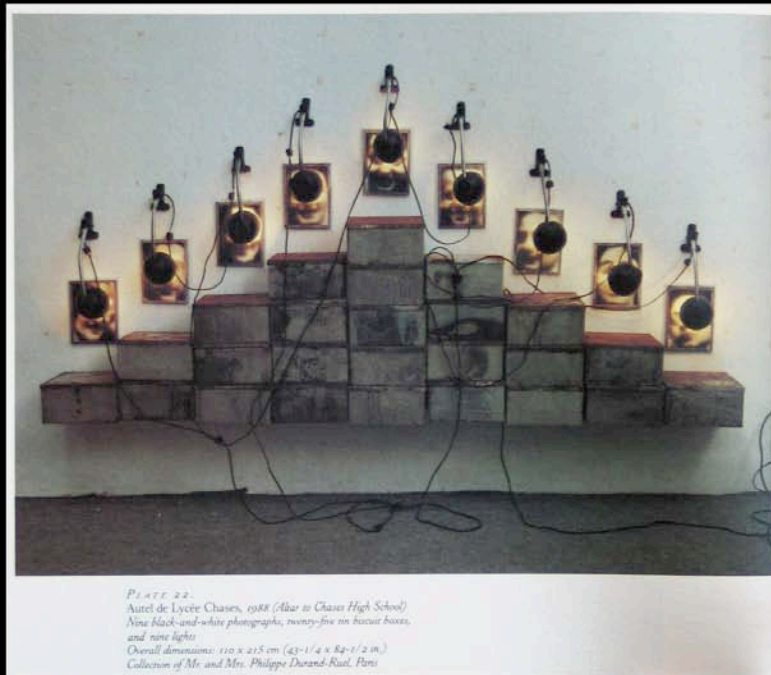
images can then give themselves over fully to indexing – to be semantically marked and cast into relationships with other images through the database.



It has occurred to me that it might be problematic to pursue a project in which images of different people from multiple families and walks of life will be brought together through categories of sameness as dictated by an algorithm or semantic term. One of my earliest theoretical awakenings was during a *History of Photography* class in art school (many years ago) when Deborah Bright gave a critique of *The Family of Man*, an exhibition curated by Edward Steichen in 1955. The *Family of Man* exhibition was made up of 503 photographs by 273 photographers in 68 countries and attempted to demonstrate, through juxtaposition of images of common activities and rites of passage – such as giving birth, playing music, sowing the fields, suffering during wartime – an inherent universality of human experience. Deborah Bright's charge was (as I can remember) that the exhibition's focus on demonstrating

“universal” experience erases difference, enforces normative family structures and social behavior while, by virtue of exclusion, renders alternative lifestyles invisible. Roland Barthes also has crafted a harsh critique of *The Family of Man* in his *Mythologies* essay on the exhibition. “Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behavior where historical alienation introduces some ‘differences’ which we shall here quite simply call ‘injustices’.” Hopefully my ‘family’ system, *the Family Analog* archive can be a little more discursive than *The Family of Man*.

While I have moved on from my own high school engagement with universal truths such as Joseph Campbell’s ideas on the journey of the archetypal hero, and passages of Carl Sander's expansive language celebrating universality in his prologue to *The Family of Man* gives me a 1980s “we are the world” kind of a shudder, my interest in collective experience and a desire to look at the rituals in people’s lives persists. Ideally, as *the Family Analog* project makes images available, en masse, for speculation and observation using contemporary viewing strategies such as searching, browsing and filtering through tags it will try the tensions between universality and plurality, enabling viewers to draw their own conclusions.



There are many precedents in the practice of appropriating other people's personal photography and making new meaning through re-contextualization. The artist Christian Boltanski has made several projects during the 80's and 90's incorporating found images of others, often merging the residue of his own personal narrative as a second generation Holocaust survivor with the hidden or lost story of what the photos actually represent. In this piece, *Autel de Lycee Chasse* from 1988, Boltanski has taken images from the 1931 graduating class of a Viennese high school for Jewish students, blown up images of their faces and created a kind of cross between an interrogation station and a memorial. The implication that the students perished in the death camps is likely, but not necessarily true – as I believe one student represented in a photo Boltanski had used contacted him years later.

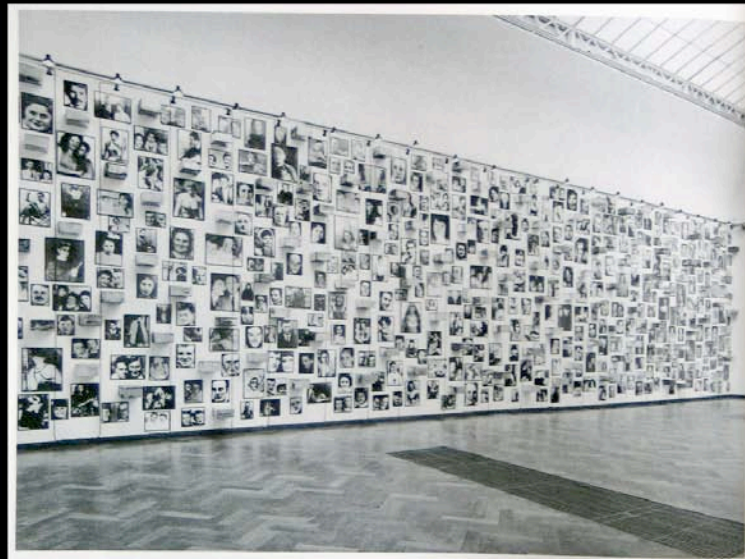


PLATE 32 Installation view
Les Archives-Detective, 1987
Four hundred photographs, one hundred ten metal boxes with magazine
articles, and twenty-one clamp-on desk lamps
Photographs: 18 x 24 cm (7 x 9 1/2 in.) to 20 x 60 cm (8 x 24 in.)
23 x 24 cm; boxes: 12 x 23 x 42 cm (5 x 9 x 17 in.) each
Collection of The Yveca Art Foundation, Toronto
Installed at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1987

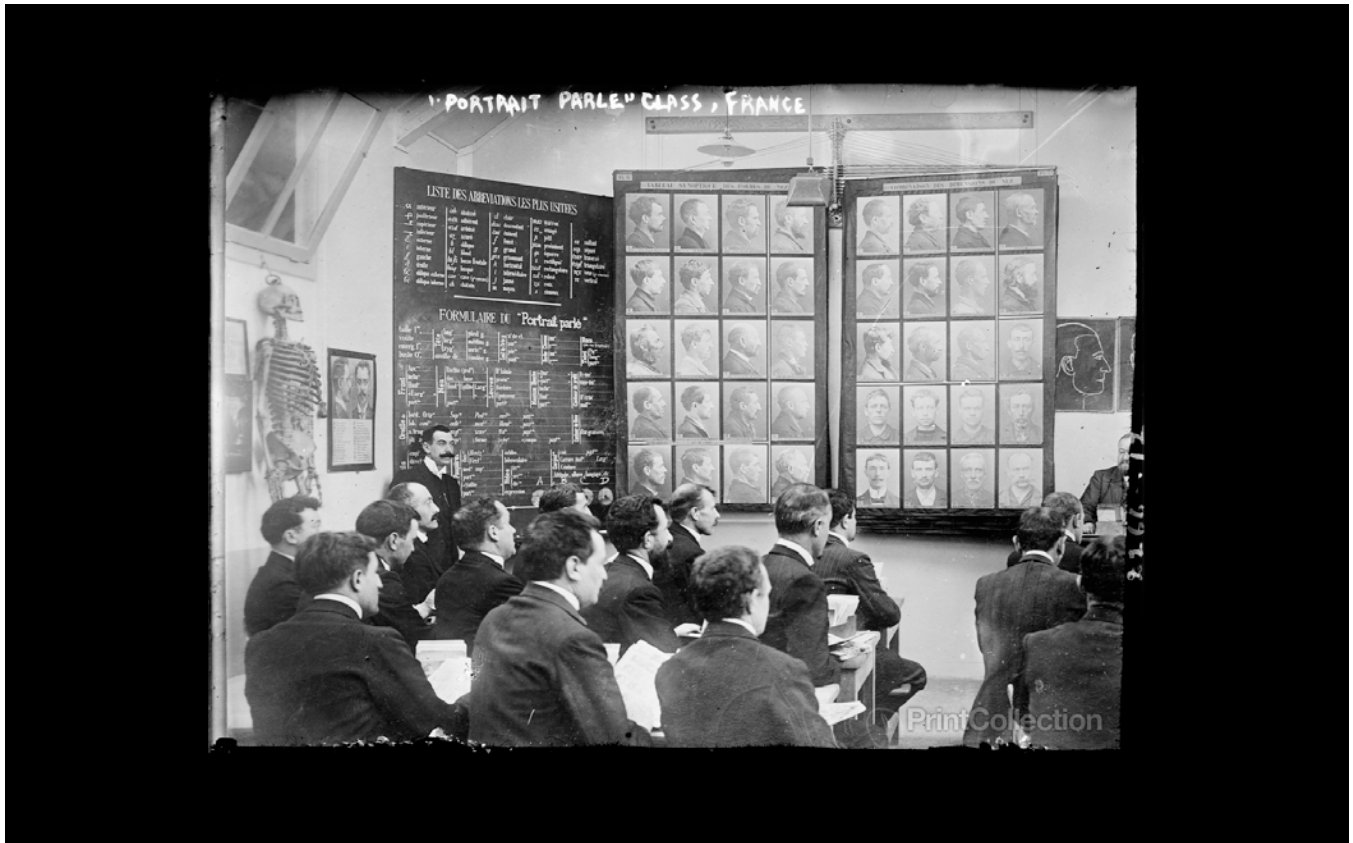
In this second piece, *Les Archive-Detective* from 1987 Boltanski has displayed four hundred photos he collected from the French magazine called *Detective*. The images represent both murder victims and murderers and it is impossible to know which is which or whose story is contained with in the metal boxes.



Marisa Olson, a theorist and Internet artist has written an essay that riffs off the practice of net artists who call themselves “Pro surfer.” The essay delivers this example by Guthrie Lonergan, *Internet Group Shot*. According to Olson, Pro surfer artists employ “a copy-and-paste aesthetic that revolves around the appropriation of web-based content in simultaneous celebration and critiques of the Internet and contemporary digital visual culture.” *Internet Group Shot*, an appropriation that is a bit more glib than Boltanski’s, makes pointed statements about the conventions of representing groups and the materiality of analog photography against the more immaterial frame of the web page, while it makes a somewhat appealing comment on collective experience. Since the advent of Photoshop and the Internet, appropriation and montage could be said to be the new normal.



[Scroll down to see the whole image, and each group jumps slightly as you mouse over it]



[A class learning the Bertillon method of identifying types through facial features]

The act of classifying people recalls contentious histories of photography in which visual representations and typologies are used as a tool for social control. Alan Sekula discusses this extensively in his 1992 essay “The Body and the Archive,” focusing especially on how photography enables regulation of the deviant body through physiognomy and phrenology as developed and implemented by Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton and put widely into use in criminology.



[The Bertillon filing system as implemented in New York State]

Sekula states “photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the other, to define both the generalized look – the typology – and the contingent instance of deviance and social pathology.”

It would be nice to reverse the order of Sekula’s argument, ending instead of beginning with his outlining of the ways in which photography in the mid 19th century served as “a means of cultural enlightenment for the working classes” – that “Photography is modernity run riot. ... [It] threatens conflagration and anarchy, an incendiary leveling of the existing cultural order.”

More forgiving social typologies have been generated by others. August Sander, the German photographer, attempted to create a record of all classes and professions of German society in the 1930s.



[August Sander, Blind Girls

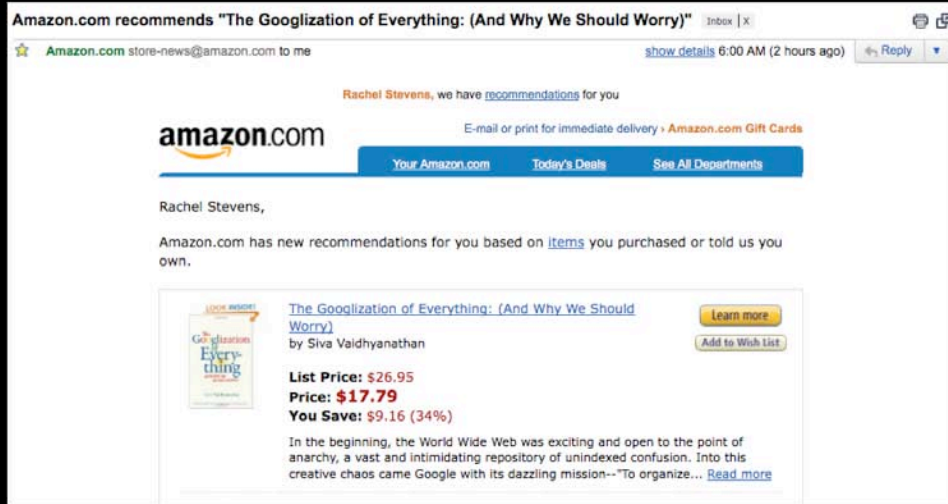


[Diane Arbus photographed by Gary Winogrand in Central Park]

The photographic practice of Diane Arbus is a more freewheeling enterprise. She collects subjects for the gaze, allowing her personal voyeuristic fascination to permeate more transparently into her archive, more often than not selecting subjects explicitly for their strangeness or difference rather than for their status as iconic representations of types.

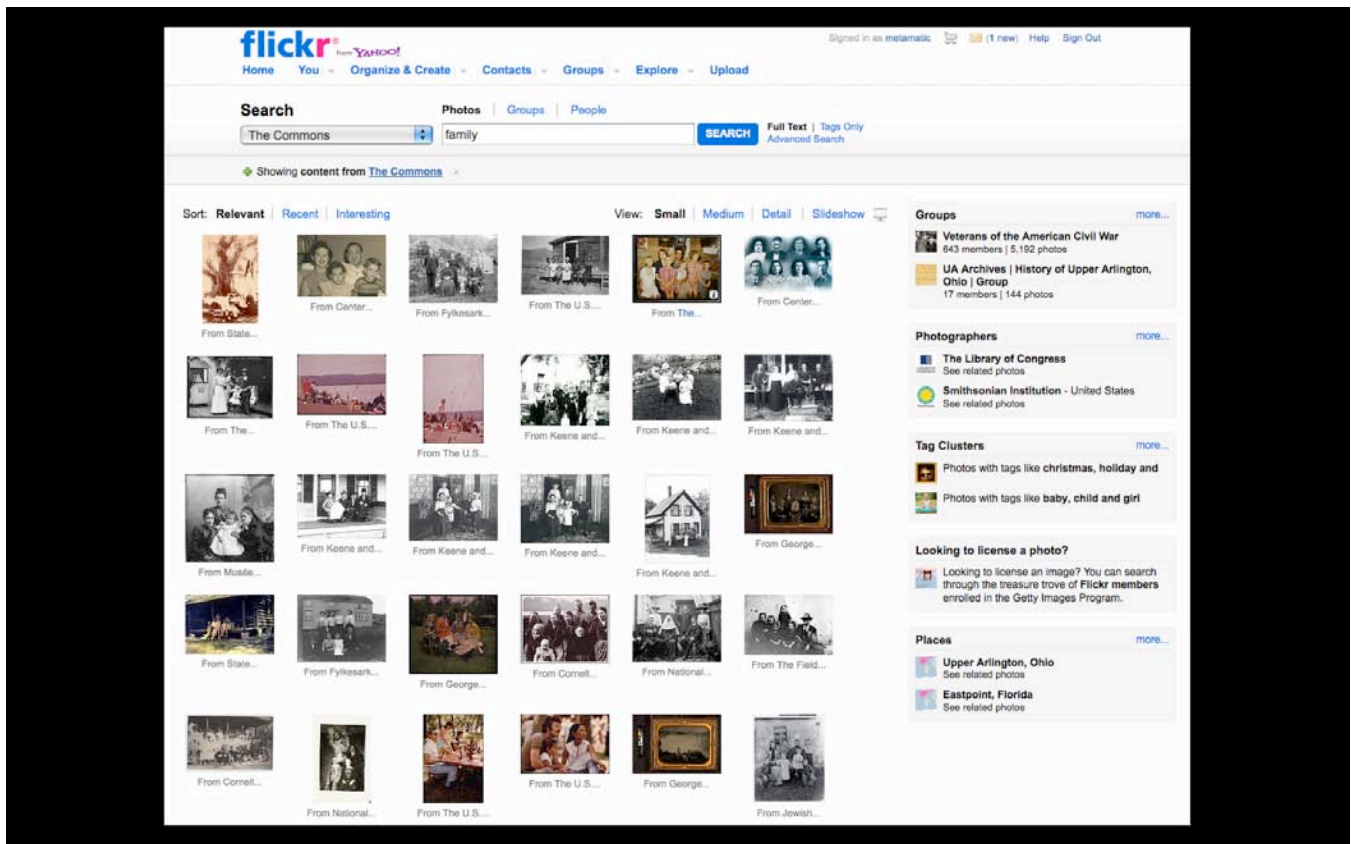


[Russian Midget Friends]



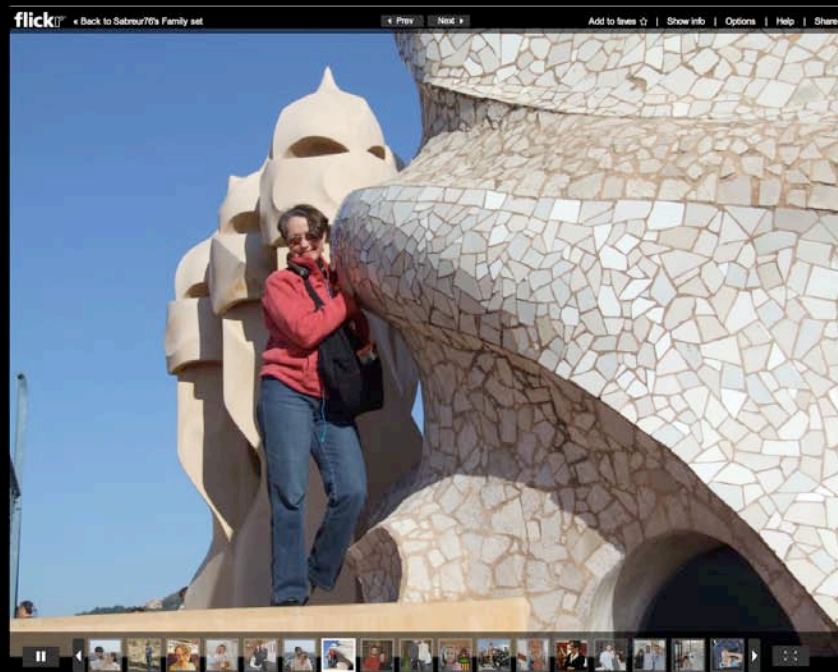
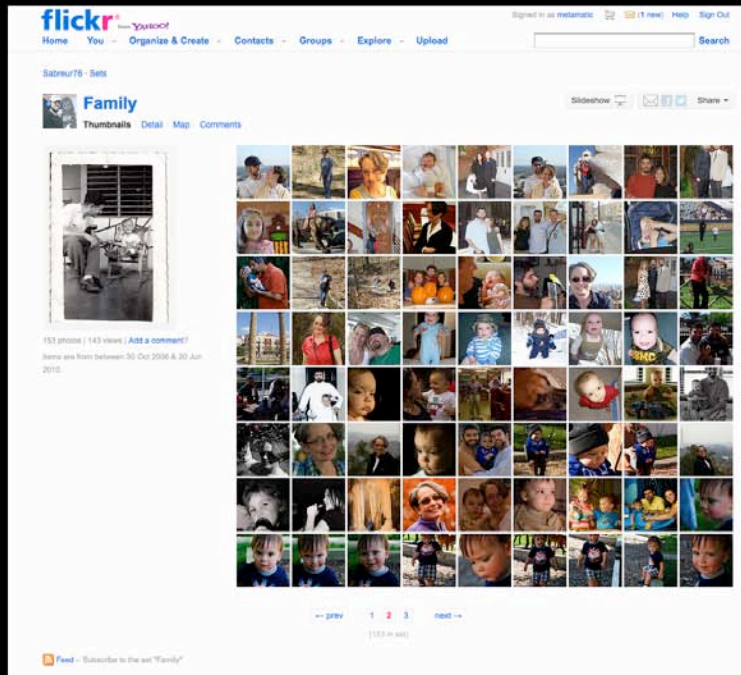
[Right on cue, I received this email this morning recommending the book *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)*]

Konrad Becher is pretty much in agreement in his essay “The Power of Classification” in the same book. “Classifying systems are notoriously off track, but evidently good for the game of self-fulfilling projections of ideological power” Becher writes. He compares the Dewey decimal system, which initially put all non Christians into one category, with the Soviet library system, which established as a top category: “Works of the classical authors of Marxism-Leninism.” The cautionary message from Becher is that while “searching is an act of imagination, an approximation of expected outcomes, ... findings inscribe themselves into the future.”



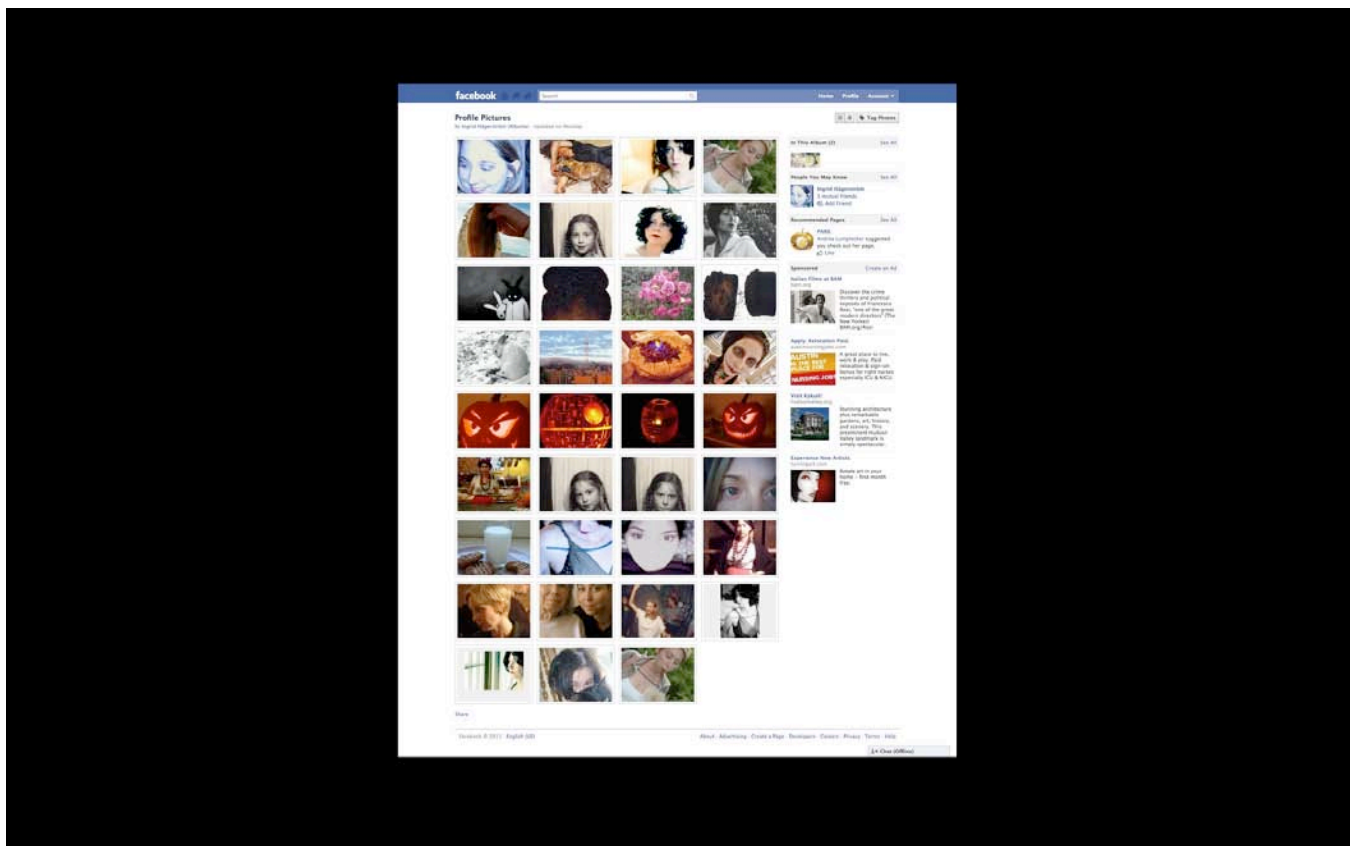
[Images from The Library of Congress and The Smithsonian Institution as part of the Flickr Commons project]

I would have liked to call this talk *The Family Analog: Borrowing and Ordering The Multitude* instead of “The Many” but I could not justify the inference to collective agency, resistance or political consciousness the term “multitude” implies, for example as used by Hart and Negri in their 2004 book *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New technologies, i.e. digital cameras and networked Internet spaces, do begin to enable a kind of empowering image commons, however. Everyone is a content creator, publisher and archivist.



[A random person's photos illustrating how one person is a creator, publisher and archivist]

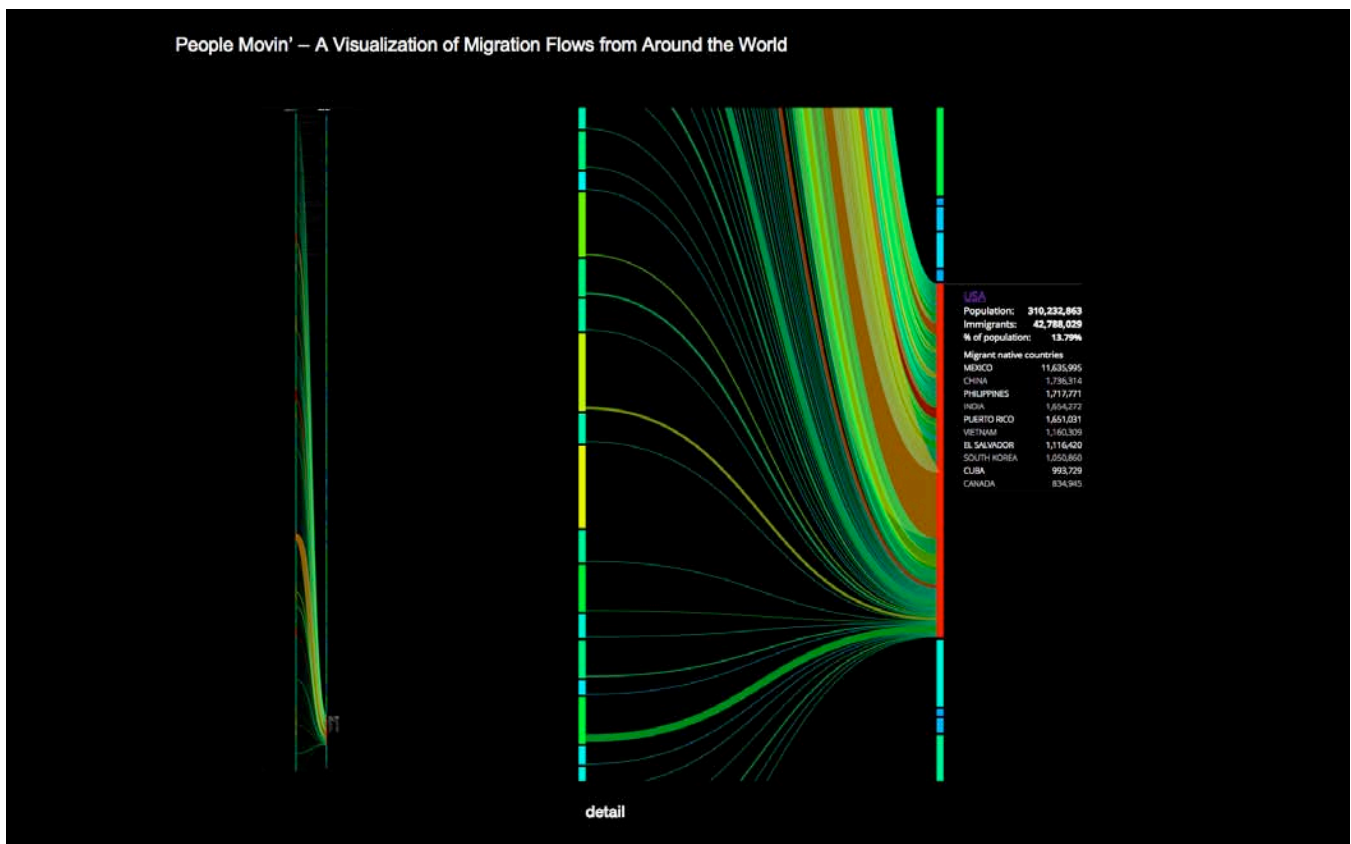
Although I wouldn't go so far as to call the Internet a public space, since it is highly regulated and primarily private interests own the infrastructure, the Internet does enable a productive (and often not so productive) flow of exchanges. One initiative enabling a public image commons is Creative Commons licensing. For *The Family Analog* I have indicated that the photos are offered up under a "Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike" license. Others can use the images for non-commercial purposes if they attribute the source to *The Family Analog* and permit the same kind of sharing.



Sekula, Stalder/Mayer, Becker and Foucault agree that classification systems are tied up with the operations of power. Although semantic and taxonomic systems are now dynamic, decentralized and generated by thousands of individuals, new forms of collecting and making sense of personal information put the power and control back with the larger governing institutions.

The Family Analog is an exercise in creating a more personal archive. It enables an excavation of the auto-representation of a generation of Americans in the late 20th Century, rescuing material culture from shoe boxes and thrift stores of history ... thereby forming yet another version of what Foucault might name as a “...system of accumulation, historicity and disappearance...”

POSTSCRIPT



Here is a more contemporary representation of ‘the many’ online.

People Movin' – A Visualization of Migration Flows from Around the World

<http://computationallegalstudies.com/2011/07/12/people-movin-a-visualization-of-migration-flow-from-around-the-world/>