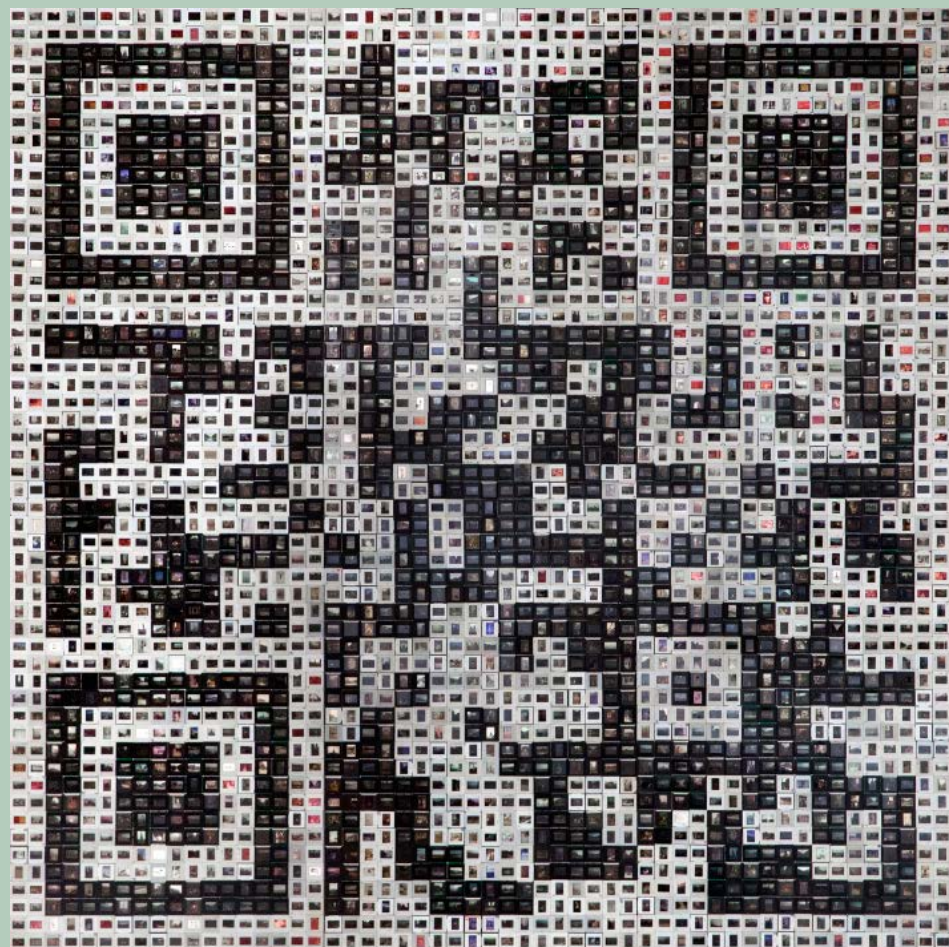


Our Photographs, Old and New



Naše fotografije, stare i nove



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SAŽETAK

Privatne i obiteljske fotografije naše su najosobnije snimke zabilježene prilikom važnih događaja u našim životima. Takve smo fotografije nekad stavljali u albume ili ih jednostavno držali u kutijama bez nekoga posebnog reda, a te smo osobne arhive otvarali samo kad smo svoja sjećanja i priče željeli podijeliti s članovima obitelji ili bliskim prijateljima. Te mnogima poznate navike povezane s načinom na koji snimamo i dijelimo privatne fotografije uvelike su se promijenile zbog digitalnog zaokreta, sve većeg broja digitalnih fotoaparata i sve šire upotrebe interneta i platformi društvenih medija. Arhivi su često mjesta u kojima se čuvaju uspomene, mjesta koja nas tjeraju na sjećanje i mjesta pohrane. Međutim, posljednjih su godina pitanja povezana s arhivima i metode arhiviranja uglavnom usmjerena na transformacije uzrokovane digitalizacijom. Različiti načini i učinci korištenja tehničkih slika uzrokovani tehnološkim procvatom neki su od najkarakterističnijih i najznačajnijih elemenata našeg vremena. U svom članku *Our Photographs, Old and New* [Naše fotografije, stare i nove] koristim suvremeni umjetnički rad Gergelyja Barcza kako bih istražila promjene kroz koje su privatne fotografske prakse i privatne fotoarhive prošli u posljednjih nekoliko desetljeća.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

privatne fotografije, tipovi slika, digitalni obrat, društvene mreže, umjetničke upotrebe arhiva, umjetničko djelo

ABSTRACT

Private and family photographs are our most personal images taken at significant events of our lives. We used to put these photos into albums or just kept them in boxes without specific orders, and we only opened up these personal archives when we wanted to share our memories and stories with family members or close friends. These common habits regarding how we take and share private photos have changed a lot due to the digital turn, the increasing number of digital cameras, and the broadening usage of the Internet and social media platforms. Archives are often places of safeguarding memories, places that make us remember and places of preservation. However, in recent years, the questions related to them and the archiving methods are mostly focused on how digitization has transformed them. The varying ways and effects of technical image usage caused by the technological boom are some of the most characteristic and defining elements of our times. In my paper titled *Our Photographs, Old and New*, I examine — through a contemporary artwork by Gergely Barcza — how private photography practices and private photo archives have changed in the last decades.

KEYWORDS

private photos, image types, digital turn, social media, artistic uses of archives, artwork

BRINGING DOWN THE "ARCHIVE FEVER"

Sl. / Fig. 1 QR kôd instalacija /
QR-Code installation
←

Judit Gellér



Sl. / Fig. 2 Detalj QR kôd instalacije / QR-Code installation detail
↑

The changing ways and effects of technical image usage caused by the technological boom are some of the most characteristic and defining elements of our times. What were our private photos like before the “digital turn”, and how did information technology, digital devices, the emergence of smartphone cameras, and new sharing options available to everyone transform them? In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to shed light on how people used to make private photographs in the past and how these habits and practices have changed as a result of the digital turn. In the end, I will present a contemporary work of art that provides a comprehensive reflection on these phenomena.

PRIVATE
PHOTOS AS IMAGE
TYPES

Private photos are various image types that were, are, and will be taken in countless quantities and very diverse manners. In my definition, the term private photo represents a larger category and allows more leeway for interpretation than family photographs, which I understand as a smaller set within the former. Family pictures — a narrower notion — are a group of photos that feature family members and are, due to their memory-preserving qualities, of importance for the family and maybe a small circle of friends. Private photos, on the other hand, can be seen as cultural objects that document major events in a person’s life, cover a wide range of subjects, can be divided into a myriad of sub-categories, and are taken mostly by amateurs, out of studio conditions, and generally (and inherently) not for publication or artistic goals but for private purposes; that is, private photos are considered to be non-public photos with personal messages. Certain regularities can be observed in the ways private photos are taken, stored, and disclosed that allow the identification of private photo archetypes.

The most common themes in family and private photo albums are people; therefore, the events and scenes in the pictures are usually structured to align with how the models want to look in the images. I have a photograph; therefore, I am — if there is a person in the shot, one of the most important evaluation criteria becomes similarity, i.e., the authentic representation of the subject. Based on the study *The Social Definition of Photography* by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu,¹ it seems important to note that there is a system of customary habits that dictates what and how one should photograph and what is deemed a socially acceptable or objectionable situation to be photographed in different cultures. Everyone who gets in front of the lens picks up a certain posture and facial expression, which most often follow the norms of decency and civility. Usually, these poses are not at all typical and natural of the person, but the choice of posture and sometimes the festive clothes worn want to reflect their respect for the situation. The photographed person has expectations of the picture made, which is why they strive to give the most aesthetic and dignified image of themselves matching their ideals. The model wants to see their most

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¹ Bourdieu, “A fénykép társadalmi definíciója”, 232.



Sl. / Fig. 3 Detalj QR kôd instalacije / Detail from the QR-Code:
Hármashatárhegy, 1974.01

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Sl. / Fig. 4 Detalj QR kôd instalacije / Detail from the QR-Code:
Hármashatárhegy, 1974.10

↑

advantageous image in portraits and group photos, so one of the key aspects of these photos is frontality — when the person portrayed maintains eye contact with the prospective viewers of the photo. This behaviour is linked to deep-rooted cultural values, symbolizing honesty, respect, and mutual recognition and expressing one’s need to provide a true picture of themselves.²

There are pivotal events in the life of a family that are thus recurrent in different private photo collections. In family and private photographs, the most common themes are family celebrations and religious holidays. Birthdays and rites of passage are popular themes as well, along with travels and summer holidays which can also be considered festive occasions where the camera is an indispensable accessory. Travels and trips are days of freedom and getting away from work, thus suggesting that the family has sufficient funds to do so. Another reason they are important is that it is often only during these days that all family members can be together.³ People tend to prove the authenticity of an event with their private photographs taken at famous locations or with celebrities, that is, they also use the photographs as evidence. In some cases, however, photographers break these unwritten rules and capture moments that are not in the least wanted by the photographed person, such images often showing people busy with their bodily functions, intoxicated, naked, etc.⁴ However these kinds of images are often identified as taboo, some of which can be seen in the collection of cinematographer Sándor Kardos, called the Horus Archives which is famous for its amateur images that are technically, compositionally, or thematically “spoiled”.

In conclusion, private photos can be arranged into typical groups or categories. Some of the private photos are placed in albums, especially family albums. One of the fundamental organizing forces of family albums is chronology, which can be structured along different life events. The most frequently recurring motifs in private photos belong to family gatherings and special occasions. The documentary nature and the power of a memento in photographs contribute to preserving these life stories of families and individuals through visual elements.

PRIVATE DIGITAL PHOTOS

Compared to the analogue era, the digital turn offered radically new opportunities for the makers and users of images. Digital technology seems to have brought a quantitative rather than a qualitative change in the making of private photographs. The photos created with digital devices and shared on web platforms have many identifiable archetypes known from the private photographs of the previous photographic era. However, one significant change can be identified in the new possibilities offered by the back and front dual cameras built into smartphones, and the direct mobile and web connection.

In 2013, “selfie”, the name of a self-portrait taken with a smartphone front camera and uploaded to a social networking site, was named as the word of the year by the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries. The word itself had not been previously published in the Oxford Dictionaries — albeit it had appeared in the vernacular long before, first in 2002 — however, the choice of the word was justified by its rapidly increasing and widespread use. There also emerged a number of playful variations of the word *selfie*, from *drelfie* for drunken selfie; to *relfie* for photos with one’s significant other, compounded from relationship and selfie; to *bookshelfie* from the merger of bookshelf and selfie; and to *bedstagram* for selfies taken in the bed after waking up or before falling asleep. The most remarkable change ushered in by (self)portraits taken with a mobile phone appeared in the image-taking gestures. With a built-in camera on the front panel, the device can switch to selfie mode in a split second, focusing on the person pressing the shutter button at any moment to publicly share their image with a few more clicks. There is no need for a third party (such as a photographer or a laboratory technician) to take or develop the images because this dual-camera technology allows for the device to act simultaneously as a mirror and a camera while the mobile connection permits instant sharing. Similar to what was previously adumbrated concerning private photography habits, selfie photographers also set expectations of their look in the photo. However, in the act of taking a selfie, the selfie-taker becomes the photographer, the model, the viewer, and the assessor of the photograph at the same time, as it is up to them to decide whether the image meets their standards before deleting or submitting it. Nicholas Mirzoeff defines the selfie-taking process as a digital performance of a person as they hope to be seen by others, and once they share the photo, their body is in the world and in the network at the same time.⁵

In addition to the new achievements available at everyone’s convenience, such as making a montage or imitating the aesthetics of different kinds of analogue photographs, all of which previously required laboratory assistance, there are also a number of image editing tools to add comments and facial recognition tags with no effort. The significance of such selfie variations, hashtags, and other tags lies in the fact that, while former private photograph researchers used to categorize, group, and tag the image types according to events, characters, locations, etc. after examining them, photographers now consciously and deliberately create precisely predetermined image types.

Among the many powerful functions of Facebook and its side applications (e.g., Messenger and Instagram) is the “life events” feature on personal profiles that I would like to highlight in my paper. In January 2021, Facebook allowed to set the following life events:

- Work (New Job, Promotion, Left Job, Retirement)
- Education (New School, Graduated, Left School/University)

- Relationship (New Relationship, Engagement, Marriage, First Met)
- Home and living (Moved, Places I’ve lived, Hometown)
- Family (New Child, Parenthood, New Pet, Loss of a Loved One)
- Travel
- Interests and activities
- Wellness
- Milestones and achievements
- Remembrance
- Create your own

Another important photography channel is Instagram by Facebook. It is a mobile-optimized app designed to share photos and short videos, allowing only a few lines of textual information to be attached. More important here is a plethora of hashtags, tags, and other annotations functioning as links within the application. It is a tell-tale empirical observation that a search session on Instagram with the keyword *#eiffeltower* found 3.4 million matches on May 30, 2017, while the same search on January 1, 2019 showed 5.3 million; on March 17, 2020 6.2 million; and on February 23, 2021 6.5 million entries.

It can be inferred from this that while private photographers created different types of images in a more or less unintended way in the past, today, their intention has changed, both due to the suggestions and reminders of social platforms and as a result of their awareness of the fact that they are taking pictures to be publicly shared and visible. Besides the often-schematic gestures and motifs used by the models to appropriately signal their chosen themes, the composition is also determined by the range of graphic templates offered by the various web platforms and the required portrait, landscape, wide, square, or even round formats.

While the sticky and foxed pages of old paper-based family albums are slowly disappearing, new digital collections, made via Facebook’s photo album creator and other options, albeit being dematerialized and ephemeral, provide a stable counterpoint to this process. New photo collections do not exist in tactile forms. Images are transformed into digits and data, photosensitive materials are replaced by sensors, and new archives are stored in digital clouds and virtual drives. Digital images thus mean dematerialization, in the sense that their creation no longer results in specific physical objects but in the data stored on hardware and displayed on various display tools, hence bringing immediacy, easy sharing and access, real-time action, and presence, which ultimately boils down to the pre-eminence of flow over preservation. Digital photos are no longer bound to the material, and their visibility is not limited in time and space. Digital devices connected to the Internet also offer various options for displaying, copying, transmitting, and transforming photos. The key concept of online space has become the remix, created essentially with digital technology, using and transforming works that have previously had a different function.

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² *Ibid.*, 228.

³ Szegő, *Privátfotó”: szimbólumszótár*, 16.

⁴ Bán, Forgács, *I have the same photo, only it’s a different kid*, 53.

⁵ Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 62.



Sl. / Fig. 5 Detalj QR kôd instalacije / Detail from the QR-Code:
Budimpešta / Budapest, 1976.05

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Sl. / Fig. 6 Detalj QR kôd instalacije / Detail from the QR-Code:
Budimpešta / Budapest, 1976.03

↑

ENCODED
(GERGELY BARCZA:
QR CODE, 2014)

Since its invention, the users of the medium have approached photography with different intentions. Photo-makers can be amateurs or professionals, they can belong to laic or artist groups, but they can also be categorised further by whether the medium is used to capture reality or, on the contrary, to create illusions. One of the characteristic practical genres of the latter approach, the reconstruction of reality, is the making of photomontages and photo collages. Artists often use photos and documents from collections and archives for this purpose. Combining images from different places and with different functions adds further layers of meaning to the new works.

The use of photographic archives is not a recent phenomenon — at the turn of the 20th century, it had already become an item of the avant-garde artist's toolbox. It was used by concept artists of the 1960s and was rediscovered, and became common again in the 1990s. The turn of the millennium and the arrival of the digital age required certain photographic methods characteristic of the analogue era to adapt, and prompted photographers to come up with new methods and concepts. According to Hal Foster, the reason for the preponderant use of artistic archives lies in the rapid political, economic, and technological changes, dematerialization through digitization, the emergence and increasing accessibility of the Internet, and the availability and spreading of information.⁶ In addition to many other uses of archives, creating artworks by using private photographs may have become commonplace again because they proved suitable for processing personal themes, memories, traumas, and for telling alternative stories against the big narratives. Digital technology just supplemented all that with more possibilities in popular culture as well as in the sphere of arts. A remix created by utilizing and adapting works that previously had different functions becomes crucial in the artistic strategies devised in opposition to the strategies imposed by the apparatus.

The works of Gergely Barcza, while establishing reflected relations to the changing technological environment, bring to the fore numerous theoretical questions. Currently studying Architecture at the Doctoral School of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, he is a former member of the Studio of Young Photographers Hungary. Barcza started working with private photographs several years ago after finding some photos in used slide frames he bought in a second-hand photo shop. While he was organizing the images from the 1970s and 1980s, he noticed that the nostalgic atmosphere of the private photographs does not only come from the presented subjects but also from the fading of the colours, resulting from slow ageing due to the technique itself. While scanning and digitalizing the slides, it turned out that the hues of the images covered the full spectrum of the 12-step colour wheel, from red to violet. Using a computer

⁶ Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, 3–22.

⁷ *The Pécsi József Photography Grant Archive*. <http://pecsiosztondij.capacenter.hu/projektek/barcza-gergely/> (date of access June 27, 2022)

⁸ Gergely Barcza's lecture.

⁹ Danto, *The transfiguration of the commonplace: a philosophy of art*.

¹⁰ Facebook page *Gyuri és Attila*. <https://www.facebook.com/gyuriesattila/> (date of access: June 27, 2022)

¹¹ This paper was composed using and translating parts of my dissertation *Private Memory in the Hungarian Contemporary Fine Art Photography* in the Film, Media and Contemporary Culture PhD program of Eötvös Loránd University.)

program, he created a colour wheel from the digital files and then built his piece entitled *Slide Colour Wheel* from the original 1457 slides, which he then presented in a 112 × 121 cm lightbox.⁷

He continued to collect private photographs. For his collection of found and bought slide frames and other shots, at one point, he started to receive photos from friends and acquaintances, too. While organizing the thousands of slides into typical categories, Barcza stumbled on a set of 800 images spanning 22 years of one family's life. Thrown away and then found on a junk removal campaign in Budapest, the family archive was provided with accurate dating, which, together with inscriptions of the locations and events, revealed that the first image was taken on July 27, 1969 and the last in August 1991. Studying the images, the artist got intrigued by numerous questions, including as to how much information could be gathered about a family of complete strangers; if the members of the family were still alive, whether their current residence could be found; to what extent our stories and theirs might prove similar; and how this analogue material could be linked to today's technical innovations and to the new formations of the world wide web.⁸ First, he looked for the answers to these questions through artistic research (an investigation, actually). Thanks to Barcza's architectural studies and experience, he was able to identify a possible clue on an outdoor photo pointing to where these shots might have been taken and who might be in the pictures. The investigation was completed with quick success, and the artist contacted the family, who, with the stipulation of keeping their names confidential, gave him permission to use the images. The artwork came out as a 270 × 270 cm lightbox installation of several panels that, in the end, included 3,000 slides.

Leaning close to the small slides, the observer can get an insight into the everyday life and festive days of the socialist era of Hungary. Furniture and objects in the apartment, the Gábor Frigyes chair, the portable radio, scenes of dressing up for a kindergarten costume party, sledging in the winter, a trip to the Buda hills, or a holiday at Lake Balaton are all worth a thousand words told about the lifestyle of a certain social class living in that place and era. But those are all gone. It is the mosaic layout of the slides that transposes us to the present day, the black and white square slide frames adding up to form a digital QR code that, if read with a mobile app, leads to a Facebook profile. Choosing a Facebook profile is a particularly relevant decision because this is one of the most common social media platforms that could represent our daily habits regarding how our lives and usage of private photos have changed due to this kind of virtual publicity. The installation *QR Code* has been on view since the autumn of 2014 in the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives (OSA) at Central European University (CEU) Budapest.

As early as the nineteenth century, it became clear that photos as technical images raised a number of theoretical questions about their presentation, function and interpretative

framework due to their ontology. Most of these questions arise precisely from their technical determination since there is a technical device between the photo and its maker and a presentation apparatus of the photos between the photo and its recipient. According to Arthur C. Danto, several conditions must be met in order to consider a photo as part of the art world: in addition to the making of the artefact, the intention to create a work of art, which passes through the filter of the art world's recipients, and the fact that the artwork itself, by its presentation, self-referentially refers to its original content and context, must all be present in the work.⁹ In Barcza's work of art, the original photos can be considered as artefacts, transformed by their creator to meet the mentioned criteria to become an artwork. The photos have undergone a change of meaning as they have passed through the permeable surfaces of different distribution channels. The private photos have been transferred from their original personal (family) context into the public (on the one hand, art institutional and, on the other hand, the social media) spheres. This type of change in function and meaning of the photos is made even more possible in the digital age by the fact that digital(ized) photos have been going through a dematerialization compared to analogue ones.

Barcza's work is meaningful not only because it highlights how private photographs taken by amateurs with no artistic intention can become works of art or because it shows what Central European everyday life was like in the 1970s and 1980s — *QR Code* draws attention to how technological developments altered the circumstances in which people take, use, and share their photographs. Although the covered theme is of local importance, it also merits global interpretations by virtue of the tools and the peculiar layout selected by the artist. The private memories rediscovered, taken out of context, appropriated, and reinterpreted by Gergely Barcza are a perfect fit for today's re-prefix-dominated world and for a collective memory emerging in the digital environment in which Gyuri and Attila's public Facebook profile¹⁰ can be available to anyone.¹¹

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