Many Telling Moments: the Essence Of Fragmented Image Culture

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MANY TELLING MOMENTS
THE ESSENCE OF FRAGMENTED IMAGE CULTURE

by

BONNIE M. EBNER
B.S.B.A. University of Central Florida, 2004
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the Computer in the Department of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

My purpose in entering the UCF MFA program was to further explore and develop my passion for photography. During my time in the program, I developed my methodology—from having the traditional photography paradigm ingrained in my mind (and wanting to fit into it) to accepting and valuing my own unique process.

I construct installations using diverse imagery and non-traditional presentation. In my installations, one may witness a reflection of the contemporary pace of image perception—fragmented, complex, abundant, and disordered. Together, images and their arrangements are used to create a unified piece that satisfies a new system within apparent disorder. The resulting installations summon the sensation of thinking and processing information in a new way, allowing for re-contextualization of fragmented imagery.

Technology has pushed photography to evolve. Previously held traditional notions of photography as art (e.g., “single telling moment” photographs and similar subject matter) are now being confronted by a vernacular of “many telling moments”. The current state of the art world is in flux, and is greatly influenced by the faster pace set by technology; I coin our new vernacular Image Culture.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There is no end. There is no beginning. There is only the infinite passion of life.

-Federico Fellini

Taking photographs is in my blood. I had my first camera and shot my first roll of film before I had a full set of teeth. The camera was a cheap, plastic point-and-shoot. I took countless photos with it, along with many more to follow.

The smell of film developing chemicals was familiar. I never thought it abnormal to bring 30 rolls of film at a time to the processing lab. This is what my family did—the lab gave us commercial account status.

My interest in photography earned my father’s respect. He gave me his prized Minolta SLR and carefully taught me the proper way to use it. The metal camera felt heavy hanging around my neck at 8 years old, but the superior quality was worth the discomfort.

When digital photography first emerged, I didn’t understand the new terminology, and hesitated to join the trend, until I used a friend’s digital camera. It might as well have been crack. I became addicted to the idea of endless photographs and “free” processing. There were no limitations…until I completely filled the computer’s hard drive. Adapting
to newer technologies presented a challenge; however, pursuing a Master of Fine Arts served as an even greater artistic and expressive challenge.

Acceptance into the MFA program at UCF allowed me to focus energy on developing my work. Over time, my methodology evolved from wanting to “fit” the typical photography paradigm to accepting and valuing my unique process.
CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPMENT

Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.

–Sol Lewitt

Figure 1 Digital Image: Beach Orange 2005

After completing two conventional bachelor’s degrees (International Business and Environmental Studies), I was encouraged to pursue a Master of Fine Arts. I made the decision to enter the MFA Studio Art & the Computer program based on my strong interest and background in the arts—photography in particular.
During my first graduate critique, I realized my process was non-traditional. My peers had more specific formulas, concepts, and patterns that acted as a platform for their work. It was then that I learned it would be necessary to qualify my work in such a way. I struggled to articulate, in academic terms, exactly what I was doing.

Figure 2 Digital Image: *Hello Dolly 2005*
Figure 3 Digital Image: Red Suit 2005

Figure 4 Digital Image: Read Between the Lines 2005
My work was labeled as “scattered” and “lacking cohesion”. These remarks led me to discover the idea of unity through concept. Despite the commentary, I was still excited about the multitude and range of images I presented.
Because I wanted to continue working with a varied repertoire of imagery, I decided to combine powerful, yet disparate, photographs. The resulting diptychs forcefully led viewers through an ambiguous narrative.

Figure 6 Diptych in Gallery: untitled (anna running) 2006
Response to the *Looking Up* installation of diptychs was varied—it had neither succeeded nor failed. And, accordingly, my confusion regarding how to unify a concept for my work continued. A few professors encouraged me to further narrow my focus. One idea was to take photographs of very similar subject matter, hence unifying them with a concrete common element. I considered the idea and found a common element within my range of photographs—a series of portraits I had been taking of three red-headed sisters. The subsequent series demonstrated a variety of emotive content and allegorical detail, while highlighting striking features of the three sisters.
Figure 8 Digital Image: *untitled (heather)* 2006
Figure 9 Digital Image: *untitled* *(mary)* 2006
Figure 10 Digital Image: *untitled (anna)* 2006
My intent to focus had been severely chided, a majority of the faculty concurred that the work was “lazy” and “boring”. They desired a narrower and more concrete unique focus and, at this point, I was determined to attempt it.

I was fascinated with the state of suspension in the portrait I had taken of Mary in the series of the three sisters (Figure 9), so I carried on with that idea the most focused way possible. I shot a series of suspended portraits, this time using the same subject, Michelle, for all the images.
Figure 11 Digital Image: *untitled (michelle suspended)* 2006
Figure 12 Digital Image: *untitled (michelle suspended)* 2006
Figure 13 Digital Images: *untitled (michelle suspended)* 2006
While focusing on the suspension series, the sparse photographs that remained finally accomplished the traditional unified vision I had struggled towards; but, ultimately I felt something was missing in the delivery of the work. The photographs escaped their true dynamic. Again, I was confused. I knew my entire range of images could speak more powerfully and remain cohesive; it was just a question of how.

I had neglected scores of quality dynamic photographs for too long. In a fit of frustration and rebellion, I decided to drench the walls of the gallery with the deserted photographs. The result was an overwhelming display of my photographic efforts, properly reflecting the complexity of contemporary Image Culture.

While preparing this particular installation, I felt more connected to my work—emotionally and logically. I realized that even though the separate images might seem divergent, patterns inevitably emerged. The process became musical to me as the arrangement of particular photos started to reveal themselves the more I studied them. I felt like a visual composer, in the same way James Joyce wrapped words—I melded these images.
Figure 14 Installation of Digital Images: *image flood 2006*

Figure 15 Installation of Digital Images: *image flood 2006*
Most viewers found the *image flood* installation overwhelming, yet intriguing. It delivered extremes—simultaneously lacking and excessive—a contradiction that made the installation affective.

Seeing the multitude of photographs on the wall together allowed me to inspect the work on a more global scale. Meta patterns became clearer, the cyclical nature of the work, and parallels to technology. A mathematical explanation kept reoccurring to me: chaos theory. This theory explained the work’s existence as a microcosm, reflecting inter-workings of the world.
A fresh perspective of the photographs excited me about possibilities of working with a multitude of diverse image matter in an affective way, but still unsure how to go about it. One visitor to my critique, Peter Frank, left me with a comment that burned into my mind, “Focus as well, not instead”; simple, yet helpful. My confusion gradually melted and I felt enthusiastic about the direction I was heading and confident about moving onward.

Finally, I was on track to unity through concept. I began arranging my next installation, \textit{B9}. The plan was to focus, but not lose the intensity created through the ambiguity of fragmented images. Scale became an important element, as did spacing. I found that it became more important to consider the interaction of each individual photograph chosen to stand on the walls together. Again I was distilling images, but not for concrete content. I allowed myself the freedom to choose images based on intuition. The sublime nature of the process surprised me.
Figure 17 Installation of Digital Images: B9 2007
Figure 18 Installation of Digital Images: B9 2007

Figure 19 Installation of Digital Images: B9 2007
The *B9* installation was unique because it allowed me to use diverse imagery in a refined way. The result was a combustible group of free-association imagery.

One professor commented that in comparison, the previous exhibit of “plastered photographs” (*image flood*, Figures 13-15) was like a vacuum, containing so much “stuff” that it detracted and made the individual images lose power—he thought the nature of the *B9* installation was more effective.
Within the B9 installation, a few pairs of powerful combinations had inevitably formed. The intensity of the combinations garnered quite a bit of commentary. I appreciated the dynamic generated by the fused divergent images and decided to revisit the idea with another series of combinations.

Figure 21 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (water pairings)* 2007
Figure 22 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (water pairings)* 2007

Figure 23 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (water pairings)* 2007
*Untitled (water pairings)* was intense, and perhaps more direct than the *B9* installation. It was a successful convergence of diverse imagery. When deciding what to do next, I fluctuated between creating strong pairings and having a multitude of diverse imagery; eventually, I created an installation that combined the intensity of both.

![Figure 24 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (FF)* 2007](image-url)
Figure 25 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (FF)* 2007

Figure 26 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (FF)* 2007
Figure 27 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (FF)* 2007

Figure 28 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (FF)* 2007
Figure 29 Installation of Digital Images: *untitled (FF)* 2007

Figure 30 Installation of Digital Images Detail: *untitled (FF)* 2007
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Figure 32 Installation of Digital Images Detail: *untitled (FF)* 2007
Figure 33 Installation of Digital Images Detail: *untitled (FF) 2007*

Figure 34 Installation of Digital Images Detail: *untitled (FF) 2007*
The *untitled (FF)* installation accomplished the combined intensity of both the strong pairings and diverse imagery. It allowed me to include powerful combinations of imagery in an associative way, thus avoiding a forced narrative or distinct linear function; escaping the typical photography paradigm.
CHAPTER 3: THE PROCESS

By living life, I provide content and context for my art.

I capture images from my everyday life. My subject matter ranges from landscapes and details of strange and familiar objects to both staged and candid portraits. I take pictures of things that I see and want to remember, wherever I may be at the time. I usually have a point and shoot on me, unless I anticipate taking photos—in which case I will bring my bigger SLR camera along. Other times I capture things merely with my cell phone, or a vintage Polaroid camera I found. It’s situational, and I adapt accordingly. Certainly, technological advancements have allowed me to capture moments that might have otherwise slipped away. My approach is journalistic in nature, but is more complex than merely documenting. I do not objectively photograph moments in time, rather I impulsively collect images from a saturated cultural standpoint.

I have archives of film, digital files, and Polaroids. When I first began shooting digitally, I stored the files on my computer. It wasn’t long until I completely filled the hard drive and resourced to using external hard drives to satisfy my growing need for storage space. I habitually go through hundreds of photos at a time on the computer, specially noting the more intense and compelling images. By virtue of chaos theory, and/or mere reflection of contemporary Image Culture, the selected images represent a dynamic range of subject matter.
The selected images go through several rounds of edits. Their meanings are not predetermined; I do not look for a specific subject, setting, or color when arranging a group of images. What I search for is evocation—image fragments that conceptually feel unified or intensified through association. I then print small versions of the final round of images and begin piecing together framework for an installation. At this point, I determine the scale of the images in relation to each other and place divergent images into a new context.

Transferring images from digital files to print can be complicated. The manipulation technique of images in a darkroom differs vastly from that of the digital world. Because I have so many images, I choose to work only with ones that lack need for digital alteration. I am not opposed to digitally manipulating images based on principle, but more for lack of time.

The process of creating my installations allows me to re-compose sequences of imagery into rhythmic free associations; combining otherwise separate moments, emotions, and experiences to collide in a unique fabricated dimension. I design the space based on my personal reactions and emotion, building momentum through distinctive changes of scale and pairings. It is a frantic process that usually takes over, but this is how my vision has developed to see images; it reflects the Image Culture I’ve grown accustomed to. Nicolas Bourriaud correlates the activity of the artist to the DJ—remixing sounds, images, and forms, while navigating the territory of cultural history. He believes it is the navigation itself that becomes the subject of artistic practice (29-39). My resulting installations
provide a space for unforeseen connections to generate commentary, as well as a sense of composure, sourced from a saturated time.

Piecing together fragments from a saturated time allows me to echo a new habitual way of seeing things and to subvert photography as it has been used in the past. And as Roland Barthes has written in his book Camera Lucida, “Ultimately, Photography is subversive, not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks” (38).
CHAPTER 4: PHOTOGRAPHY

“What we habitually refer to as photography…no longer has a stable identity and is now subject to increasingly frequent mutations” (Crary 9).

Historically, photography is known for rendering a simulation of human vision. Since its invention, photographs have been used in many capacities: science, education, politics, media, reference, art, and so on. According to Walter Benjamin, the advent of photography was the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction (6). Photography has more than fulfilled its use as a reproductive medium, acting as a catalyst for profound changes in the way people interpret and contextualize visual meaning.

Over time, photography has evolved—its definition, purpose, and validation as an art form have perpetually come into question. In the 1900s, the art world hesitated to accept photography as a valid art form. Eventually, photographs made their way into the mainstream art world and established a comfortable niche. Traditionally, successful photography as art has gravitated toward the conveyance of a “single telling moment” or a focused body of work that revolves around visually similar subject matter (perhaps distinctive portraits, landscapes, or even abstractions) hanging at eye level and meticulously spaced for symmetry’s sake.

As Andy Grundberg discussed in Crisis of the Real, photography’s traditional role is mutating. The idea of a genius photograph that translates a “single telling moment” is
fading. Instead, Grundberg believes that photography has relinquished to television its role of eliciting memorable images with the power to rouse strong emotional responses (239). The resulting shift in technological dominance affects the contemporary use of photography and its purpose as a medium.
CHAPTER 5: TELEVISION, TECHNOLOGY, & IMAGE CULTURE

Television has contributed strongly to a new cultural condition, a shift of assumptions and attitudes. A chaotic condition in which information and theatrical effects are mixed with the totally banal, and where art, culture, politics, science, and so on are all brought together electronically outside of their usual contexts and connections, has created a vast meltdown of forms within the public consciousness. Use of compressed, intensified images and messages, with their edited forced sequences and shock value, has now become part of everyday visual vernacular, by now, an absorbed aspect of Western aesthetic tradition and mass culture. (Lovejoy 78)

Television modified the way we mentally process imagery, but is not the only contributing factor. The technological revolution born in the late 20th century amplified the already fragmented effects that an increasingly dominant television had on Western society; and added the internet and a multitude of other gadgets to the mix.

The relative ease of accessing information, coupled with an expanding gamut of people and things vying for attention, has generated fervent Image Culture. The image has become the dominate purveyor of meaning and information in Western society, where people see an overwhelming amount of visual communications in a day.

The rapid pace of mass communication lends to a faster-paced lifestyle. The multi-layered complexity of culture is attempting to fuse, despite chaos and instability. The immediacy of the current moment often takes precedence. And the onslaught of imagery nourishes a newly adapted generation with voracious appetites for visual stimulation.

Current global trends have led to greater technology, speed, and connectivity, which inevitably lead us to a more fragmented, compartmentalized world. The resulting image
storm might, at first glance, be observed as pure dissonance; however, the resulting determinacy of patterns lead me to believe a higher physical pattern is at work—chaos theory; or, order within apparent disorder. Despite seeming scattered, a new synthesis is being revealed.

The pace set by this new order is mirrored in my process. I take massive amounts of photographs and reconfigure them into a new system.
CHAPTER 6: PERCEPTION

We are now in a material environment where earlier 20th century models of spectatorship, contemplation, and experience are inadequate for understanding the conditions of cultural creation and reception…recognition of this shift and a realization that art must reconfigure itself in relation to transformed modes of cognition and experience. (Crary 6)

When I install a group of photographs, I intend to reflect the contemporary pace of image perception—fragmented, complex, abundant, and disordered. At first glance, images may seem disjointed, yet by sharing a common space, they convey a shared meaning. The resulting depth of “randomness” is more inclusive, comprehensive, interconnected, and interdependent than a representative “single telling moment”. The installations are meant to summon the sensation of thinking and processing information in a new way, allowing for re-contextualization of fragmented imagery.

The imagery undulates between engagement and retreat. Arrangement of the installations suggests rhythm based on space, scale, and juxtaposition of subject matter. Power of free associations, movement from one image to another, and the quiet space between images echoes a shift in image perception. Together, images and their arrangement are used to create a unified piece that could not be accomplished by a “single telling moment” photograph.

I invite the viewer to enter the realm of “many telling moments”, a unique reflection of fragmented Image Culture. “The contemporary body as it now exists inhabits a new kind of simulated environment in which time and space has become obsolete…the postmodern
individual is experiencing a major transformation of perception and consciousness” (Lovejoy 80). I anticipate a desire for a way of seeing art that reflects contemporary notions of perception.
CHAPTER 7: SYMBOLISM

Images inherently act as symbols that convey multiple meanings. The images in my installations individually, as well as altogether, perform referential functions that allow for multiple complex readings.

Symbols perform both direct and indirect functions—some being mediated and referenced by others. The symbolism in my work is relative to many variables, including: the viewer, image placement, image content, scale, and so on. The imagery, acting as symbol, is given permission to morph in order to reflect perception, offering only suggestions regarding its potential meaning. Today’s observer is prepared to decipher symbolism in, while garnering meaning and value from, images that seem simultaneously familiar and new.

Goodman asserted in his text *Art as Exemplification*, “A salient feature of symbolization…is that it may come and go. An object may symbolize different things at different times, and nothing at other times…Perhaps, rather than art being long and life short, both are transient” (208). The transient nature of interpreting art over time helps magnify the immediacy of how it’s being read now. Despite the relativity of symbols over time, today’s vernacular is subject to scrutiny and deconstruction.
CHAPTER 8: DECONSTRUCTING

“When deconstruction is seen not as an end in itself but as a tool, it imposes a will to examine, critique, and analyze, moving the insurgent critical thinker away from attachment to a particular rhetoric or set of critical paradigms…” (Hooks 3).

I dismantle previous notions of how photography is used and reconstruct a visual situation where the viewer is invited to form her own thoughts and associations. It is my intention to detach from the photography paradigm that dictates we must have visually similar subject matter hung at the same level in a room.

Fragmenting my image archive, saturated with varying subject matter, allows me to re-evaluate the meaning and relevance of imagery today. “The world began to be seen as an experience of continually changing sequences, juxtapositions, and layerings, as part of a decentered structure of associations” (Lovejoy 65). In my installations, visual information is re-contextualized based on personal psychological content and visual formality, introducing a complexity of meanings within a labyrinth of imagery.
CHAPTER 9: INFLUENCES

When I began the MFA program at UCF, I did not know any contemporary artists. Throughout my time here I have learned of many—some who share similarities to my own work. It has been both inspiring and validating to learn more about their work and processes. I am interested in artists working with the photographic medium, particularly Wolfgang Tillmans, Nan Goldin, and Jason Fulford.
[Wolfgang] Tillmans composes a visually unified experience on the diverse phenomena that comprise the broad spectrum of lived experience…[his] essentially optimistic vision of the interconnectedness of life eschews imposed boundaries whether between reality and abstraction, photography and other media, or between art and life. (“Wolfgang…”)

Tillmans is an artist with a vast range of subject matter stemming from his lust for life and imagery. He has various ways of presenting his work that keep meaning in a constant state of flux. Tillmans is interested in probing the complexity of a subject by constructing networks of images and meanings (Deitcher 1).

When I first saw Tillmans’ work on display at PS.1, it was a liberating experience. The show was entitled *Wolfgang Tillmans: Freedom From The Known (Spring 2006)*. Even in graduate school, the typical photography paradigm had been reinforced, and I struggled to overcome it. It was refreshing to see his work on display in a non-traditional and non-linear way. I enjoyed his work and felt connected; it felt familiar to my own process and techniques.

The latest show I saw of his, *Atair (Fall 2007)*, at Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea, incorporated photography, video, and sculpture. It demonstrated ambivalence of marriage to one medium, one technique. Overall, his purpose seems to have more political drive and consists of a continuous search. Visually, we share similarities, but I believe the purposes of our searches differ.
Nan Goldin

Nan Goldin photographs the world as she sees it, the way things are. She has intense emotional connections to her subject matter because most of them are friends she considers part of a larger “family”. She embraces the reality of her life and sets forth to represent it, not as a statistic, but as visual communication.

Many people have described Goldin merely as a documentary photographer capturing a niche generational milieu. She has stated otherwise; her work stems from an emotional drive. “I am desperately trying to survive.” she continues, “The pictures came from deep emotional need and connection” (“Nan…” 2).

Goldin’s photographs strike a chord with her viewers. There are intense emotional connections in the imagery she chooses to reveal to us. The imagery is not static, it is constantly changing, and its arrangement is in a state of flux. In this way, I believe, it effectively reflects her reality. “Perhaps such personal images are never as private or individual as they seem once we recognize the very public and collective nature of our notions of self, family, childhood, relationships, and even place and time” (Bussard 17).

Professor David Haxton has related me to Nan Goldin. Although the subject matter of my work does not represent a similar world, it does represent my world, as I see it. And like Goldin, I have a strong emotional connection to my world.
I first saw Goldin’s work at her 2006 exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery entitled *Nan Goldin: Chasing a Ghost*. Immediately, I felt an intense connection to her images. I saw the individual photographs and interpreted them separately, and then again as a group when I read them all together. In another room, her film flashed images, not allowing us to retrieve them again for further reference, but only to recall in our own minds what we briefly saw. I was strongly affected by the powerful emotions generated by her work.

When we left the gallery, I burst into tears as I walked by Goldin. I wanted to talk to her, to tell her what a connection I felt to her work, but all I could do was cry. The intensity of her work has kept me craving more; her passion, her openness, her honesty.

While I do not display identical emotional elements or subject matter as Goldin, I do share the sense of reflecting the world as I see it in a non-linear way. Like Goldin, I photograph complex relationships.
Jason Fulford

I came upon Jason Fulford’s work perchance in the library. I was perusing the shelves in the photography section and saw a peculiar title that caught my attention, “Raising Frogs for $$$”. I liked the title, so I grabbed the book. Serendipitously, it matched my sense of image rhetoric and I felt fond of it immediately.

Although the book is practically void of text, I feel it speaks volumes. The pairings and placement of imagery become the focus, and are important to understanding these otherwise mysterious voyages through space and time.

He used the body of the book to stratify the imagery, relying on the pages to connote space, and scaling the images appropriately. I was engaged by the idea that text was unnecessary and the images were diverse in subject.

I find it fitting that a random find in the library echoes the notion of my work. While Fulford and I share similar image rhetoric, I create a larger range of intricate imagery with dissimilar intensity.
 CHAPTER 10: REFLECTION

Any image from everyday life will thus become part of a vague and complicated system that the whole world is continually entering and leaving...there are no more simple images...The whole world is too much for an image. You need several of them, a chain of images...No longer a single image, but, rather, multiple images, images dissolved together and then disconnected...art is not the reflection of reality, it is the reality of that reflection. –Jean-Luc Godard (qtd. in Lovejoy 93)

Imitating life, my installations lack a singular meaning. I work in an unstable medium that’s definition has decayed during my time. The unstable nature of the medium is amplified by the saturation of Image Culture. I have embraced these changes and now use a new incarnation of the medium to represent that change.

The world of art is not the only creative endeavor in constant flux. The art world orbits a similar realm as the fashion world, sharing an amorphous sense of disordered order. Barthes vividly describes the sister world that also functions from ambiguity as: “simultaneously unpredictable and systematic, regular and unknown, aleatory and structured, it fantastically conjoins the intelligible without which man could not live, and the unpredictability attached to the myth of life” (Barthes, Fashion 300). The array of symbols and meanings connoted in my work exist to give significance to everyday experience and attempt to explain the paradox of the lives we live…the mythical experience, its inherent contradictions, and infinite passion.
REFERENCES


