Summary

Photocollage, Fun and Flirtations in Victorian Drawing-Room Albums

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In a striking photomontage from the 1860s, (Lady Filmer in Her Drawing Room; now in the Paul F. Walter Collection, New York) Lady Filmer presents herself as a collector of photographs, standing by her drawing room table, close to her albums, pot of glue and paper knife. Making albums is presented here in the context of other feminine accomplishments: reading and writing, flower arranging, and embroidering fire screens. Such decorative album-making has not been appreciated by histories of photography, which have tended to see it as a quaint, purpose-less activity, on which women wasted their time and talents for want of better outlets. Yet this seems an inadequate account of the visual energy of Lady Filmer’s photocollages. As I argued in my book, being a Victorian woman involved a lot more ‘Fun and Flirtations’ (the title of a booklet on drawing room games from the 1860’s), than is commonly acknowledged in women’s histories. Women’s albums were an important aspect of the visual culture of the time, crucial sites in the elaboration and codification of the meaning of photography, as a new, modern visual medium.

The 1860s were also the heyday of the carte-de-visite as the preferred format for studio portraits. They sparked a craze for collecting photograph albums, which soon became a fashionable drawing room accessory. Reading these as ‘family albums’ has obscured how cartes circulated. The sale of prints to the general public became the most lucrative aspect of producing cartes de visite, and by the 1860s it was possible to purchase photographs of a vast array of people from the worlds of politics, entertainment, the arts, and upper-class society. In the album, these could be mixed with those of family and friends. Owning a carte of a famous person could imply knowing them well enough to exchange photographs, a gesture associated with a degree of intimacy; or only knowing where to buy it. Collectors could use this ambiguity to play up their social sphere, and status games were part of the ‘delicious moments’ (as described by a commentator in 1862) engendered by the photo album. Conversely, one of the pleasures of being photographed as a carte-de-visite was participating in social games that blurred distinctions between private persons and public characters.

Drawing rooms – where the albums themselves would have been on display – are a recurring motif in the mixed-media albums made in the 1860s by women of the English upper-classes. The drawing room was the most feminine, but also the most public room in a house. Its style and arrangement showcased the hostess’ accomplishments at a time when a woman’s touch discriminated the tasteful interior from one that was merely expensive and showy. The room and its contents were going to be seen beyond the circle of family and friends, by a range of visitors keen to assess the status achieved by the woman of the house through her management of the family’s cultural and social capital, which was an indication of the value of frequenting her drawing room in terms of networking.

Lady Filmer’s album pages are one of the most visually exciting example of the pleasures and ambiguities of collecting photographs in the 1860s. Her photocollages are considered in the

context of her flirtation with the Prince of Wales, and their exchanges of photographs and letters. Dedicated to fashionable forms of display and flirtatious sociability, Lady Filmer’s album uses collage and watercolour to celebrate the pleasures available to upper-class women, yet also to destabilise the semantic work allocated to albums by dominant culture. Cutting out and pasting paper-images was not only one of the feminine accomplishments signalling status and gentility, but could also produce ambiguous results, as collage at once cuts and repairs, fragments and makes whole again, never seamlessly. In her album pages, cutting photographs to recontextualise them in hand-made arrangements seems to modernise and celebrate upper-class feminine culture as capable of manipulating images to more discerning, amusing and semiotically open ends, than art or commerce would be able to do.

More than this, Lady Filmer’s visual strategies flirted with photography and with the meaning of exchanging photographic portraits. Her photo collages are compelling because they demonstrate that flirting was a risky but enjoyable pastime for upper-class women, which did not necessarily lead to loss of respectability. They also emphasise and make visible the flirtatious nature of all exchanges of photographic portraits. As Georg Simmel argued in 1909, flirting with meaning is a strategy associated with femininity and modernity; women have been masters of flirtation because they have been historically denied the language to ‘mean’ – meaning being determined by men – so that flirting is an empowering position for them to take, even if only at the level of fantasy and play, by refusing to take meaning seriously.

In Lady Filmer’s album, the photographic ambiguity between presence and absence is played out for the pleasurable and empowering feminine strategy of refusing to deal with meaning seriously, in favour of the delights of flirting. In the context of Simmel’s work flirting is one of the cultural forms that embody characteristic aspects of modernity by becoming abstracted. Separated from any practical purpose, they are no longer a means to an end, but are valued in their own right. As art becomes ‘for art’s sake’, so does flirtation. No longer subordinated to sexual seduction or marriage, flirting emerges as a typically modern form of sociability. Like the flaneur described by Baudelaire, the flirt is purposefully aimless, adopting a strategy that embraces the fleeting and provisional nature of modern life.

Lady Filmer’s visual strategies flirt with photography and portraits, in ways that self-consciously reveal, and revel in, their inherent ambiguities, with effects that already seem to have the subversive potential later made explicit by twentieth-century artists using photo-collage. Rather than being quaint and old fashioned, these ‘Society’ (rather than ‘Family’) albums used collage and mixed media as a self-consciously modern representation strategy. Twentieth-century artists made manifest in the art gallery a potential that was already there, at home with Lady Filmer.

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