

Digital Snapshot Dynamics

Review the slide show once again. Between image 397 and 399 there's one that you didn't see; but wait, here goes again from the beginning. Look at the Polar bear, look at Ana standing next to the giraffe. And when was that? That was the same day we went to the Spanish restaurant. Images tour the computer monitor, context and meaning are drowned in a sea of impressions, landscapes, smiling faces and the occasional spontaneous gesture.

During the last few years, digital cameras have been deployed to the four corners of the world. As their capabilities for storing image data have increased, their function as witnesses and storytellers of exceptional moments has been dramatically transformed, Jeff no longer makes a one-time special appearance in front of his birthday cake; now he opens the door to each of his guests, walks around the apartment, sits down, hands a dish, a fork, a glass, poses with his dog and offers a piece of cake to the camera.

Social events have been transformed by the appearance of these digital tools for image-making. As soon as a large-enough group of people have assembled for a festive event, the social gathering turns into an activity with the dynamics of a press conference. Cameras, flashes, people posing, smiling. Cameras register, modify and become part of the event. Communication melts in the experience. When any circumstance that could be considered out of the ordinary takes place, everyone must grab a piece. We all feel the urge to get our own snapshot, our own trophy of "reality". The amount of images collected becomes disproportionate, and the time required for seeing each series of images recorded during the event forcefully turns into an event in itself.

I want to concentrate further on the irruption of cameras in social events and their function as interfaces. In these social gatherings, those embarking on the use of cameras withdraw from participating in conversations for a given time (and may occasionally disrupt them). The camera is used as a tool, but also as a trigger for an occupation, an excuse for performance and sometimes for drawing attention. In extreme cases it may also function as a shield, a protection for those shying away from communication. Safety can be found in a device that permits looking from but not looking to, that provokes responses but does not elicit significant communication with others. It allows for "being together" without building real bridges, a way of experiencing the moment through an object with defensive properties, at a reasonable distance, disengaged and in the role of the documenter/spectator.

So what is left of the social event when a significant number of people adopt the role of photographer/spectator? What is the objective of accumulating such an enormous (humanly unprocessable) amount of visual material? How much time will we dedicate to reliving events through these representations? How will the experience of socializing and documenting the event evolve as still cameras adopt even more features from film cameras? If we look for answers in our recent past, experience teaches us that such novelties wear away quickly and end up adopting a more functional role (and in this respect, it must be said, digital cameras excel in many activities). But they may very well, of course, be replaced by the next one in line.

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