**Coexistent Perspectives**

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**How does the values the traditional family album represents compare to the contemporary gallery space. Furthermore how does the role of the woman function within these spaces?**

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## Introduction

Within the ever-changing contemporary condition, the role of photography is shifting continuously as the technology continuously changes and evolves as the digital world grows.. Introducing the family album as an idea of a personal family archive is a somewhat simple viewing of the photography and the way it is used. The nuances within the concept of the family album echo's ideas within social factors and is a useful indicator on the role that various groups play within society. Pierre Bourdieu writes that 'The family album expresses the essence of social memory' (Bourdieu, 1990), which demonstrates how the family album plays a useful role when considering social structures and society. When considering the patriarchy and how this affects the function of the family album from a feminist perspective, we are also able to draw parallels with the gallery space. In the contemporary art world there is most certainly a sense of change however, certain societal ideas still seem to transcend this progress and spill out in the representation of female artists. The question I pose to ask and investigate throughout this essay can be broken down into smaller subsections. The first question being is there a parallel to draw between the idea of a traditional family album and a contemporary gallery space? Both seek to represent a cross-section of the contemporary condition whether intentionally or inadvertently. The second question I am interested in deconstructing is evaluating the role of the woman within both of these institutions? Is there

a specific role that society expected of the woman which still persists even amongst changing times and does the concept of the family album even exist in its traditional format anymore? Domestic spaces have long been seen as the domain of the woman an idea expressed through multiple pieces of literature and research and in juxtaposition the gallery has been dominated as a male space. In a post-pandemic world we have learnt the true fragility of the structures within society domestic and gallery spaces have not escaped this fact. In an ever changing culture there is certainly plenty of opportunity to cultivate further change and embrace this fragility. There is still much to do, 'we need to be aware not only of our society's achievements in equality but also of the difficulties and inequalities we are still faced with' (Gørrill, 2020). An investigation into the family album compared to the gallery space provides an opportunity to deconstruct some of the societal factors and theories such as feminism, time and the archive which affect the art canon. Photography already plays an extremely important role within the reshaping of the art world and perhaps we have employed many of the techniques used now throughout the fabric or domestic photography and archiving without even having knowledge of it. Within the fast pace of a digital world the seemingly simple act of creating a digesting family album can perhaps be much more a guiding force for how we are able to understand social issues and potentially how we are able to make progress. This is what I am going to be deconstructing throughout this essay by

looking at how the work of different practitioners has been influenced by the duality of the this very domestic idea and the gallery space.

## The Family Album

'A feminist intervention would be necessary to disarm the masculine power that maintains patriarchal governance structures' (Gardner-Huggett, 2012). This quote is interesting when considering both the family album and the gallery space as they could both be considered to be patriarchal structures. I am first going to focus on deconstructing the idea of the traditional family album and what role women take within this. In recent years the traditional idea of a family album is seeing a decline as we continue to travel through a digital age. The ritual of curating and a sharing an album filled with recollections of time gone by is no longer so sacred with use of social media and every improving smart phones. It has become the norm that perhaps most people create and curate their own personal family albums which therefore expands the idea that the album can represent social factors and becomes extremely personal to each individual's experience. Traditionally the role of the woman within the domestic space was frozen within family photographs therefore the woman was the mother or the object of desire throughout the traditional Western idea of the album.

> It was mostly men taking pictures of their partners. It was them who had the machine around their neck. For instance, in [the album labeled "Helene"], the man is taking close ups of her excessively. Even his girlfriend's name is written in large lettering. You can tell he considers her an adorable, desired object. (Kessels, 2013)

The concept that men were the creators of the family albums clearly demonstrates the place that society deemed women to have. They were to be looked at and to be captured both metaphorically and literally by the men in their lives. The concept of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975) can be seen working in practise throughout the concept of the production of the photographs for the family album. The women are there to be captured acting perfectly within their given roles and the man is able to take whatever he likes within this dynamic. From this stance the family album can be heavily criticised by the feminist movement for the imbalance of power demonstrated. However, if we look a little deeper at the concept, we can begin to see there is a duality to the family album and that women play a very important role within them in regards to the curation of the album. The photos themselves may be construction with a patriarchal narrative but through the album we see hints of the matriarchy unveiled. The family album has been described as 'as a means by which women negotiate subject positions within specific sociocultural contexts' (Pitt, 2015) and the negotiation can be seen to represent the act of curation. Different narrative can be created depending on what images are included within the album and this make the curation of the album arguably more significant than the production of images.

The importance of the gallery within this conversation regarding seemingly irrelevant or outdated methods of photography is important for bringing this debate further into the contemporary context. There are many artists and photographers whose work can be seen to be directly impacted by many of the societal and patriarchal ideas introduced through the family album. In a time where great progress has been made in terms of inclusion and equality when considering the gallery we are still able to see many of the ideas of the family album at play. Women are seemingly only included within the gallery space if it suits the needs of the patriarchal consumerist models which follows in many ways the traditional values of domestic photography. Many of the statistics support the idea that there is still a long way to go in terms of the art world leaving behind the out-dated values born from the patriarchy.

> 'Three of the most-visited museums in the world, the British Museum (est. 1753), the Louvre (est. 1793), and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (est. 1870) have never had female directors.'
>
> 'In the U.K., 64% of undergraduates and 65% of postgraduates in creative arts and design are women, but 68% of the artists represented at top London commercial galleries are men.'
>
> (NMWA, 2023)

These two statistics are just a small sample of many which demonstrate the inequalities within the representation and how this seems all too familiar when regarding the ideas of

domestic photography previously mentioned. The evidence supports what female artists are already saying, feeling and creating work in response to. It is also important to recognise the fact that galleries are also relatively fragile places similarly to the concept of the family album. During the Covid 19 Pandemic we saw physical gallery spaces temporarily loose all of their power, this demonstrated how galleries had largely ignored the digital space and showed they had an extreme reliance on physical space. This apparent oversight allowed other voices to carve out new, contemporary and digital spaces in order to advocate for their work to be seen and voices to be heard. The stability of the gallery and the family album are both reliant on the desire to create and consume media which represents the current social climate.

The parallel drawn between the gallery and the album is that they are both spaces for people to exhibit. The family album in whatever form it takes whether it is an old physical album or a gallery on social media, allows space for the personal display of images which reflects their position within life. The gallery provides space for the far more public exhibiting of work and female artists are utilising both of these methodologies to produce work which speaks out against the traditional art canon and stale art world. A further investigation into different artists and their work will be undertaken throughout the next section of this essay.

## The Artists

The ideas discussed so far throughout this essay do not just exist theoretically, there are a number of artists and photographers whose work is influenced by the concept of the family album. The first artist whose work I am going to be deconstructing is Sally Mann and in particular her project 'Immediate Family'. This project received extremely mixed reviews with many being conflicted between the beautiful and personal nature of the images and the potentially exploitative viewing of them. However, regardless of how the images can be perceived they are undeniably influenced by the concept of a family album except instead of amateur shots they are beautifully finished, high quality prints. They are also produced in a methodical way by utilising mainly large format analogue cameras which again displays the finesse of Mann. Regardless of the aesthetics the content of the photographs very much echo's the rawness and intimacy of the images found within a personal family album even if this was also the reason for the controversy.

Figure 1 is a photograph from the series that I was particularly drawn to as it captures many of the ideas discussed this far.

*Figure 1 Sally Mann Gorjus 1989 Immediate Family*

Gorjus aims to encapsulate ideas of family life by capturing this at first seemingly candid shot. The image depicts Mann's two daughters playing and dressing up using make-up and other items in the back garden of their home. As mentioned this image could be seen as a traditional family album snap-shot on first reading however, when deconstructing the image further we are able to see themes of feminism and anti-patriarchal ideas. Mann's images are created in order to create a magical representation of her family that seem to show the sides of life which are often left out of the albums as they are laced with other agendas which are dressed in beautiful eery images. *(Women's Art Magazine, 1990-1996)*. The perfect composition of the image is the first thing to notice the two young girls standing in the

natural lighting seem to be glowing and the placement of the 'gorjus' number plate on the vehicle on the left this all creates a narrative of perfection which the artist hopes to create within the wider theme of childhood and gender role play. The shadows within the image also create a point of interest as they are cast over the beauty items whether this is intentional or not it comments of the beauty industry and the unrealistic pressures placed on women from a very young age. The depiction of the two young children within the image brings the focus to the idea that the patriarchy is imposed on women from the moment they are born and creates even more of a shock impact with the image. Although *Immediate Family* is not the most contemporary body of work to look at in relation to the family album and gallery space it is still a key work to reference as it shows how female artists are using and sub-verting traditional patriarchal concepts in order to advocate for women within art. As a single mother Mann has produced work that speaks of her life experience by disguising it as beautiful work which is more likely to reach the 'punctum' *(Barthes, 1993)* of the audience particularly if viewed in a gallery space. The beauty of the work draws viewers to the work in an accessible way however, the deeper narratives of her work such as representation, feminism and gender as there to seep into the sub conscience and hopefully leave the viewer with questions to take away.

It is important acknowledge that there are many artists and more specifically many female contemporary artists who are still creating work based off of the idea of a family album. Perhaps the hidden power women gained from the secret work done within the family album has left a piece of itself behind and therefore we continue to feel drawn to these somewhat magical items. The contemporary photographer Rie Yamanda comments very on the family album very cleverly through her photographic project *Famile Werden*. The project consists of the images where the photographer has recreated images taken from a number of separate family albums. The photographer set out to gather various family albums by asking for donations and searching through charity shops.  These images are not traditional reconstructions as the Yamanda takes on the role of the subject as well as the photographer. Within the contemporary recreations Yamanda plays the role of the subjects herself by using costume to fully convey each character. The images are shot with a self-timer and then edited to successfully recreate the family portraits.

*Figure 2 Rie Yamanda Famille Werden 2017*

Figure 2 is one of the images that demonstrates how the photographer is using her power as a female photographer to deconstruct the narrative found within the family photo and how she has a power with being able to highlight these issues within a gallery context. The most striking aspect of the photos if often how Yamanda portrays the male figures within the images by taking on the position of power. As the artist is the subject within the images it changes the power dynamics of the family structure and it is a. very clever artistic

intervention to add a new facet to this conversation. Yamanda is able to embody the spirit of the families by creating the work and has felt that she has created connections to the families who's images are being re-performed as if they are her own family. This is also an interesting project to consider as it also subverts the narrative about who is in control within these families as in this instance the woman has taken further control over what images are shown publicly. (Horne, 2019)

The artist was quoted in an interview discussing the photographic project saying:

> 'By perceiving the subjects' homes and private spaces as small 'containers', I could read into the their personal stories, solitude and, at times, imaginary worlds' (Yamanda, 2017)

The choice of words used within this section particularly interested me as there are many connections to be made with many of the themes being discussed throughout this essay. The idea of peoples families and lives being considered as 'containers' has connotations of being trapped perhaps within certain social ideologies. This links with ideas of women being stuck within a patriarchal society and how family life can sometimes perpetrate these narratives and also highlights how art can be used to give a voice to change.

## **The Gallery**

When considering the gallery space within the context of the family album and then applying the work of the artists who have produced projects based off the core value of the family album it becomes a very interesting and critical location. Within feminist theories there is an a concept regarding locations which deconstructs how in our current society private spaces are considered to be more feminine and public spaces are more masculine (Rosewarne, 2005). This is particularly interesting if we consider the family album to be the private space and the gallery is the public space and particularly how the role of the woman functions within these spaces. In addition to the many artists producing projects in relation to these themes there is also work happening within galleries and curations which is the final link in my essay.

A particularly well put together exhibition entitled *Room* which was exhibited in the Sadie Coles gallery in London in 2020 is the particular case I will be exploring within this section of this essay. This exhibition consisted of female only artists, photographers and creatives, with a mixture between contemporary and archival work. It aimed to look at themes of domestic spaces and exploring social constructs and particularly women's position within these.

Although this exhibition does not directly deconstruct the family album it touches on all of underlying ideas and concepts behind the discussion surrounding the family album.

*Figure 3 An all-female exhibition at London gallery Sadie Coles explores domestic and social constructs 2022*

'Oppressive, chamber-like structures that ruminate on the idea of escape dominate the gallery on Kingly Street' (Jansen, 2022). This is how the exhibition is described in a text written about the collaborative project , the idea of escape is a key aspect of this exhibition. 'Escape' is a very emotive word to describe this work with however, it is also the most perfect word to describe this exhibition and also harks back to the earlier mention of the word 'containers'. Throughout the discussions of these themes the same ideas appear multiple times hence creating the suggestion that women are still stuck in the family album and the power dynamics within the family and society. The exhibition highlights how the home is

perhaps considered the woman's 'natural containers'. The struggle even now is still to escape these social structures and containers that have been established for years. Although the work in this show is not photography exclusive it is still extremely powerful within this conversation as the family album itself is not simply a collection of photographs but is a complex, ideology of society. The mixture of sculpture work, fine art pieces and photographs all work together in a beautiful yet slightly disturbing way to create a powerful piece which disrupts the flow of the traditional gallery space. Exhibitions like this are key to reimaging the art canon as they help disrupt the narrative that women do not belong in the gallery space and that they do not have anything to add to the conversation. Using curation as a tool to bring further representation to female artists is a reclamation of the role imposed on women through traditional societal values and therefore the family album.

It is also important to consider how although these gallery interventions are very positive signs of progress and change, in ever-changing and past paced world we now live in they hold a certain fragility. Through the COVID 19 pandemic we saw we an unpresented event where we saw all of the art galleries ,as well as pretty much every other sector, was closed. The pandemic disrupted the normalities of every day and the art world didn't escape this fact and in fact revealed the fragility of the gallery space as artists moved to working an online space where possible. This is an important point to address when investigating the

connections between the gallery and the family album. The idea of a traditional family album has become destabilized as we hurdle rapidly further into the online domain. 'In the age of Instagram and Facebook, the physical family album is at risk of becoming obsolete' (Wright, 2017), as it is so accessible for people to share images with others online using the various social media platforms available at their finger tips the magic of the family album seems to be dissolving into the meta. Although the gallery spaces are now open again and continue to function in a way not dissimilar form the pre-pandemic way the online spaces to have been created are now being utilised by those artists who are under-represented within the traditional gallery spaces to showcase their work and innovations.

The use of the online space could provide a space for underrepresented artists to exist in a way that transcends the binary rules surrounding gender and the different spaces that are effected by patriarchal ideologies such as the gallery and family album. Contemporary female artists who have perhaps deconstructed the idea of different spaces have taken to the online space as an act of protest in many way. The 'self-presentation of feminist artists on TikTok' (Sidorova, 2022) has disrupted the traditional ways of working displayed as it is no longer contained within the physical realm and perhaps this also means it is able to escape the confines of a patriarchal society. Although this does not take away from the fact that we haven't actually come very far from the ideas of the family album and that women are

severely underrepresented in galleries it Is refreshing to see the reclamation of a space where artists are able to capitalise on their own presence. Progress has been made yet there is still much to do and using areas that are unfamiliar or non-traditional to create a new standard within the art community. The fragility of the gallery and the family album have allowed for a space to be create in which new creative ideas can be capitalised on and distributed further.

## Conclusion

In conclusion of this piece of writing it is clear to see how all of the various ideas and concepts mentioned within this essay are intertwined. The idea of exploring the family album, as well as the gallery space for a feminist perspective provides an interesting reading of the current social climate. This has essay has deconstructed the concepts behind the family album and has demonstrated how female artists are utilising the techniques and language that has evolved from the family album and its societal position. Although it is quite a wide area of research to focus on it is undeniable how interconnected all of these ideologies are. It is extremely refreshing to see that there are a number of artists within the contemporary condition that are making feminist work in order to visually deconstruct the ideas surround the patriarchy. The conclusion that I have drawn from this investigation in to

the topic is that the role handed to women in both contexts mentioned is one of silence and support. Within history and particularly within the traditional family album women have been seen as objects to be captured by the camera and shown off. It has been interesting to consider the hidden role of power that women have claimed by being the ones to curate the albums which in turn controls the narrative that will be seeing as they have selected the photos to make the stories. Within the gallery women have also been seen as objects as highlighted many times by the artistic collective Guerilla Girls, if women are included in the gallery dynamic it is usually work which has captured a woman rather than a female artist being include. Progress is happening and statistics are starting to improve however, it is also a positive sign to see so many contemporary creatives producing work in response to these different spaces. The initial questioned asked was how the gallery space compares to the family album and more specifically how thev societal concepts of feminism and gender are represented. Through this writing I aimed to demonstrate how the conceptual space of the family album and the gallery are not too dissimilar from other and therefore in regards to the role of the woman it functions in very similar ways. It is time that women are able to break out of the family album and into the gallery spaces whether this is through online interventions or continuous disruptive work that will help to fully deconstruct the old-

fashioned art values once and for all. It is positive to see so many female creatives inspired by these ideas and it is imperative that these kind of changes continue to happen.

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