

Is Food Scenery? Generative Situations in Urban Networked Photography

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In surveying the images of cities presented on the public image-sharing website Flickr.com™, certain subjects appear with surprising frequency, inspiring reflection and research questions. For example, anecdotal observations by one of the authors seem to indicate that food, from items on display in outdoor markets to meals about to be eaten in restaurants, is a popular theme with Flickr users. Why should this be? This and other questions prompted us to review accounts of urban photography practices that we have collected in the course of our and our colleagues' [1, 2] ongoing empirical study of personal photography including Flickr. This study consists of 11 interviews with Flickr users, mostly undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of programs on the UC Berkeley campus. All of our interview subjects live in the San Francisco Bay Area, many in urban centers such as Berkeley and San Francisco. In some cases, the city they photographed was home; in others, it was a travel destination or a waypoint en route to someplace else.

In this paper we will discuss three aspects of the urban journeys and experiences represented by our respondents on Flickr: some of the motivations specific to picture-taking in an urban environment; how narratives are composed from these pictures through sequencing and annotation; and how viewers may interpret these urban stories.

"Random Things Around the City": Urban Situations That Inspire Photography

Previous studies of amateur photography have found major triggers and motivations include archiving "key moments" [3] (the family assembled together, the candles blown out, or the mountaintop viewpoint reached) or, in a travel context, subjects that represent a location or culture, or traveling companions. In addition to these triggers, our interviewees often described taking pictures at odd and unanticipated moments; moments in which they were at rest, at play, in transit, or waiting for things to happen.

A number of our interviewees reflected on these transitional and playful picture-taking practices while showing their travel photos. On a recent trip to Atlanta, one interviewee recalled, "I ... found weird things to take photos of and uploaded them to Flickr from the airport." The airport venue presents an interesting intersection of spaces: a constrained place and time (there is nowhere else to go and nothing else to do) that generally excludes the traditional "key moments." Another interviewer described snapping a photo of stacked canned drinks in a supermarket because she reportedly "found it very amusing." Such reports may suggest people take photographs because of the subject's novelty.

Another common theme among our interviewees is the importance of spontaneous encounters and interactions within complex urban environments. One interviewee living in Berkeley reported being inspired by the surprising occurrence of her home city's name on a street sign in Boston, saying, "We just saw this street called Berkeley and so we had to take a picture of it." The subject matter of these photos extends to inanimate objects such as food. The photos range in subject from the reported "disgusting" protein fries purchased at an In 'n' Out (a Bay Area fast food restaurant chain) to the cheesecake eaten on a visit to New York City. One interviewee photographed a traditional Indian food, knish, on a trip to India,

explaining simply, "I thought it was great." Someone else addressed this process when noting her common practice of taking photos of "random things around the city."

Some interview subjects found that prolonged attention to inanimate objects allowed them to find novel perspectives. For example, an interviewee who both sketches and photographs explained that buildings make low-risk subjects for images because "They're big, they don't move. You can kind of sit there, park yourself in front of a large building and no one thinks you're strange." Compared to things, unusual looking people seem to attract similar interest as potential photographic subjects, but with attendant ethical dilemmas that may dissuade the photographer or change the way the photo is taken. The same interviewee who liked buildings showed us some pictures she shot of a stranger while riding Bay Area Rapid Transit: "And this is a teenage girl – you'll note that I didn't take a photo of her face." In her attempt to capture the unusual on camera, she found that Flickr raised inhibitions that she didn't always have about photographing people surreptitiously. For this reason, she noted that she never shows strangers' faces in the photographs she uploads to Flickr.

Making Urban Narratives from Photographs: Sequencing, Annotation and Tagging

As we've discussed, many people described taking pictures during relatively passive moments or transitional moments, and being attracted to surprising or novel subjects. This prompted us to ask how these choices affect the way the resulting photographs are used in self-presentation by the photographer. Do these esoteric images support different kinds of personal narratives than the "key moments" rendered in traditional snapshot photography?

We found that while the subjects of our interviewees' urban photos might seem mundane in isolation, in the context of other pictures in a narrative they can become significant. The

photographer may take the picture without any notion of story or narration, but a story can nonetheless be constructed after the fact on Flickr, by adding tags, annotations, or links to one's own photos or those of others. Our interviewees employed a range of rules and methods for situating individual photos within narratives. For one photographer, a picture was uploaded to Flickr only if it made up "part of a story." Another person told the story of her trip with a friend to the Berkeley Marina through photographs of their journey from beginning to end. She relied on the sequence of photos uploaded to tell an implicit story about the shared urban experience.

Through the Kaleidoscope: Viewing the City on Flickr

Though our interviews focused on Flickr use from the photographer's point of view, a discussion of "imaging the city" through this system must also consider the experience of the viewer. If we accept that for some users, Flickr is a repository of that which is novel and surprising in the city, it follows that the collective representation of a city will have little consistency. Indeed, to search the Flickr collection on a city's name is to discover that workers and wanderers, tourists and residents find very different sights to be worthy of capture. As a result, Flickr offered kaleidoscopic views of cities in flux. On a recent day, for example, images tagged "San Francisco" included views of "a bad hamburger," a fire engine and a Christmas tree as well as the Pacific coast, a cable car and one Golden Gate Bridge tower appearing to sprout from the head of an unsuspecting traveler.

Summary and Implications

In all of these practices, we observe that the story of place becomes the highly visual and idiosyncratic story of what the photographer noticed: the city as seen from the positions he or she takes, through his or her lens. Our interviewees often took photos upon noticing something they found unusual or absurd, or in candid or playful moments. They often

attributed their choice of photographic subject matter to its ability to spark a spontaneous reaction or association. After uploading these somewhat accidental collections to Flickr, our interviewees used annotation and the aggregation and proximity of photographs to shape narratives and form meaning. Flickr appeared to provide a means of editing and curating these collections of digitally recorded interactions with one's urban environment.

These observations suggest a shift in these users' judgments about what constitutes an appropriate moment for photography, and what types of photos are necessary to compose a record of experience worthy of sharing or saving. They also point to the increasing importance of Flickr in sequencing digital photography, as well as the ability to annotate both individual images and groups of images across photographers. On a "macro" level, the prevalence of a photographic style that privileges idiosyncratic impressions of the city over consensually authentic landmarks seems likely to change the public perception of urban environments. Specifically, it may lead to less iconic, more kaleidoscopic visual identities for cities, both among Flickr users and in the media at large.

References

- [1] http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/~vanhouse/photo_project/index.php
- [2] Van House, N. A., Davis, M., Ames, M., Finn, M., and Viswanathan, V. The Uses of Personal Networked Digital Imaging: An Empirical Study of Cameraphone Photos and Sharing, in CHI '05 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2005), ACM Press, 1853-1856.
- [3] Chalfen, R. *Snapshot Versions of Life*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987.