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## THE WAY SHE LOOKED THE DAY SHE DIED: VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY, MEMORY, & DEATH

When considering the topic of photography and death, we see a complex and varied relationship between the medium and time. We might think of the canonical (but possibly staged) photograph by Robert Capa of the Spanish Civil War soldier at the instant of being shot, of the slice of time after the bullet hits him but before he falls down; a split second caught by the camera and forever fixed.<sup>1</sup> Here we see photographic time as conceived by Museum of Modern Art curator, John Szarkowski, in his influential 1966 publication, *The Photographer's Eye*, in which he wrote of the photographer's fascination with "immobilizing thin slices of time" and of the "isolation of a single segment of time."<sup>2</sup> There is also, of course, the quiet, placid, immobilized time—the still-life time—that we see in post-mortem photographs. Or we can

think of death and time as postulated by Roland Barthes in his oft-quoted passage from *Camera Lucida*, which posits that in every photograph of the living, we see the future death of the individual. He writes, “whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”<sup>3</sup> For Barthes, all photographs carry the death of the sitter into the present; if photography were a verb tense, it would be the future anterior, the tense of that has been.

In this paper, I will focus specifically on the vernacular photographic practice of memorial photography, and the complex network of time, death, and memory that this particular genre embodies. Memorial photography can be defined as a photograph taken when the sitter was still alive, which has been ‘framed’ or placed into a new context after the death in such a fashion as to indicate that the sitter is now deceased. I distinguish this from post-mortem or mortuary photography, photographs taken of the sitter after death, although certainly this genre can serve a memorializing function of well. Specifically, I will highlight a unique **private memorial album** held at the University of Colorado (CU) Boulder Libraries, while placing it in the context of other examples of memorial photography. While the small body of literature on single memorial images is growing, less attention has been paid to the memorial album, specifically the narrative aspects and particular relation to time of these multi-image constructions.

Compiled circa 1913, the album in question traces the life of Philadelphia resident, Carol Warren Benson Philler, who died at the age of twenty-five from toxemia of pregnancy. What distinguishes this album is an inscription written in the mother’s hand, scrawled onto the cover of a studio portrait at the very end of the album which reads, “This picture of Carol taken Christmas 1907 was wonderfully like her a day or two before she died—in fact the day she died” (Fig. 3.1). This final combination of image and text signifies the enactment of a private mourning ritual and narrative, in which photography serves to fix forever the de-

ceased in an image of youthful innocence and beauty.

**The Benson Album** opens with an inscription giving Carol’s birth and death dates, and then proceeds with an arrangement of photographs charting the life of the deceased. It opens with a largely chronological sequence of photographs, commencing with studio portraits of Carol as a baby and then progressing through childhood and into early adulthood. The world captured in the album is largely a world of women, a world of sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Carol’s father is referenced early on in the album with a photograph of a four-year old Carol looking out from the porch with the caption, “waiting for her father (reverend F.L. Benson to come home),” but it is not until young adulthood that males make more of an appearance in the album.

Indeed, album making itself, as well as funerary crafts, has traditionally fallen in the province of the female sphere, with women being the keepers and preservers of family memory. In terms of album-making, in the Victorian era women would frequently not only assemble albums but also create fanciful collaged works involving cut-up cartes-de-visite and their own drawings. In the Benson Album, Carol’s mother is the compiler of the album, a designation that raises interesting questions about authorship. Who is the author of this album? Is it the mother who contributed a drawing to the album and exercised a keen eye in page layout, sequencing, and composition, or is it the multiple producers of the photographs, both studio photographers and amateurs alike?<sup>4</sup> I would argue that as the compiler, the mother is the primary author, for the album can only be understood in its totality, assembled as it is from multiple disparate parts. Placing primary authorship with the mother opens up a way of viewing domesticized women in this period as having an authorial, artistic voice, just not one that has traditionally been recognized within the canon.

In terms of the history of portrait photography and the family album, the Benson Album occu-

**FIGURE 3.1** *“This picture of Carol taken Christmas 1907 was wonderfully like her a day or two before she died—in fact the day she died”*



FIGURE 3.2



pies a pivotal moment in time, a period of change between the slow, formal world of the studio portrait and the instantaneous, casual moment of the snapshot. In the end, the album ultimately keeps one foot in the world of studio photography and one foot in the world of the amateur snapshot. In 1888, the year of Carol Warren Benson's birth, Kodak introduced a handheld camera that came preloaded with flexible film. True to the advertising slogan of "you press the button, we do the rest," the camera had a single shutter speed and fixed lens, and the user simply had to return the camera to Kodak to have the film processed, new film loaded, and the camera and prints sent back.<sup>5</sup> Owing to the ease of use of the Kodak camera, its introduction led to a significant increase in amateur photography, giving rise to the ubiquitous family snapshot.

With the rise of amateur photography, studio photography eventually fell out of favor, and albums transformed to accommodate new tastes. As opposed to the nineteenth century, when albums were produced with slots of a uniform size, first to accommodate carte-de-visite photographs

and later to accommodate the larger cabinet card format, the twentieth century saw the marketing of albums to accommodate the multiple image sizes that proliferated with the rise of snapshot photography. As Elizabeth Siegal has noted, however, in her work on American photo-albums, this change did not happen overnight and cabinet-card format albums in particular were popular well into the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> While the round images produced by the early Kodak camera, or Kodak 1's, appear early on in the Benson Album (Fig. 3.2), the family did not abandon studio photography altogether. Looking closely at the images in the album reveals that the family returned to the same studio over and over again, and as the children grew, the same carpet and furniture from the studio remained ever present and unchanged.

Additionally, it is precisely the form of the cabinet card album—not a more modern format—that we see in the Benson Album, and the mother's frustration with the limitations of this format is clearly apparent. While some pages are used as intended with a single photograph inserted into the slot and filling the frame, the al-

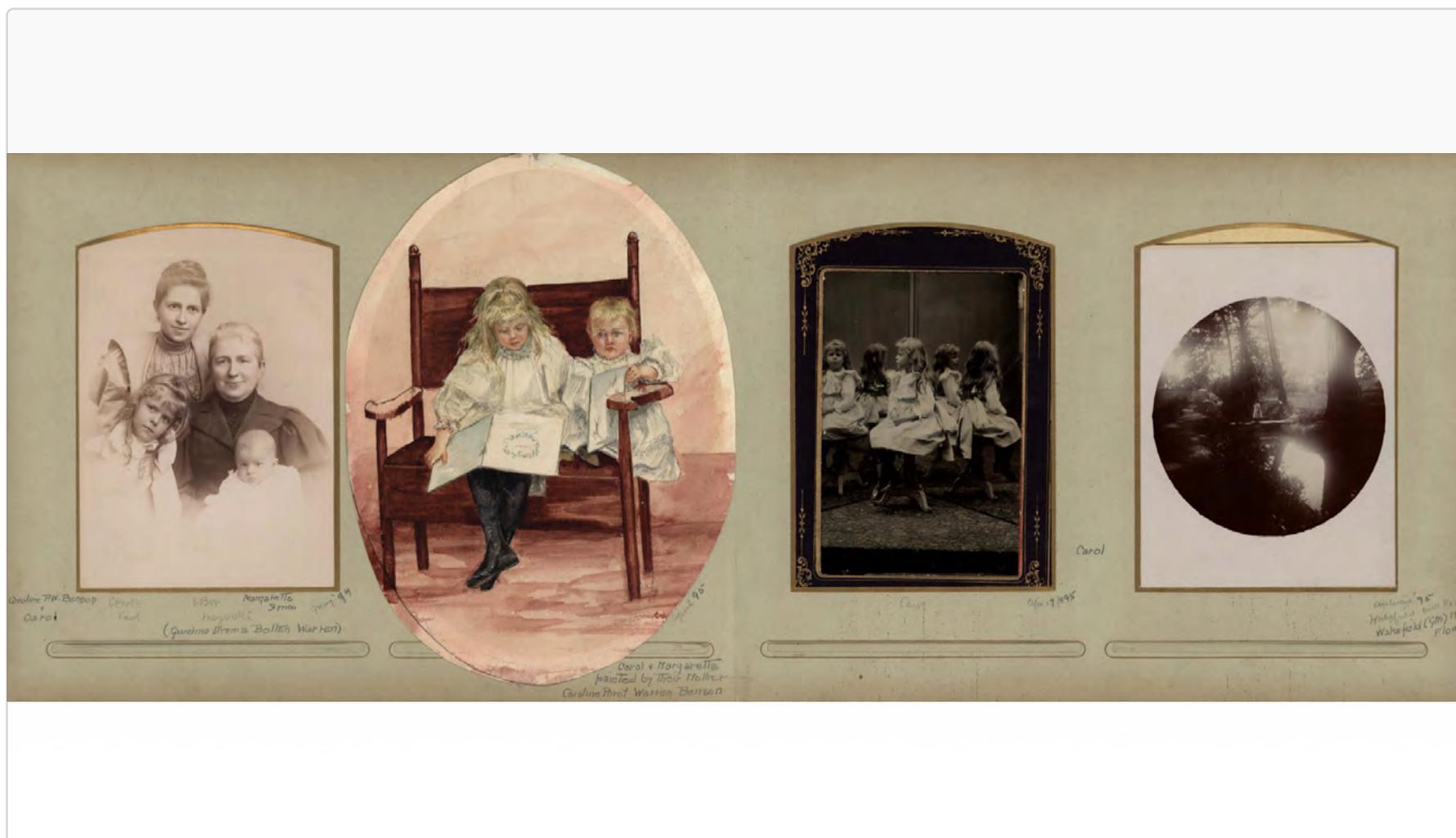
bum also includes numerous examples of photographs which have been pasted over the frame or inserted without filling the frame entirely, frequently offering a jarring juxtaposition between frame and image. Further deviating from the cabinet card album's intended format and use is the mother's placement of her own drawing of her children in the album (Fig. 3.3). The combination of the mechanical and the hand-made in this spread speaks of both the instantaneous, immediate time of the photograph and the slowed-down time of the drawing, of the indexical and the iconic, of the machine and the human.

The mixture of the handmade and the mechanical can be seen in numerous examples of memorial photography. In fact, it is often the addition of handmade, crafted elements that signal that the sitter is now deceased. For example, in a piece from 1910 featured in the Van Gogh Museum's 2004 exhibition, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, photograph, text, and decorative elements such as flowers and taxidermied doves are used to create a memorial image.

Writing on the piece in the exhibition catalogue, Geoffrey Batchen notes that in “mingling Christian iconography—the dove of peace and resurrection, symbol of the Holy Ghost—with a secular, mechanical image—a photograph of the deceased—it speaks of death and mourning but also of the renewal of life. It seeks to remember this man not as someone now dead, but as someone once alive.”<sup>7</sup> With his reading of such vernacular photographs, Batchen rightly complicates Barthes' assertion that every photograph speaks of the death of the sitter, for in vernacular photographic practices, we often see the assertion of both life and death,<sup>8</sup> and this is equally true for both singular memorial images and memorial albums, as I will detail further in the course of this paper.

Before I return to the Benson Album, it is important to note that although this album is a particularly striking example of the memorial album genre, it is certainly not the only example. The International Center for Photography's Hugo Huslig Album, a somewhat later example than CU

FIGURE 3.3



Boulder's, was compiled by the deceased's mother upon the death of her son at the age of twenty-three. Moving back in time, there is an example of a Baltimore-area carte-de-visite album compiled in the 1860's, in which collaged elements memorializing a dead child break with the strict conformity of the album's other images.<sup>9</sup> On account of the private nature of these albums, however, and the infrequency in which they have appeared in traditional collecting institutions, an exact account of the number and degree of prevalence is difficult to ascertain.

The Benson Album can also be understood in terms of printed textual memorial books, or 'albums' as they are sometimes known, examples of which can be found within both the Jewish and Christian traditions. A German-Jewish example, published in 1922 by Zion Verlag of Munich, includes standardized printed text along with space for details about the deceased to be filled in by hand. Additional space was also provided for the mourners to affix a photograph of the deceased. Continuing with the theme of time, the album also assists the mourner in identifying the *jahrzeit*, or anniversary of death, on the Christian calendar, which differs from the Hebrew calendar. While the book itself was standardized and mass produced, the addition of individualized details allowed it to function as a personalized and unique form of devotion and remembrance held by the principal mourner.

In the Christian tradition, privately printed memorial books were quite prevalent in the late-nineteenth century and typically included a photograph in the frontispiece, either a tipped-in original photograph or reproduction, along with some combination of biographical sketch, sermon, and recollections from friends and family. Rather than tell the story of the deceased's life through images as the Benson Album does, these works rely on a textual narrative and include just a single image to bring the deceased to mind. While these printed works were meant for distribution to a wider set of mourners beyond the immediate family, they re-

main in essence, an act and function of private mourning.

In contrast, *The Seven Mile Funeral Cortege Of General Grant* in New York aids in the mourning for a national figure who would have been known personally to few if any of the people who bought this memorial album. Published in Boston in 1885, the album includes tipped-in original photographs detailing the last days of Grant's life and his funeral procession. The oversized format of this album, with pages at fifteen by eighteen inches, speaks of public display and stands in sharp contrast to the smaller format of private memorial albums.

In the introduction to their encyclopedic study of photobooks from 2004, Martin Parr and Gary Badger explain that the genre of the photobook exists somewhere between the novel and the film.<sup>10</sup> In other words, rather than being composed of a random assortment of single images, the photobook employs a conscious sequence of images, often with an implicit narrative. The same can certainly be said for the format of the photoalbum. In the case of the Benson Album, the narrative is the life of Carol Benson, which unfolds as we turn the album's pages. But just what sort of narrative or story does the album tell? For it is not a strict unfolding of time that we see in this album; time turns back, and rather than ending with the finality of the subject's death, time and life itself loop back on themselves. As an example, certain images of Carol are repeated at different points in the album, disrupting a straightforward narrative of the chronological unfolding of time ([Fig. 3.4](#)). Even the final image of Carol is found earlier in the album in proper chronological sequence, and when we encounter this image again at the end of the album, it jolts us back in time to an earlier point in the narrative.

Continuing with the theme of the genre crossover with the novel and the film, we must also ask ourselves whether the tale of Carol Warren Benson falls under fiction or non-fiction. Ultimately, I would argue that it falls in between the two. While employing indexical signs of Carol's

FIGURE 3.4



life at various stages of her development, the photographs have of course been consciously selected and arranged to put forward a story that is acceptable and comforting to the album's complier. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has noted, "There is nothing more decent, reassuring and edifying than the family album."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the photo-album offers the perfect vehicle for carefully editing a fiction of family happiness and presenting a view of how one would like both the dead relative, and the family itself, to be remembered. Nowhere is this clearer than with the album's final image and the inscription, "the way she looked the day she died," when in fact it is an image of Carol taken many years before her death and with much life still before her. It is a comforting fiction in which time does not move forward—quite the opposite in fact, for it is a careful selection of which memory of her daughter the mother would like to emphasize.

The relationship of photography and memory is equally as complex as the relationship of photography and time. Photographs are frequently thought of as aides-memoires, but to return to Roland Barthes and *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes, "Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory...but it actually blocks memory, quickly becoming a counter-memory."<sup>12</sup> Barthes reaches this conclusion after looking at family snapshots of his own childhood, and he implies that the images filled his consciousness with such force that they superseded any memories unmediated by photographic information. Following Barthes, we see the convenience of the memory-blocking aspect of photography employed in the album as a strategy for dealing with grief. While the album's photographs bring to mind the lovely lost young woman, the final image also serves to replace any authentic memories of the last day of Carol's life with the more comforting, constructed memory offered by the portrait of Carol six years younger than she was the day she died and four years prior to her marriage, long before the pregnancy that resulted in her death.

Just as photography can both encourage the retention of memory and block memory unmediated by photography, the memorial photograph and the memorial album, as we have seen, can affirm both life and death at the same time. We know that Carol has died when we look at the album, but as time bends backward through the fiction of the album format, we also have the possibility of eternal life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Szarkowski, 100.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 96.

<sup>4</sup> For a larger discussion of this issue, see Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Benson, *The Printed Picture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 150.

<sup>6</sup> Siegel, 159.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, Yoshiaki Kai, and Masashi Kohara, *Suspending time: life - photography - death* (Nagaizumi-cho, Shizuoka: Izu Photo Museum, 2010), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Siegel, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, 91.

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