

by Ricardo Antúnez [1](#)



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The North American photographer Emmet Gowin gave over a good part of his beautiful book *Photographs* to present pictures of his own family. In a passage from the interview that precedes the photographs, he says:

I was going round the world searching for an interesting place, when I realized that the place that I was in was already interesting. There was something in family life [...] that was my theme... [2](#)

There are many important and diverse photographers who at some point have published pictures of the people closest and most loved to them. Stieglitz devotedly photographed Georgio O'Keeffe. Weston left many portraits of his children and his lovers; the photographs of Tina Modotti are renowned. From an early age Lartigue assiduously photographed brothers, cousins, parents and other relations. We are familiar with pictures of Kertész's wife, of Cartier-Bresson's daughters, of Callahan, Frank and Avedon's families. In the fifties *Life* published Gene Smith's essay, remembered for its war photographs and for *Minamata*, which Smith dedicated to his young daughter, Juanita. More recently, the little known Mark and Dan Jury documented for three years, through images and texts, the illness and death of their grandfather in a book entitled *Gramp* [3](#). Pedro Meyer published the CD-Rom *I photograph to remember* [4](#) that basically deals with his parents' last months of life. Under the title *Immediate family*

[5](#)

Sally Mann gathered together a series of photographs of her children, a book which provoked some scandal due to the nude portraits of the children. In 1995 *World Press Photo* awarded second price in the category of photojournalism to Larry Towell's *Family Album*, a published author recognized for his photojournalism in conflict zones such as El Salvador or Palestine

[6](#)

. Last year Nicholas Nixon published an extended version of *The Brown Sisters*, an exceptional book in which he takes photographs of his wife and his three sisters, one beside the other, always in the same order, over 25 years

[7](#)

. In *ZoneZero* you can see the work of the Argentinean Diego Goldberg, constructed along similar lines

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Does this heterogeneous and incomplete list allow us to conclude that there exists a tradition of family photos in the field of "author" photography? Strictly speaking, we should exclude from it the photographers who dwelled on the theme only occasionally and without the family itself being the subject. The pictures that Weston left of his women and his children do not deal with the family of the photographer: they inscribe themselves within his portrait series or his nudes series. Something totally different happens, for example, in the aforementioned work by Meyer, which uses a photo-documentary method in a multimedia format to recover the history of the group and to narrate first the illness and death of his mother, and then of his father. In this case, a series of family events genuinely constitute the subject of the work.

I can recall only one author who is truly dedicated to photographing his/her private life. Almost all the work by the New Yorker, Nan Golding, deals with herself, her friends and her lovers. A "sociological" reading of her books can be made, seeing them as a description of a certain New York environment from recent decades. But is this reading not induced by the documentary tradition in which the photographer always appears as another - as an observer of the world that he/she photographs? How can one forget that Golding photographs herself and the people who share her life intimately? Her books preserve pictures of her emotional life, including its sexual dimension. In a sense, her work resembles a diary. Its publication, however, has made these series something else: an exceptional work which transgresses the strict boundary that separates what can be photographed and what cannot be photographed in the sphere of the private. At the same time, it cancels out the code of intimacy that prevents these photographs from becoming public - publishing - and through them, certain aspects of private life. In her powerful images no trace remains of the idealization which in this photographic genre, often inhibits the recording of pain, of conflict, of the intimacy and the triviality which accompany the relationship with the people who are closest. Free from the imperative of the decorous and edifying family celebration, Golding reveals other dimensions to shared life. To start with, by discovering that around her there is almost no conventional family, but new forms of family, friends, lovers and chance relationships 9.



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The rarity of Golding's work confirms that, although the list of authors who dwelled on the subject in differing ways is considerable both in quantity and quality, the family photo is typically the territory of the unprofessional photographer who is essentially motivated by emotional and traditional reasons.

The expression family photos alludes to this homogenous collection of pictures, its special occasions and its rules of composition. The collection is more or less disordered or gathered together in albums, decisively integrated into the family heritage, and which in its own way narrates the group's saga.

What follows is a series of polemical proposals on these collections that are of dubious value in the history of photography. These are generally devalued by devout photographers, but have enormous popularity and are cryptic in meaning [10](#).

### I

From both sides of the camera, our first contact with photography takes place in the sphere of family photos. Their rules are learnt from an early age: rules of the timeliness of the shots, of the value and use of photographs, of behavior in front of the lens, of the design of the picture. We are so used to the routine of special occasions and poses, of stereotypes, so used to that ritual and innocent practice of the family photo that it is unlikely that we question its meaning or the reasons behind its existence and which determine the way it is. The family photo is a traditional and ingenuous practice. Integrated into certain domestic rituals, it is located beyond an aesthetic ideal - documentary, as well as beyond any reflection about its function and nature.

### II

The family photographer is not inspired by technical, aesthetic, documentary nor critical ideals. He is not a devout photographer. For him it is sufficient that the pictures are sharp, that the people are in the frame and that the faces are smiling. Their aims are of a completely different nature to those of a dedicated photographer. In its modal version, the family photograph is an acritical and stereotyped practice.

### III

Family photos are invested with a unique value that brings them closer to fetish. They have a quality that makes us throw them away, tear them up, it seems a brutal and irreparable act. Family collections of photographs are jointly owned, they are hoarded, they survive moves, they go with us throughout our lives, and pass from generation to generation.

### IV

Family photos have a private value and use. They are pictures that the family produces of itself for itself: it has no meaning for others. Faced with photos from someone else's family (once the laboratory gave us photos that had been swapped around) we have the impression of being before the known and the unknown, we recognize the code but we do not appreciate its value. To see them demands overcoming disinterestedness and shame. Deprived of their particular sentimental reference, family photos lack value and provoke a certain discomfort: will we see ourselves as being just as insignificant?

### V

Family photography has its favorite characters. First, by far, are children. Is it because they represent the renewal of the group, the antithesis of death? [11](#). Second in the order of the favorite are the elderly. Perhaps because they condense family history and identity.

Sitting in the middle of them all, the grandmother is the emblematic character: she represents the identity and the origin of the group. A little further on, the baby who is me, dangerously placed in the trembling arms of my great-grandmother, makes up the representation of the extremes of the clan, the newborn and the next to go, the signs that speak of its continuity.

### VI

Scarce as they are nowadays in some societies (the middle classes from Montevideo are a typical example), children become precious. The quantity of photos that can be taken of an only child is surprising. To love them is a genuine feeling but, also, a socially determined behavior [1](#)  
[2](#)

. By placing the family portraits on the office desk they say (to me and to the rest): I love my children. They also say (to me and to the rest): I created a happy family, I'm their head and their pillar. Those photos are, at the same time, signs of success and responsibility, besides accounting to the social mandate of paternal love.

The quantity of photographs taken of children declines rapidly when they approach adolescence. Perhaps because they start to resist their status as precious objects, perhaps

because their participation in family life dwindles as the young open up spaces for their own relationships, slowly separating themselves from the family.

### VII

Bourdieu said that family photography transforms the good moments into good memories [13](#) . To this hypothesis we could add the following: used by the family, photography is a tool to create good moments. Smiles appear in front of the lens. The euphoria of parties, in the place indicated by the video reflectors. Under the brutal pressure of becoming fixed (for others, far beyond the boundaries of our lives, forever) we reply with the pose: a certain positioning of the body and of expressions. But in the picture's frame, the body and the expression are no more than significant. What is posed is really something else: a state of mind, a way of being, a certain characteristic of family ties.

### VIII

The family photo does not have any documentary obligation. Its contract is not with the search for truth but with the desire to have an always-smiling family, free from pain and problems. The family album says and repeats again and again: we are a harmonious and happy family. Its recurring theme is the family gathered together: parties and vacations. The family album is a mirror that reflects a tranquilizing, edifying and decorous image [14](#) .

### IX

The issue of decorum and status is always present in the pictures of a family album. The photos from the last trip do not only say: this is how we are, happy and having fun. They also say: we were there, at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe, in the shadow of Christ the Redeemer.

### X

Family photography is a strongly regulated activity. Its ingenuity disguises the strict order that governs it, in particular, in relation to special occasions. In the sphere of family life, what should and should not be photographed is strictly defined. A wedding cannot begin if the photographer does not arrive because photography is part of the ritual: it is there to hierarchize and commemorate the occasion [15](#) and, also, as we see, to rouse the party. Meanwhile, a long series of events of undeniable significance for the group do not find a place in the album: work, everyday life, illness, death, separations and sexuality are not recorded. The family photos are bound to the family party and its significance in the group celebration. Everything that belongs to the category of pain, conflict, intimacy and of everyday chores lacks recognition in the history that the album narrates.

## XI

Psychoanalysis instilled in us the assurance that certain profound meanings are found precisely in the place where silence is produced. Just as interesting as analyzing what is evident in an album, what is offered immediately before our eyes when we open it, is to pause in its gaps. The album seen as a register of absences is no less meaningful. Beside every one of life's milestones that the album puts into order, from baptism to marriage, from the first day at school to the photos from the last trip, innumerable events from family life remain forever silent and invisible, discarded by the photographic memory of the group. The reasons for this should be investigated. A full program of research on the family album should center on the play of presences/ absences. It should search the fine line between what is shown and what is concealed, between what is said and not said, for the meanings within the discourse of the family photo.

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## Immediate Photographs

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1 Ricardo Antúnez (Montevideo, 1964), photographer, BA in Sociology from the Universidad de la República, Uruguay. [\(back\)](#)

2 Gowin, Emmet. Photographs, Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1990. [\(back\)](#)

3 Jury, Mark and Dan. Gramp, in Best of Photojournalism 2, Newsweek Books, NY, 1977. [\(back\)](#)

4 Meyer, Pedro. I photograph to remember, CD-Rom, Voyager, Santa Monica, 1991. [\(back\)](#)

5 Mann, Sally. Immediate family, Aperture, NY, 1992. [\(back\)](#)

6 World Press Photo, Anuario, Madrid, 1995. [\(back\)](#)

7 Nixon, Nicholas. The Brown Sisters, MOMA, 1999. [\(back\)](#)

8 Goldberg, Diego. The march of time, it covers the same 25 year period as the book by Nicholas Nixon. [\(back\)](#)

9 Golding, Nan. The ballad of sexual dependency, Aperture, 1986. [\(back\)](#)

10 This part of the article is indebted to discussions with the students from the Basic Course in Photography of Visual Dimension, where the author gives a course on family photos. [\(back\)](#)

11 "[The child] is the paradigm of the vital, the incarnation of the living, the breeding ground for multiple possibilities. It is also the antithetic image of death". Defey, Denise et al. Duelo por un

niño que nunca nació, Roca Viva, Montevideo, 1992. [\(back\)](#)

12 Barrán, José Pedro. Historia de la sensibilidad en el Uruguay, Vol 2, El disciplinamiento (1860-1920), EBO/ Facultad de Humanidades y ciencias, Montevideo, 1990. [\(back\)](#)

13 Bourdieu, Pierre, et al. La fotografía, un arte intermedio, Nueva Imagen, Mexico, 1979. [\(back\)](#)

14 "Nothing is more decorous, tranquilizing and edifying than a family album." Bourdieu, Pierre, et al. op cit. [\(back\)](#)

15 Bourdieu, Pierre et. alt. op. cit [\(back\)](#)

