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# With billions of networked images flowing through social media, how can we understand what photography looks like today?

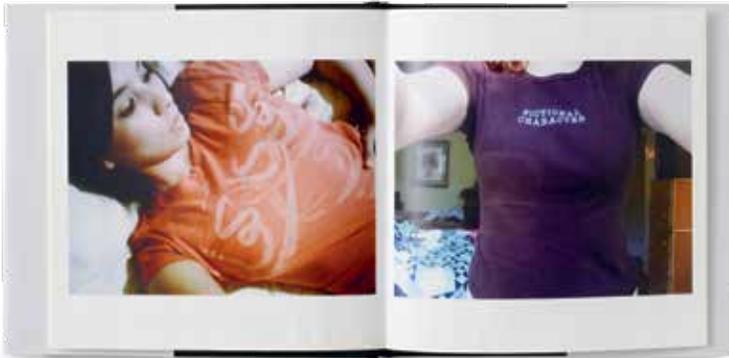
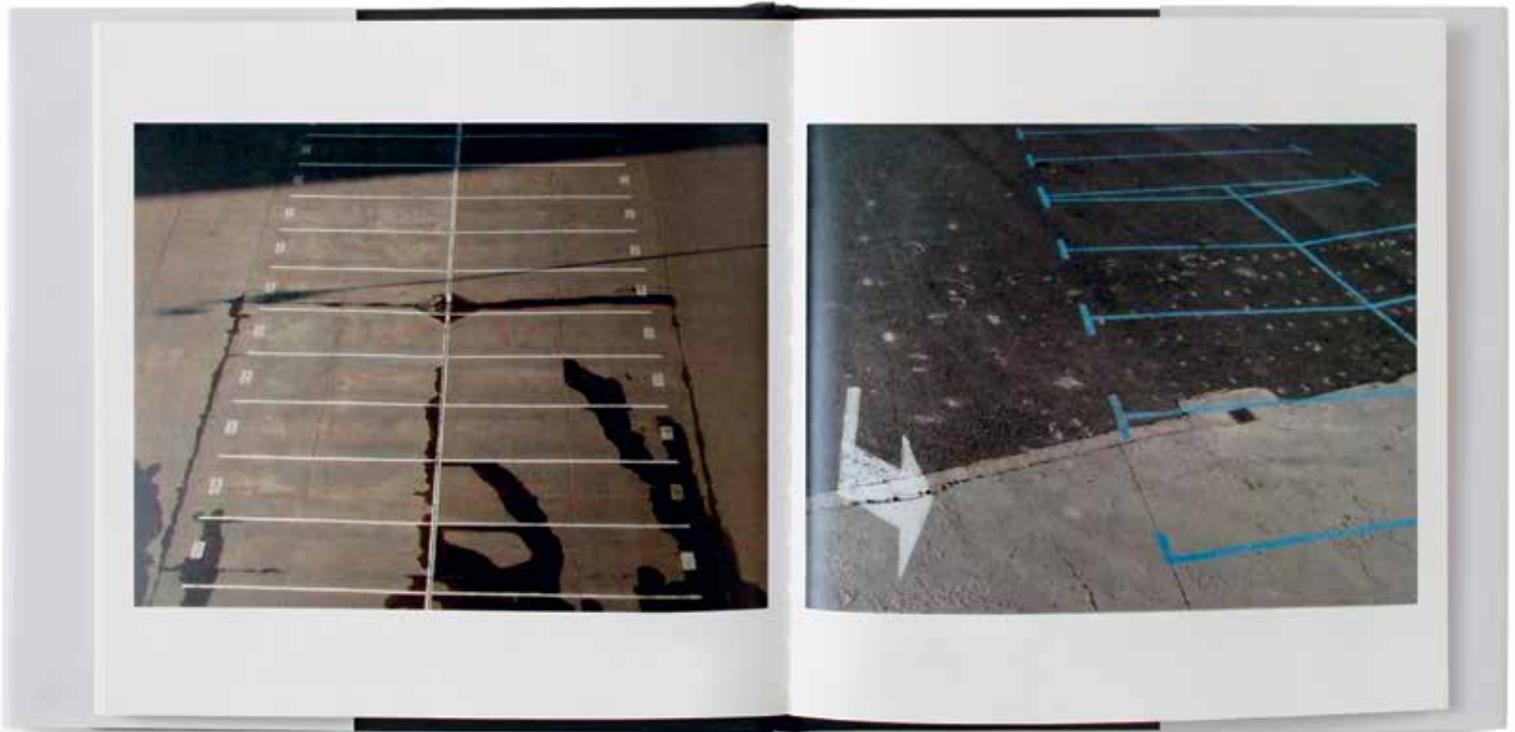
## Observing by Watching: Joachim Schmid and the Art of Exchange Geoffrey Batchen

It is surely telling that in the same month—January 2012—Eastman Kodak declared bankruptcy and Facebook, the world’s largest online social-network site, moved toward becoming a publicly traded company valued at \$100 billion. The following April, Facebook spent one of those billions acquiring Instagram, a startup offering mobile apps that let people add quirky effects to their smartphone snapshots and share them with friends.

The inference could not be clearer: social media has triumphed over mere media, or at least over the photographic medium as we once knew it. But what is the nature of the social in digital image-sharing sites? And what about the nature of photography itself? Has it too become bankrupt, reduced to no more than a vehicle for conveying sentimental platitudes? Or does it continue more or less as it always has, banal or fascinating according to the prejudices or interests of each viewer, avoiding its own obsolescence through yet another one of its strategic technical transformations?

Everyone concedes that photography is now a medium of exchange as much as a mode of documentation. Able to be instantly disseminated around the globe, a digital snapshot initially functions as a message in the present (“Hey, I’m here *right now*, looking at this”) rather than only as a record of some past moment. This kind of photograph is meant primarily as a means of communication, and the images being sent are almost as ephemeral as speech, so rarely are they printed and made physical. As Michael Kimmelman once put it in the *New York Times*, photographing has become “the visual equivalent of cellphone chatter.” That chatter demands a different kind of body language than in the past, with arm outstretched and photographer looking *at*, rather than through, the camera. Contemporary photographers gaze at a little video screen and decide when to still (or not) the moving flow of potential images seen there. In operating that camera, they enact a sort of cultural convergence, in which the distinction between production and reception, and between moving and still images, has clouded. Danish scholar Mette Sandbye has proposed we consider this convergence a “signaletic” one, such that the “that-has-been” temporality of photography once described by Roland Barthes has been replaced with a “what-is-going-on,” a sharing of an immediacy of presence.

That said, the sheer number of photographic images being loaded onto social-media sites makes any analysis of the phenomenon difficult. Facebook has reported that more than three hundred million photographs are uploaded onto its site every day, meaning that the site currently hosts more than 140 billion images. That makes Facebook about forty-six times more photographic than Flickr, the next largest depository. Established in February 2004 by a Vancouver-based company, Flickr reportedly gains about 4,500 new photographs every minute (so nearly 6.5 million a day), mostly gathered into the electronic equivalent of personal photo-albums. Nevertheless, even the White House releases its official photographs there. And it’s just one of a number of such sites (the oldest, South Korea’s Cyworld, has boasted that at one stage 37 percent of the South Korean population had an account). How can anyone examine a representative sample of contemporary photographic practice in the face of such overwhelming statistics?



As it happens, a German artist named Joachim Schmid spends six hours a day perusing and grabbing images from Flickr, using them to illustrate his own artist books under the title *Other People's Photographs*. When I asked him why, he told me: "I do it so that you don't have to." In the process of saving me the trouble, he also provides a kind of anecdotal, surrealist ethnography of global photography today. Again, it has become a truism to remark on the refashioning of privacy in our digital age, with social media stretching the word "friend" to include a vast array of relative strangers. Schmid's unauthorized publication of Flickr photographs merely extends this array to comprise discriminating denizens of the art and book-collecting world. His website discusses *Other People's Photographs*:

*Assembled between 2008 and 2011, this series of ninety-six books explores the themes presented by modern everyday, amateur photographers. Images found on photo sharing sites such as Flickr have been gathered and ordered in a way to form a library of contemporary vernacular photography in the age of digital technology and online photo hosting. Each book is comprised of images that focus on a specific photographic event or idea, the grouping of photographs revealing recurring patterns in modern popular photography. The approach is encyclopedic, and the number of volumes is virtually endless but arbitrarily limited. The selection of themes is neither systematic nor does it follow any established criteria—the project's structure mirrors the multifaceted, contradictory and chaotic practice of modern photography itself, based exclusively on the motto "You can observe a lot by watching."*

For one such book, Schmid first gathered some ten thousand images of "currywurst," the local fast food of his hometown of Berlin, lovingly photographed by those unlucky souls about to consume it (he tells me that, over his many earlier years spent gathering discarded analog photos, he found only a handful of such images). People visiting Berlin apparently want to remember the food they are about to eat, or at least to share the experience

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Top:  
From *Other People's Photographs: Parking Lots*

Bottom:  
From *Other People's Photographs: Self*

This page, top:  
From *Other People's*  
Photographs: *Cleavage*

This page, bottom:  
From *Other People's*  
Photographs: *Currywurst*

Opposite:  
From *Other People's*  
Photographs: *Self*

All images from  
Joachim Schmid's series  
of ninety-six publications  
*Other People's Photographs*,  
2008–11. Courtesy the artist

of that want with others. Even within the apparent global homogeneity of Flickr we can thus find viral traces of the local asserting themselves—if, that is, we care to look for them.

In fact, it is only Schmid's looking that turns this otherwise international genre of food photography into a regional, even an autobiographical, focal point. Indeed, it might be said that a collapsing of the global into the personal is at the heart of his practice, making it true to the character of social media itself. Sitting at his computer screen, he downloads certain subjects and motifs that seem to recur in the constant stream of photographs he sees on Flickr's "Most Recent Uploads" page, which he refreshes constantly. Of course, there are now sites that set out to facilitate this same sort of distillation process, such as Pinterest, a social-media website launched in 2010, on which its twelve million users compile collections of pictures they find on the Internet. But Schmid brings both a distinctively ironic eye and the play of chance to this process (he finds his images rather than searching for them), thus allowing us to take note of exhibitionist desires that might otherwise remain scattered and lost in the infinity of digital space. In short, each of the thirty-two-page samplers in *Other People's Photographs* imposes a thematic unity on an otherwise unruly universe of images. A diverse group, these samplers include the titillating flash of *Cleavage*, the deadpan documentation of *Mugshots*, the concrete poetry of *Fridge Doors*, and the more literally concrete jungle of *Parking Lots* (surely a choice of category inspired by Ed Ruscha), to name only a few of his titles.

Among other things, Schmid has recognized the sudden popularity of previously unknown genres of image, such as the proliferation on Flickr of photographs of camera boxes, apparently now the first thing everyone takes with their new camera: takes, and then shares online. In a similar vein, one of his recent books comprises nothing but photographs of the photographer's shadow. Some things, it seems, never change. Or maybe they do: what's interesting about this digital genre is that all these shadow-pictures seem to have been deliberately made, a significant shift in an amateur practice in which clumsy accident once ruled the pictorial roost.





Here on Flickr, through the mediating agency of Schmid's hunting and gathering, we get to see the art world, which once upon a time mimicked this aspect of the so-called snapshot aesthetic, now having that mimicry copied and reabsorbed back into vernacular practice. It seems the analog snapshot is indeed remembered in digital form, but only via a historic artistic mediator.

Another frequent image appearing on Flickr is the self-portrait made with camera in hand, arm outstretched, a type of photograph made possible only with the advent of lightweight digital cameras. Schmid's book on this genre implies that there are many more young photographers doing this than those over thirty, and more women than men. His selection also leaves the impression that this practice is more popular in Japan than in other countries (although, as he admits, this could be because Japanese teenagers upload their files onto Flickr as he starts work in Germany, whereas American members upload while he is asleep). In Korea, this kind of photograph has its own name: *selca* (self-camera). Korean scholar Jung Joon Lee reports that many young women who practice *selca* adopt specific angles and facial expressions that are designed to give them bigger eyes, a higher nose bridge, and a smaller face. But this kind of specificity, and a critical engagement with the Orientalism it internalizes, is subsumed in Schmid's book to the startling conformity of the genre, to a blithe repetition of form that appears to obey no identifiable cultural imperative beyond narcissism. Here, then, is the challenge his project lays before us—not just to make sense of contemporary photography, but to find ways to creatively intervene within it; not just to wonder at its numbing sameness, but also to exacerbate into visibility the abrasive political economy of difference.

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