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MH: Your work as a photographer has largely focused on family politics. How did you become interested in family photos and how has this interest evolved? What are the politics of family snapshots and how do you expose their public, political side in your work?

LN: My interest in family photographs came as a surprise to me. In the early 1980s I was using slide projectors with colored gels to illuminate the interior spaces I was photographing. I was using color to invoke emotion. I had a box of slides from my childhood and one day I popped one into the projector and everything changed. I could make memory materialize. I began to look at my family's photographs with fresh eyes – how they were a chronicle of the American dream – a happy, attractive, and traditional nuclear family at home and at play in the suburbs. What was, and was not, photographed fascinated me as I looked through the boxes of my parents' and grandparents' photographs. As I chose photographs to project and juxtapose, I selected ones that were evocative of the genre and the times rather than my own personal narrative.

Fragments, 1987, color photograph

I began this work before the craze in the photography world about family pictures. People were most interested in my work at the time because of the technical and conceptual aspects of the projections and the fact that I was setting things up to photograph. I remember talking with Larry Sultan who was photographing his parents and using stills from his home movies (which became his *Pictures from Home* project). We were lamenting that no one was interested in our use of old family photographs. By the mid/late 1980s all that changed and photography shows about family

were everywhere. In part, this may have been a reaction to and critique of Ronald Reagan's "family values".

As I continued to look at my family photographs and was thinking about all that was absent, I felt I needed more than the insular world of my family's snapshots as material. This led to my inclusion of images from magazines and newspapers. What was going on in the world at the time and how could these public images inform and open up my family images so they did not exist in such a historical vacumn?

Playback, slide/sound installation, *1992*

MH: I think that is the innovation of your work: the tension you maintain between the intimate family setting and the larger context of which it is a part. Projection, superimposition, and installation seem like optimal modes of mobilizing this tension, provoking the viewer into making connections between private and public, and appreciating the politics of the domestic. But in this earlier work you are a creator of images. How did you decide to become a collector as well? How did "Collected Visions" begin?

LN: After creating three projected slide installations (*Critical Distance*, 1988; *Traces*, 1990-91; *Playback*, 1992) that looked at my family photographs in relation to media images, I wanted to explore the politics of the family photograph in a culturally wider sense, by looking at my own photographs in relation to other people's snapshots. Thus began my *Collected Visions* project.

I began by collecting family photographs of girls and women from friends, students, and acquaintances to create a new slide installation. Part of my impetus to focus on women came from the fact that I come from a world of girls – two sisters, only girl cousins on both sides, and all nieces. In looking back, I see that it had just as much to do with the under and mis-representation of women and girls in the media. I wanted to *see* the struggle of girlhood and coming of age and turmoil of my times. Things have changed for women, but not in my family's photographs and surely not much in the media.

Collected Visions I (excerpt), slide installation with music by Elizabeth Brown, 1993
(Hands holding open pages of well-known feminist books are overlaid over serveral of the images.)

In the Q+A at a lecture I gave when *Collected Visions I* was exhibited at the Houston Center of Photography in 1993, I was asked why I did not include contemporary photographs of women. Many of the photos did, in fact, cross generations, but the conventions of family photography are so strong that the differences between generations were not apparent. The photographs that broke the mold or had subtle signs of defiance were overwhelmed by the conventional ones. This came home to me years later when I was at a conference with many famous feminists and I was shocked when they all were photographing themselves in the most traditional manner grinning with their arms around each other.

MH: Can you explain the different aspects of "Collected Visions" – the archive and your taxonomic terms, and the interactive part of it?

LN: After exhibiting the first *Collected Visions* installation in Houston, I began collecting photographs from men and boys, in addition to continuing to collect images of women. Little did I know then that my growing collection of 1,500+ family images would become an Internet project. The vast majority of photographs in the database were once analog images that were then scanned. A mantle with framed photographs is the navigational base of *collectedvisions.net.* From there, visitors can search a database of approximately 3,000 images collected from hundreds of people. Search parameters include who is in the photo, what categories do you want to see, and what time period. I determined categories by looking at the images and seeing what were the common themes The most populated categories are *at home (posed)* and *posed portrait,* followed by *at home (candid), formal dress up* and *fantasy dress up.*
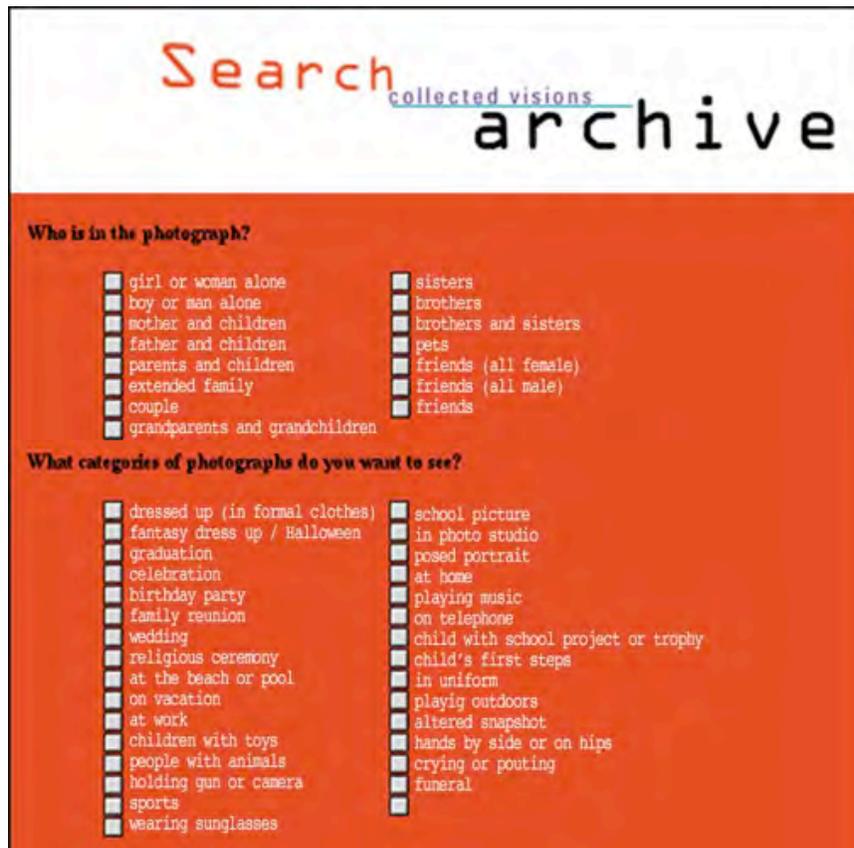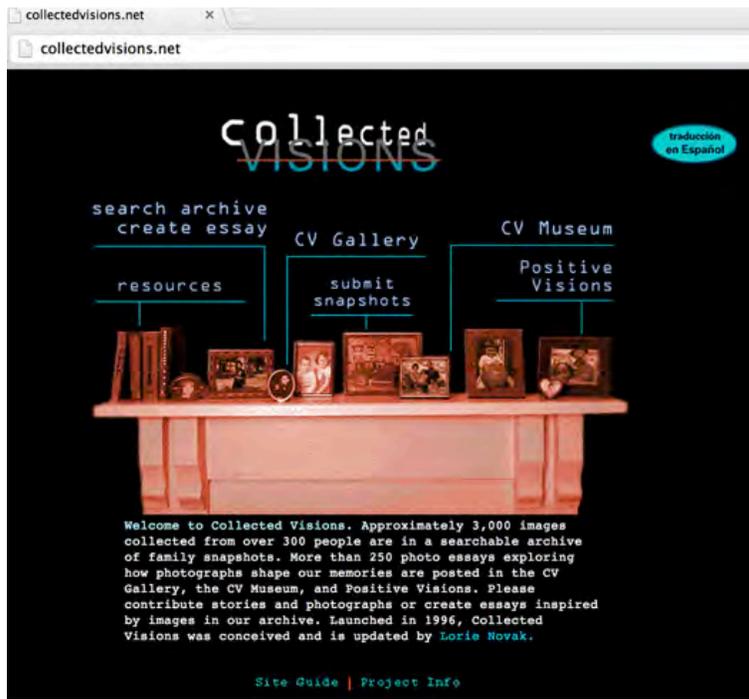
The interactive component of *Collected Visions* was in part inspired by the many conversations that I had when I traveled with my exhibitions or gave lectures. People talked to me about their family photographs – rarely did they have the the photographs they talked about with them. They just wanted to tell me stories. Many times, someone would go into great detail about snapshots they could no longer find and often questioned if these photographs ever really existed. This spoke to

me about the mythic power of the photographic image. As opposed to film or video, the still image reduces time to frozen moments that linger in our memory. We can choose the image that best fits our memories or fantasies at any given moment. Many times our photographs fail to reflect our past as we remember it, and this dissonance is very interesting to me.

Tools are provided so that visitors can write, design, and submit photo essays for exhibition in a *Collected Visions Gallery.* The essays are exhibited in the *Collected Visions Gallery,* which change periodically, and are archived in the *Collected Visions Museum.* Visitors can write about anyone's photographs so as to open up a dialogue about how photographs shape our memories. My interest in the family photograph has always centered around the fact that it can be read differently by different people and at different moments. We cannot help but understand it based on our own experience. The storytelling aspect of *Collected Visions* highlights this idea of multiple truths.

MH: So it seems you realized that the images are enhanced by stories, that they do not stand on their own. In fact, looking through *Collected Visions* and the classifications you create with your taxonomy, one realizes how formulaic and generic family snapshots become, how repetitious they are and how little they actually show. The photo-essays you invited take the images out of the anonymous pile and personalize them, but I wonder if the prose and the affects it tries to name and to narrate, is not equally formulaic.

LN: Many are equally formulaic, but there are stories that question traditional family narratives. The section, *Family Secrets,* in the *Collected Visions Museum* is where most of these stories reside. *collectedvisions.net* is meant to be a space for many voices. I made the decision early on that I would post all the stories without curating them. The good and the bad of interacitvity is the lack of control over content. Even the formulaic and boring, however, tell us a great deal about what we project onto our family photographs. The unconscious desire to keep up family mythology is very strong, so it is not surprising to me that many stories do not puncture the veneer of the photographs.
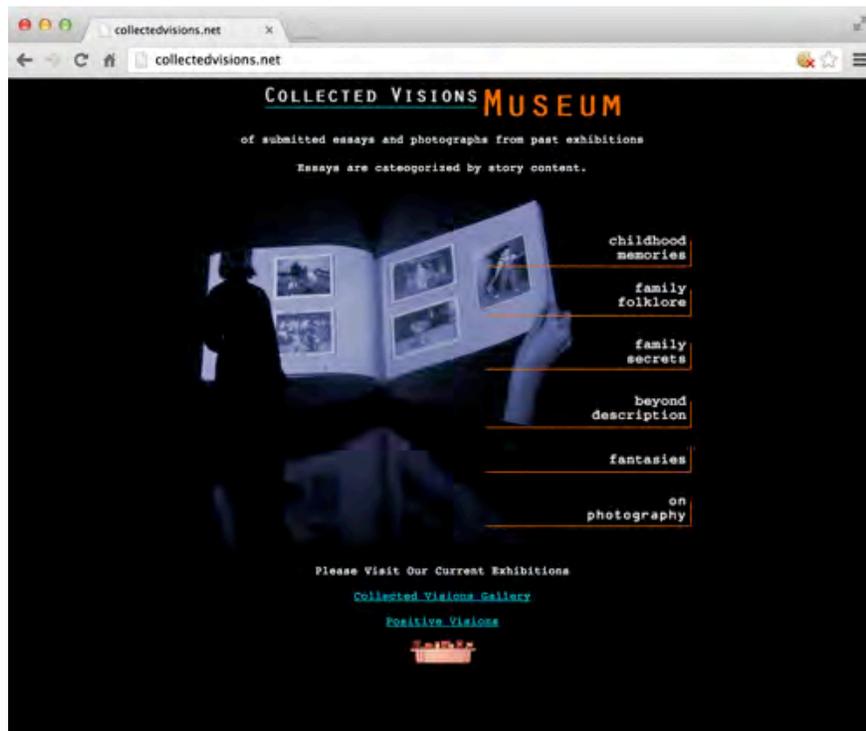
MH: It was very disconcerting to me to find an essay based on one of the photographs I had donated to *Collected Visions*. It was a picture of me, at age 9 or so hiking with my parents in the Carpatian mountains in Romania.   The person who wrote the essay about this photo, male, transformed me into a boy and told a story about the depicted family that was totally different from our actual one. I found it disturbing but also exhilarating: that snapshot could be read in so many ways; the identities in the picture had become fluid and malleable. It gave me some sense of the excitement you must have felt in giving up a degree of control over the stories accompanying the photos.
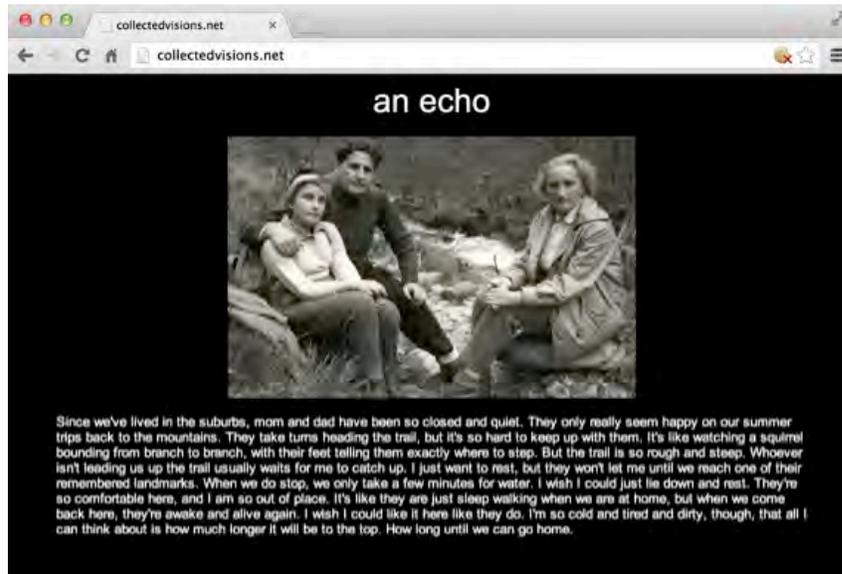
LN: Exactly, there is an essay written by an anonymous viewer about a photograph of my grandmother where my Aunt's first husband is cut out of the frame. The writer, however, chose, to concentrate on the martini glass that my grandmother is holding, which I had never noticed, and completely ignored the fact that someone had been cut out of the frame.

MH: Do you feel that *Collected Visions* leaves enough space for your own voice and your own creativity?

LN: The computer-based installation version of *Collected Visions* (2000), using photos from the Internet version, is in a sense my own extended essay drawing from the archive. In it, I have projected 200 floor to ceiling images in a 20 minute dissolving sequence, combined with overlapping spoken word, and music composed by Elizabeth Brown. The text fragments in the music were drawn from interviews that Elizabeth and I conducted asking people to tell us about their favorite family photograph. There was never a hesitation in giving us an answer. This question alone was enough to get a great conversation going. One statement from an interview with a friend of mine became the key to the installation:

> I wish I had some photograph that I felt…I could remember, not just the circumstances, but how I was thinking and feeling. I cannot connect to the little boy in these pictures…I have no sense of who he is at all… My inner life, was, more of what I remember

Installation view, *Collected Visions,* computer-based installation with music by Elizabeth Brown
International Center of Photography, NY, 2000

MH: Your "Collected Visions" project was launched in the early days of the internet. What were your hopes for this new platform?

LN: In 1995 I was invited by the then Center for Advanced Technology at NYU to collaborate with a team of programmers and designers to create a project. My first impulse was to create an interactive CD-ROM, but it quickly became clear that it was a short lived medium. [1]

It was an exciting time to be working with new technology. The Internet was commercialized in 1995 when many restrictions were lifted. Netscape 1.0 had been launched and soon became the predominant browser, and viewing images on the Web finally became possible. By the time *Collected Visions* launched in May 1996, Netscape 3.0 and Internet Explorer 2.0 were the major browsers. Only universities had fast connections. At home, modems were dial up and slow. My team of collaborators, Clilly Castiglia, Betsy Kershaw, and Kerry O'Neill were also graduate students at NYU's ITP (Interactive Telecommuications Program) and were very immersed in exploring the possiblities for interactivity on the Web. The potential for using my *Collected Visions* archive as the basis for a dialogue on the Web was very exciting to us all. We had very few models of artist or storytelling sites to help us, so we were inventing as we went along. And we quickly came up with the idea of giving people the ability to search and view images from an on-line database and to submit photographic essays about them, live, so to speak.

The official launch was May 1996 at your *Family Pictures: Shapes of Memory* conference at Dartmouth College. We asked participants to bring photographs to scan. I remember that many people did not want to contribute photos because they were uncomfortable putting their personal photographs online—the screen was so impersonal. Seems quaint now.

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[1] (Voyager the innovator in the field disbanded in 1997 – it's first CD-ROM was published in 1989 – see http://www.eai.org/resourceguide/preservation/computer/pdf-docs/voyager_casestudy.pdf *).*

Collected Visions was one of the earliest participatory storytelling sites on the web and a precursor to Web 2.0 social networking and sharing. The site, however, was largely ignored in tech circles because of its content. It was about family photos and domesticity, not technology. I could not get it into any of the big media festivals. The majority of projects at the time were about the technology itself.

MH: I wonder if your navigation page would look different, were you to design it today. As Diana Taylor has observed, these are skeuomorphs that echo the traditional site of display of family snapshots and portraits, the mantle piece. And then you use other traditional terms, album, museum,based on older technologies. What do you think has genuinely changed about family photography in the digital? Does digital photography shift the politics of the snapshot, with the practice?

LN: It would defintely look different were I to design it today. I have been thinking a great deal about what has been lost as we no longer use film cameras for our family snapshots and rarely print the photographs. With digital cameras, we click away and our feedback is immediate. With film, there was lag time before seeing the images. We could only imagine what we had taken. And nowadays we never run out of "film" – if our card is full, we delete the unattractive photos and continue snapping away. Looking at a screen rather than through a viewfinder takes the emphasis away from the frame of the image. It may be that the little screen gives the illusion that we are watching a movie and focuses our attention on the subject not the full image. The photos live on phones and in computers. Some are chosen for Facebook or emailed to family and friends, but we don't edit in the way we used to when we made photo albums. I think it is easier to delete a computer file than to throw out or rip up a physical image. There is also a permanence issue. How many people back up and archive their family photos properly? And our performance for the camera has changed as we have become accustomed to so much of our social lives being photographed for instant replay. The majority of family snapshots may be becoming even more similar to each other as we are all influenced by seeing so many familial images online. I must admit that most of my own images of friends and family, although well composed, represent well known tropes.

MH: Perhaps that's why you need to reframe them in your projections and installations, so as to take them out of their conventionality and thereby to give them meaning.

LN: In many ways, *Collected Visions* was about looking at the photograph, as an object, and what has been lost in the switch to a digital medium. Even though I was looking at the images on a screen and not holding them, I could feel the loss. Printed photographs aged, were marked and ripped, and people were crossed out in them. Digital photos have no history embedded in them like this.

In a recent discussion I had with the curator Alison Nordstrom, she made the astute comment that snapshot photography now is often more about enhancing the present than about a desire to preserve the past. There seems to be a need to capture as we go. How do we keep all these photos in our memory? Does the photo we put on our phone's lock screen have the same power as the ones we have on our desk, dresser, or wall? Do many people go back and look at the hundreds and hundreds of photos they have taken?

MH: These are such good questions, and the technology is moving so much faster than our ability to think about it. I notice in your work how often you use the trope of a hand holding a photo. Touch, the haptic, is so much part of the image but is not touch lost, or at least transformed as we use our finger to scroll on the screen rather than hold the material image? Perhaps, as you say, it's more about a practice in the present, the instant of the capture. We no longer have to wait for the photos to be developed, so the temporality of the snapshot has changed. And so has the temporality of display. Images can be intantly displayed and disseminated. What happens to private images when they enter the public archive? This question became so urgent in September 2001. You spent a great deal of time photographing the posters people put up of of loved ones who were missing after the 9/11 attacks. Can you talk about the influence of that moment on your work?

LN: I was consumed by photographing the missing posters , and it was the first time I was extensively photographing on the street again since graduate school. The posters with their smiling snaphots quickly became sacred objects and were transformed into impromptu memorials. Family photographs became public sites of mourning and portals for speaking to the dead. Around the World Trade Center site, I saw many family snapshots just taped to walls. Loved ones wrote notes as did strangers. A friend of mine lost her brother in the attacks, and when I went to his memorial, her mother handed me her camera and asked me to take photographs because it was her last event with her son. It was if photographing it made it more concrete. I am sure that the shift to making more political work was largely a result of the 9/11 attacks and the awareness that we were living in a pivotal historic moment.

MH: Photography was such an integral part of that moment and your images of the missing posters and other impromptu forms of memorialization add a significant dimension precisely at the threshold of private and public. The private became intelsely political. But since 2001, that threshold has become much more fluid yet, hasn't it? I wonder, are there still private images now, in the age of Facebook and youtube?

LN: I do not think our images are private anymore if we or people close to us have an active life on the screen. Making my family photographs public in my art work feels very different from posting them on Facebook. As someone who has spent my adult life thinking about the meaning of photographs, I choose carefully when I make an image public. Who knows where it will travel and how it will be read. With the overwhelming number of personal photographs out there without their original context, I often feel photographs have lost some depth. We have yet to find out how the generations who have grown up with their childhoods documented on facebook will feel about this in the future. That is if Facebook and all those images survive.

MH: It's interesting what you say about multitude and depth. I recently saw the exhibit about contact sheets at the International Center for Photography. There, the most famous iconic photographic images were embedded in a series of similar images. It's only when the one image is singled out, cropped, framed, that it seems to acquire the sense of inevitability we attribute to iconic photos. We do not experience digital images in this way.

LN: So true. We look at digital images in a time-based sequence which is a very different experience that seeing images singled out or in relation to each other side-by-side. When it comes to family photographs, we are most likely remembering a compilation of images in our minds rather than a single image. This may let us tailor images in our mind more to our liking, and that liking can shift over time.

MH: The focus of your work has shifted away from the domestic, without entirely leaving it behind, it seems to me. This just at the moment when digital photography became increasingly popular. Is this accidental, or are you less interested in digital family photos than you were in the physical snapshots?

LN: Although collectedvisions.net is still active, it's most dynamic years were 1996-2006. I don't know if it is a coincidence that when my engagement in the site slowed down in 2006, it was the first year that digital cameras outsold film ones.

What became of great interest to me in late 1990s/early 2000s – and of course 9/11 was part of that shift – was the widespread use of the family photograph in the media to convey the magnitude of a tragedy. The focus of what seems to be my need to collect shifted from family photographs to media images.

In 2003 I returned to looking at my own family archive against public images. *Reverb,* the computer-based projection piece I completed in 2004 mined my family's archive, newspapers and books, and for the first time, the Internet. Approximately 200 images arranged in a chronological sequence contain both important and little known documentary images of historic events from the Holocaust to the Iraq conflict interwoven with my family snapshots, self-portraits, and travel photographs from the same periods. For the audio, I spent over a year recording direct broadcasts of past historical events, political speeches, and personal testimonies from on-line audio archives and news sources. These fragments play randomly alongside the projected images so the experience of viewing the piece is never the same twice. In our 24/7 news and image packed world, our perceptions are constantly shifting and I wanted to address this in both the form and content of *Reverb*. The images are fleeting but they remain the same, but we are taking in new information every time we look at them.

Excerpt from *Reverb,* installation view

MH: It seems to me that these installation became more focused on politics and history, turning from the family's domestic life to its political performances. You are now collecting newspapers. How has your work changed as a result? Does the politics of the family still figure in this newer work?

Excerpt from *Reverb*

LN: In the latter part of the 1990s, I was struck by the fact that photos of displaced families forced from their homes were regularly printed in newspapers to show the horror of the situation in the former Yugoslavia. I had already been clipping images of people holding family snapshots as a way to show that a loved one had died or was missing, but now I was saving more photographs than usual. As it became clear in March 1999 that NATO was going to bomb Serbia in response to the attacks against Albanians in Kosovo, I decided to start saving the entire front section of the *New York Times* once the bombing started. The World Trade Center was attacked and I kept collecting, and I have not stopped.

Fore Eyes, 2012, ink jet photograph

MH: Your *Photographic Interference* project based on the newspapers still focuses on the domestic, at least in part. The newspaper enters our home, at the breakfast table, on the screen. The family is a powerful trope in the stories of atrocity that you have singled out in some of the installations and your recent photographs. How would you describe the connections here?

LN: What you describe is the disruptive encounter that I think of as photographic interference. There seems to be very little restraint on what is shown above the fold or what appears on the home page of our online news sources, so we are often forced to look. I question what I see in photographs, This questioning is fundamental to my *Photographic Interference* project, and thus my own eyes and the act of looking are very much part of the project.

Look/Not/Look, 2011, ink jet print

MH: Again, it seems to me, you are interfering with our own easy consumption of conventional images, be it family snapshots or photos in newspapers, things we barely look at because we think we know what is there. You take them out of that invisibility and thus you push us to look beyond the frame. And you cover your eyes, reflecting our need, sometimes, to cover ours.

LN: In re-contextualizing photographs, I want to cause a rupture in expectations. Difficult images always create tension making us want to look and not to look. I am an image-maker but also a consumer. Many photographs haunt me, and it often feels as if they get under my skin. The afterlives of both personal and public photographs take on lives of their own. Like the invisible latent image on film, the photographs in our mind have been molded by our memories, fantasies, and imagination. As photographs become more ubiquitous, this malleability has more complicated implications.

Photographic Interference reflects my ongoing interest in the afterlives of images (be it family snapshots, Facebook photos, or images of atrocity), and how knowledge is transmitted and memories are created through photographs. This work uses the most fleeting of media, the print newspaper, and overlays a variety of images onto one another and onto stacks of newspapers. I inscribe the act of looking and remembering that all my work has highlighted. I want to show how and what we continue to see, whether our eyes are open or closed

Lorie Novak is an artist and Professor of Photography & Imaging at New York University Tisch School of the Arts. Her photographs, installations, and Internet projects have been in numerous solo and group exhibitions and her photographs are in many museum permanent collections. She has been the recipient of numerous grants and residences including the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center and the Bogliasco Foundation, (Italy); ArtSway (England), and the Mac Dowell Colony (US). Recent projects have been published in the book *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* and in the online journal *e-misférica*. See www.lorienovak.com for more information.

Marianne Hirsch teaches Comparative Literature and Gender Studies at Columbia University. She is President of the Modern Language Association of America. Among her volumes on family photography are *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), "The Subject of Archives," *é-misférica* (co-ed. 2012) *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, with Leo Spitzer (2010), *Rites of Return: Diaspora, Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (co-ed. 2011), *The Familial Gaze* (ed.1999), and *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997). Hirsch is one of the founders of Columbia's Center for the Study of Social Difference, and co-director of its global initiative "Women Creating Change."

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www.lorienovak.com
www.postmemory.net