

## Transcending the Everyday: an Analysis of the Family Photographs Produced by Cia de Fotos on Flickr <sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article aims to analyze some photographs produced by Cia de Fotos for the Caixa de Sapato (Shoe Box) project linked to Flickr, in the light of discussions about contemporary digital photography and the sharing of feelings and personal narratives in the virtual world. We will reflect on the relationship between home photography, photographic aesthetics and intimacy, because they are images made by professionals in their intimate day-to-day family life, with a strong aesthetic weight. Starting with authors like Flusser, Bourdieu, Chalfen, Soulages, Lister and Murray, we will analyze the aesthetic standards of these images, which are between amateur and professional, private and shared.

**Keywords:** Digital photography, family álbum, Cia de Fotos, memory.

This article aims to provide a conceptual framework about the possibilities of the digital (tying this concept to the new possibilities of production and circulation of images) and its impact on contemporary photography. For this, we must bear in mind that photography went from the analog to the digital only recently, and that with this change some of its precepts were renovated.

We are particularly interested in the phenomenon of the circulation of personal photographs on virtual platforms and the emergence of a possible new aesthetics of everyday life and the ephemeral. Chalfen (2002: 143) has emphasized the importance of the study of what he defines as "home media," a field that is often overlooked and which has its own characteristics. "In summary, home visual medium consist of

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mediated forms of audio-visual communication that are created in private, personal ways and meant for personal and private consumption<sup>4</sup>." Domestic photography is impacted by the digital not only because of its multiplication (with the ubiquity of digital cameras and the reduction of costs involved in the production of photos), as well as a greater circulation through the image-sharing virtual networks.

*Flickr*, as well as other similar platforms, allows the restriction of viewing to a group of selected users, simulating the social practice of displaying albums among people who have affective family ties between them. Also found on the platform are a number of users who seek to circulate their images among a wider audience, who might be professional photographers who benefit from the network in publicizing their work, or who might be amateur photographers who find there a way to practice their hobby of producing and enjoying images. Among these images, however, it is not uncommon to find a number of images that are apparently part of the areas of home, family, the everyday and the intimate. Could this be a new aesthetic trend in contemporary photography?

As an object of analysis, we chose the *photostream* of the Cia de Foto collective, which since 2008 has exposed intimate and everyday images of themselves and their families on *Flickr*. We believe that the Shoe Box project (2008- ) can help us to discuss the prominent issue of the contemporary exhibition of intimacy, and the rise of an "aesthetic of the ephemeral" (Murray, 2008), which has seemingly made the separation between amateur and professional images become less clear.

### **Considerations About Contemporary Photography and the Advent of the Digital**

When using the term "contemporary photography" we must be aware of exactly what we are referring to. The term "contemporary" itself has at least three distinct meanings, as emphasized by Soulages (2009). The first meaning is relative and qualifies the fact that a certain thing shares the same time as another, therefore, it is impossible to say that something is contemporary in itself. In another meaning, the term is used as an absolute, in an anti-historical and self-centered vision in which the current present is

<sup>4</sup> Free translation of the authors: "In summary, home visual medium consist of mediated forms of audio-visual communication that are created in private, personal ways and meant for personal and private consumption."

seen as the center of time. A third meaning is the one suggested by the term "contemporary art," which does not designate a particular historical period or a specific style, but rather a way of making art (Soulages, 2009: 15-16). It is through a paradigmatic approach that we should understand contemporary photography and not through a chronological apprehension.

For Entler (2009), the contemporary is more than a stylistic rule or procedure, and is an attitude of an attempt to position oneself critically in relation to a starting point. According to Tamisier, "Contemporary photography does not make us discover the world of others, but presents itself as an image of our vision, as the narcissistic reflection of our own apprehension of the world"<sup>5</sup> (Tamisier, 2007: 9). For Soulages, this would happen due to photography's breaking with realistic requirements: the photo would no longer be linked to "this was" (ça a été), but rather to "this was represented" ("ça a été joué") (Soulages, 2009: 17).

The advent of digital technology seems to us to have an important role in the reshaping of contemporary photographic theory. Lister (2007) tells us that for most of the 1990s the debate about photography was marked by tragic speeches that foresaw its end, or a radical displacement of its practice. Thus, the death of the photographic practice would be marked by an end determined by digital technology. However, the author points out that gradually theoreticians from the area<sup>6</sup> who investigated the issue recognized that technology by itself means nothing without a cultural and social proposal within a specific historical circumstance.

More than two decades have passed and, instead of the death of photography, we have witnessed the strengthening and renewal of photographic narratives. This configuration was driven by the new technologies of media convergence that enable an intense and diverse photographic production like never before, as well as new forms of consumption with the proliferation of digital media and forms of image circulation on a global scale with the virtual network.

The digital enabled photography to resurge from its decline. Thus, the

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<sup>5</sup> Free translation of the authors: "La photographie contemporaine ne fait plus découvrir le monde des autres, elle se donne bien plutôt comme l'image de notre vision, comme le reflet narcissique de notre propre appréhension du monde".

<sup>6</sup> Lister (2007) cites, among others, Frosh (2003), Manovich (2003) and Bolter and Grusin (1999).

accessibility of these images by circularization in the virtual network, accentuated by the rapid spread of personal sharing, puts the photograph as the preferred language in the practices of contemporary mediated communication.

"It glorifies the photographic because it gives up its own textuality in deference to that of the photograph. It immortalizes the photographic as it becomes the vehicle through which we continue to consume images that have all the appearance and signifying properties of photographs: images that are now inserted into other media forms and circulate in new as well as traditional ways after their traditional material form and technology have been set aside."<sup>7</sup> (Lister, 2007: 252).

Thus, the author makes an effort to start a discussion about the role of technology in the production of an altered environment for photography. Thus, he considers that digital photographic practice works within a cultural and institutional logic and even in a physical landscape that is permeated and altered by information and its technology. For the author, we can only understand the new technological context of photography by observing significant changes in large areas of photographic practice within two widely separated discourses: the theory of contemporary photography and of computer science. Such conclusions will demand new ways of analyzing the digital.

Jones, Batchen et al (2001), in turn, make a delineation of what they see as an epistemological condition that would be the basis for the issue of survival of the photographic act and its culture in the present form. Thus, they situate the photograph as a desire, not as a technology, and while this desire moves the economy, photographic culture will remain active.

Manovich (2003) also offers a reflection on the broader cultural and epistemological changes of the digital. For the author, in this new technological environment we should expect to find signs of photography moving simultaneously in different directions, so that the photograph will be used for new purposes, while it will fight to keep some of its historical purposes.

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Among the new possibilities of digital cameras, we deal with a greater ease of continuous production, since the digital allows for a large storage of images and the opportunity for an instant evaluation of the image achieved by its agents, and can be erased and redone or multiplied by similar possibilities. Thus, the digital brings to photographic practice the constant registering of everyday life: anyone can shoot at any time. This possibility generates a greater intimacy in regards to the photographic act both for photographers and those who pose for the camera. Thus, our digital photo files tend to be extensive and repetitive when seen without a prior selection.

We should point out, though, that with digital cameras and their automatic settings of photographic production, as well as programs for photographic post-editing, the images of everyday life begin to fall into a visual pattern and, to differentiate some from others, the lovers of the photographs start to explore their creativity and subjectivity to achieve a different result.

The search for a differential look and aesthetic can be achieved either by the use of the camera itself (framing, cropping, focus, lighting, colors and subjects), and by the use of software that gives a new dimension to the ideas of Flusser (2002), according to whom the photographer is much more than a camera operator, being an artist who uses it as an instrument to highlight his or her subjective view of the world.

### **Amateur Photography and the Aesthetics of the Ephemeral**

As we can see, technology transformed photography and popularized it even more. Despite values having changed, as well as the family institution - which transformed itself with the industrial world and with the new logics of consumption and social position - the need remained to confirm identity and memory through the image. Industrial relations, beyond having entailed the death of the artistic aura and having legitimized the portrait as the last resort of contemplation, also strengthened the link of photography to the family (Bueno, 2007).

In early 1870, two independent and related innovations, both crucial to the emergence of the snapshot (i.e., instant photography), took place. The first had to do with a gelatin dry plate, which was extremely sensitive. The gelatinous emulsion allowed a breakthrough: it could be applied on a flexible medium. Thus, film rolls

replaced glass plates. With this, photography became affordable and simple for millions of amateurs, enabling instant photography. In 1888, George Eastman, the founder of Kodak, placed the first camera with a simple operation in the hands of consumers. This thereby transformed what had been an arduous and complicated process into something simple and accessible for a much larger number of people.

According to Murray (2008), starting with the advent of Kodak cameras, amateur photography became not only a leisure and popular consumption activity, but also an organized social and artistic practice that had spontaneity, authenticity, naturalness and the emotional as values. Thus, he concludes that in this period two types of amateurs emerged: those who photographed for fun or in order to record special events, and the "serious amateurs" who saw themselves as committed to doing art. With the arrival of the Kodak Brownie cameras in the market for one U.S. dollar, the practice reached the apex of its popularity. Amateur photography came to be defined as a practice that could be easily integrated into the leisure activities of daily living, and could be used to express individual artistic impulses.

For the author, more than anything else, snapshots began to capture the special moments of domestic life. And so, with the massification of cameras, stronger divisions appeared between those who took themselves seriously as artists and those who saw photograph in a more functional way. In 1960 and 1970, the aesthetic of the family snapshot entered the world of photographic art, as a way of pointing out the complicated relationship of this communication medium with reality and the construction of the family and of private life. In this sense, the use of digital cameras represented an even greater change for the amateur practice.

In 2004, after four years on the market, digital cameras began to be sold for more accessible prices, yet the number of people who used film cameras was almost double of those who had joined the digital. However, the production of digital images had already reached the sum of twenty-eight billion, representing six billion more than the analog images produced at the time (Murray, 2008).

In this sense, we can make a historic journey in which the image becomes successively lighter and more ephemeral. The first pictures were framed as paintings, large and heavy. Then came the albums with metal plates. Over time, metal was

substituted by paper and still later by plastic. Then came projection machines, and then the scanning and digitizing of the image. From there it went quickly to storage on CDs, pen drives, internal and external memory, and the Internet itself.

Digital technology has brought new precepts of photographic use (people began to adapt to new ways of using digital cameras, their form of storage and the circulation of images), and the renewal of some theoretical reflections that had always accompanied the history of photography. This paradigm shift has required some revisitations from theoreticians, now with a new perspective in regards to some aspects and genres of photography.

It is important to bear in mind that the albums have become more accessible in this world that experiences the sharing of data and emotions through the digital in the form of virtual communities. And there is the fact that these spaces are delimiters of the constructions of identity and memory in contemporary times. Since seeing is the dynamic act of perceiving the world, attributing meanings and values to it, photography - regarded as the grammar of seeing and being seen - becomes the primordial language for living socially, representing not only a construction of memory but a social self-construction.

Murray (2008) points to a living, immediate, and transient photography when discussing the social use of photography as presented in *Flickr*. It signals therefore a change in the way we relate to the everyday image, in making it less about the rare and special moments of domestic life and more about the immediate, the flow and the common. Furthermore, the author believes that we are witnessing a moment in which the distance that has always existed between professionals and amateurs seems to decrease, since the snapshots of everyday life have become a subject that everyone feels comfortable in discussing with relative authority.

In making this assertion, the author makes it clear that he will not enter into the question of whether these new practices are more liberating, progressive, or participatory; instead of this, they show us a definite change in our temporal relation with the day-to-day image and thus help us to change the way we build our personal narratives and the world around us.

Therefore we can say that the virtual is not just a space for the display and

sharing of images used for a self-construction. It enables a two-way street between the interactive and creative processes, of mutual influence between producer/exhibitor and receiver, i.e., a continuous and open process, the result of which can only be complex identities.

Furthermore, virtual reality and its mind-boggling pace have come to decisively influence our subjectivities and our image repertoires, including our subjectivity. For Sybil (2003), a situation is established with cyberculture in which each individual is pierced by various subjectivities that intersect. The author speaks of "subjective *upgrades*," that is, ephemeral identity models, or subjectivities and identities that are consumed and discarded quickly.

### **The Shoe Box Project on *Flickr***

The photography collective Cia de Foto, formed by eight photographers working for newspapers, magazines, advertising agencies and companies, inaugurated the "Shoe Box" project in 2008. The goal was to create an intimate space where the personal and quotidian production of the photographers could be incorporated and displayed. The photographers then set the challenge of creating a "systematic production where the most commonplace snapshot, the most ordinary, has a photographic identity." These images are an image reference not only for the subjects portrayed here, but they also constitute a showcase of the day-to-day life of the photographers for the general public to navigate on the Internet, from the time they are posted on *Flickr*.

*Flickr* presented itself as one of the most popular sites for free sharing of images (Murray, 2008). In it, each member has a space for sharing photos, in which they can build albums, identify people and get feedback on their photos. This space is part of a decentralized network of other personal pages, a fact that helps in the building of the *Flickr* community and a greater collection of images, thus creating communities through categories, and enabling its users to make comments when discussing them, build contact lists (people who subscribe to your page and who will be alerted about every upload) and groups (spaces dedicated to specific subjects, in which the album receives its members' contributions).

With the help of such tools, *Flickr* has become a collaborative experience with

the exhibition of shared memories, tastes, stories, collections, clippings of everyday life and a constant dialogue between amateurs and professionals who collectively articulate ideas about their photographs and their daily aesthetic. Thus, *Flickr* became one of the more socially active social networks, in addition to being one of the few social networks in which the language is more focused on the image than on the text. That would signal to Murray (2008) the change in the way we relate to everyday images, starting a movement toward the development of a shared aesthetic that does not respect the hierarchy between amateur and professional.

Entler (2011) reflects on the importance of the sharing of the experience through the network, since this allows, at the same time, immersion and interaction that empower practices of creation. To the author, the work of Cia de Fotos on the network would be a metaphor of its own practice of creation, in which the interaction is stronger than the individual actions. Thus, the collective now presents itself as a network that is a type of microcosm analogous to the cosmos of the Internet, which makes up our culture. The author speaks of the collective aspect that involves all forms of creation when we resort to an accumulated knowledge in the techniques used to make a photograph, frame an image, select it and edit it. And we are immersed in the universe of anonymous co-authorship, where the collective is presented as a way to build and maintain an authorial identity without falling into an egocentric and individualistic art.

On the *Flickr* pages of Cia de Fotos, we find photographs of family daily life, images of the banal, the ordinary, the day-to-day. Such images, however, are different from those found in the photo albums of amateurs, since they are well designed in terms of the play of light and shadow, and have sophisticated framing, the colors are treated, and there is a concern with lines and forms. One can perceive that there is a greater care both in the photographic act of the "click" and in the post-editing, as after all we are also dealing with a product collectivized by professionals.



The Images of the Shoe Box project are attractive because they open a window onto the life of another family, exposing their bodies, their daily experiences and their emotions, their intimate and private lives. At the same time, there is the preservation of faces and identity, as something sacred and secret or as a way to keep a mystery about the subject portrayed here.

We find aesthetically rendered images of moments that mark everyday life, of weekends with family and friends, of the stages of childhood, of leisure time and also of difficult and intense moments from the private life of each individual. The album is clearly differentiated from the majority of traditional family albums, which emphasize the moments of exception, the rites of passage and the integration of the family (Leite, 1998; Langford, 2001, Bourdieu 2003). By including everyday moments of daily tedium, sex scenes and personal hygiene, as well as unpleasant although striking situations, Shoe Box gives access to intimacy beyond what we usually choose as "happy memories." An example is the following image (Fig. 1), one of the most commented upon from the collective on *Flickr*.

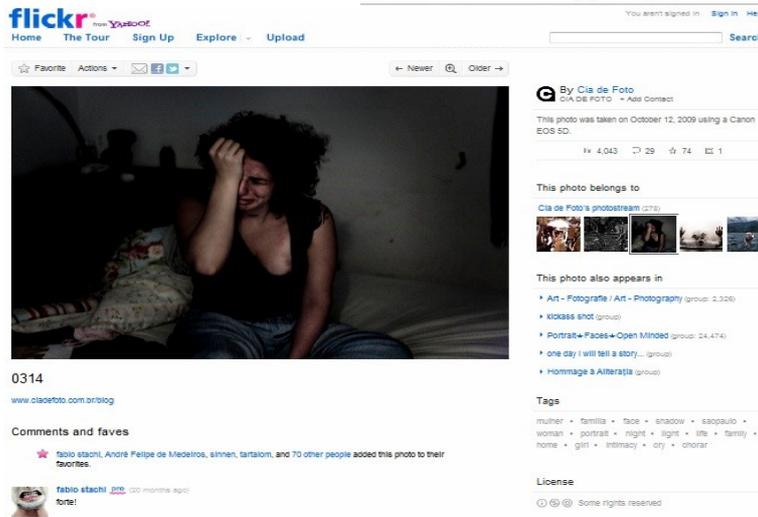


The comments on this image are divided between people shocked with the dramatic effect of this experience and those who marvel at its aesthetic beauty and technical quality. The photograph, probably of the child of one of the group members, contrasts greatly with the type of photography that we find in conventional family albums, which usually omit the times of sickness and distress. Some of the comments are addressed directly to the photographer, asking about the health of the baby. Others emphasize the realism of the picture, which presents "life as it is."

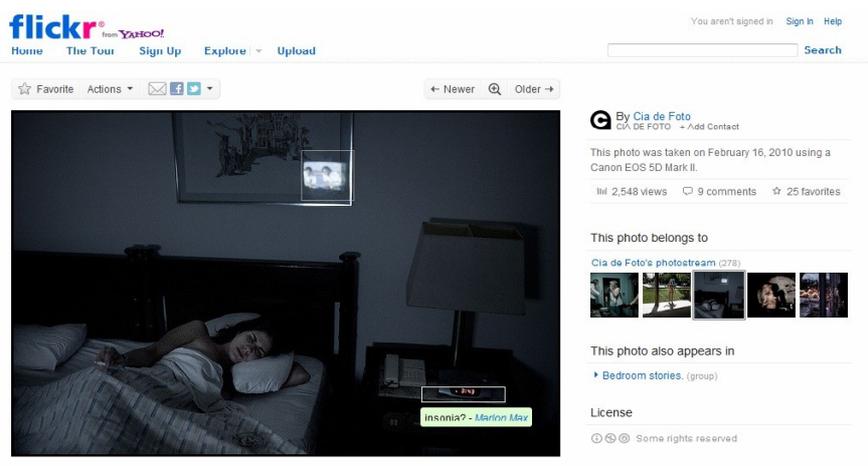
In another picture (Fig. 2), a woman is photographed crying, in a scene that is quite intense (a term used in several comments). It is interesting to note here that most of the 27 comments underscore the truthfulness and the "power" of the situation. Some also direct themselves to the character portrayed, offering a hug or asking that she stop crying. One of the comments, made in Italian, differs from the intense manner of the majority:

"Saying, "intense!" seems a bit reductive, I hate this approach to photography. One must respect it and have a little photographic intelligence, recognizing in this photograph the drama, the story it can tell. Oh, damn Flickr world, what little respect you have for photography with a capital P. My compliments to the true emotion, a complete and elegant form of expression that you are able to print with just one click."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Free translation from the original: "Dire :: - strong! Mi sembra un po 'riduttivo, odio di questo so trattare her photograph. It is necessary rispetto and un po 'di intelligenza fotografic per riconoscere photograph in question drammaticità la', la storia che riesce the raccontare, ahì maledetto mondo di flickr as poco con rispetto hai della PHOTOGRAPHY F maiuscola. I miei veri complimenti per l'emozione, la

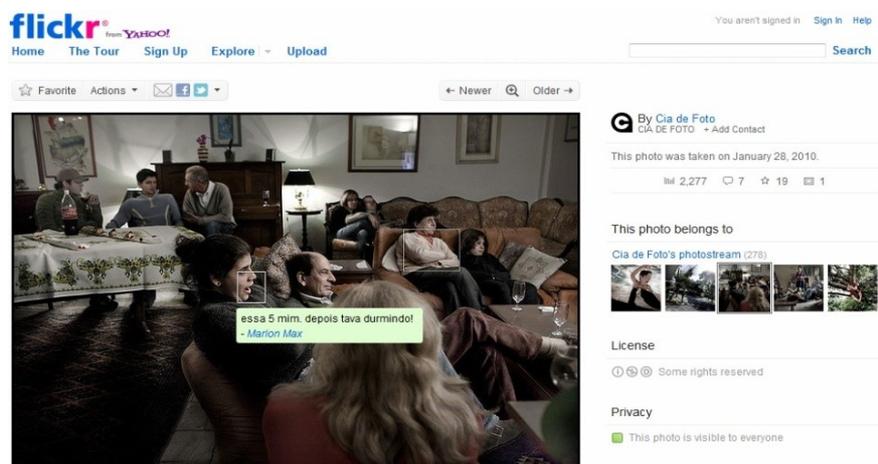


One characteristic of the capturing of the photographs on *Flickr* is the tags that users make for their own photos, calling attention to details that they like and creating a reading for certain elements. With some images, for example, there is a discussion of technical aspects such as lighting, and in others we are helped to perceive narrative details created by the image. We realize that there is a tension between these two aspects. On the one hand, users are led to observe the image as a photograph made by professionals, in a sort of portfolio, since they are looking at the work of a professional group. On the other hand, we are seized by a curiosity about the narrative told there, by the realistic effect produced by amateur everyday photography.



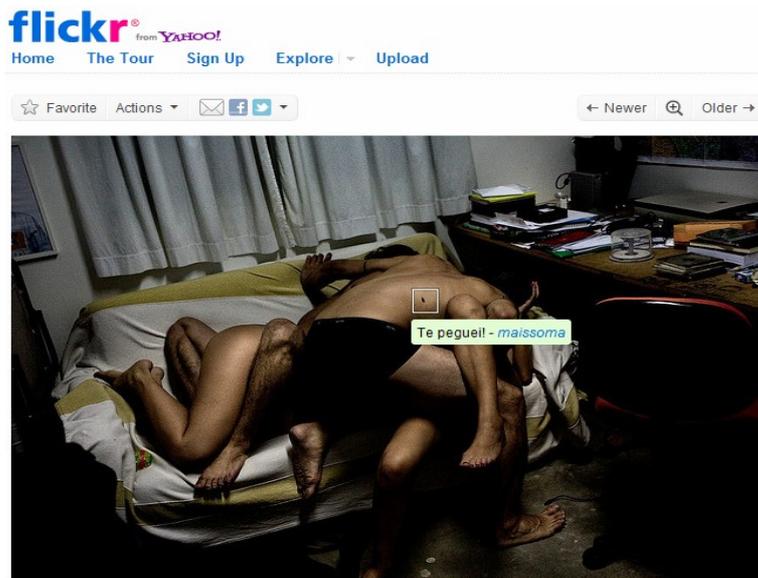
In the photograph that shows a woman watching television in bed (Fig. 3), there  
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 mode raffinato completezza e il di che esprimere know riuscito ad imprimere con un solo scatto ".

are boxes around the time on the clock radio (3:43 a.m.) and around the movie reflected in the framed picture behind her. In one of the few that shows a typical family gathering (Fig. 4), a box calls attention to the yawn of one of the persons present while another highlights the crossed arms of a woman. In this image, the comments are divided again between discussing "the truth" of the photography and the "technical quality" of the image. While one user comments "The end of the family," and another says, "Beautiful photo, the color was very nice." Even in the case of a seemingly trivial image, representing a group of people in a moment of spontaneity and distraction, with a composition that seems sloppy and random (a bottle of cola almost covers the face of one of those present and the person in the front has their back to us), users are induced to comment on the aesthetic quality of the photograph. This is because a closer look is able to recognize that this is not an amateur photograph, that the lighting and composition are actually very well thought out and there's probably post-production involved.



In another photo album, two boxes discuss the lighting of the image. While one comments that he does not like that lighting in particular, the other uses photographic jargon and explains: "This is called flair, and I LOVE IT!!!" However, some photographs draw more attention for their theme, mainly because we know that they portray the daily life of the photographers. This is the case of one of the most controversial photos of the *photostream*, in which a group sex scene is depicted (Fig. 5). Here, the discussion of the 19 comments is not about technique utilized, nor about the beauty of the colors and composition, but about the number of legs and persons who

appear in the image. One of the users uses the tagging feature of the image to ironically emphasize a birthmark of one person: "Gotcha!" In this case, the preservation of the identity of the subjects represented is at stake, which would have been betrayed by the bodily mark of that individual. Again, we are faced here with the display of intimate moments that never were part of a traditional family album.



## Final Considerations

The rapid transformation experienced by photography since the 1980s, which is getting increasingly faster—with the digital image, has renewed some precepts that directed analog photography, and it has also shown new directions for the images we choose to represent our daily lives. Thus, digital technology represents a new technique that has brought decisive influences on the new contexts of a virtual and ephemeral materiality.

What the future of contemporary photography reserves for us cannot yet be answered, because it is still being built with the stones of diverse trends. What we need to do, according to Bauman (2007), is to practice the art of living together with the differences, a cooperation in which each party maintains and develops its own identity and characteristics.

The Cia de Foto's photostream on *Flickr* seems a good example of one of the

aesthetic possibilities of contemporary photography. We believe that the key to understanding the sensitivity created there is in one of the comments found in one of the photos: "Transcending the everyday." Although composed of seemingly mundane and ordinary images, the photographic aesthetic is used in the Shoe Box project as a form of transcendence, a quest to find something in daily life that is beyond its simple representation.

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