

Tracking the Loving Gaze

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ABSTRACT

Tracking the Loving Gaze is a futile attempt to follow, map and capture the way cherished personal photographs are viewed. The authors asked 30 people to look at a preselected photograph that held a special meaning for them, while using an eye tracker. The raw visual data from this process--heat maps, focus maps and scan paths--became the foundation of a body of work that includes darkroom prints, short videos and a limited-edition artist book. Apart from exploring the invisible viewing processes of personal photography, this article introduces the concepts of the detached and the invested viewer, as well as the corresponding concepts of the cold and the loving gaze.

keywords: personal photography; eye tracker; artwork; loving gaze; book art

The substantial body of literature dealing with vernacular, snapshot, everyday, or else personal photography tends to place emphasis on the physical or digital photographs, their representations, meanings, materiality or distribution [1]. Not much attention has been placed on one essential, and at the same time invisible, aspect of personal photography: that of the viewing process. Our art project *Tracking the Loving Gaze* attempts to follow, map and capture the way someone views a cherished personal photograph. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a gaze is “a fixed intent look” [2]. However, the term has been used in a variety of fields of study to mean different things. Indicatively, it has been used in critical theory, sociology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, feminist studies, post-colonial studies and tourism studies [3]. For this project, we use the word “gaze” to describe the act of intent viewing and “loving gaze” to describe the act of intent viewing by an individual who has a unique personal connection with a photograph. While we use eye-tracking technology, a technological tool that claims that it can capture an individual’s gaze, to track the loving gaze, we are well aware of the futility of the attempt. The project is really about the impossibility of fully communicating the affect qualities of personal photographs to others and of using technology to accomplish this goal.

Viewing Personal Photography

Mass Photography vs Individual Photographs

Kessels’ *24 Hrs in Photos* filled a floor-to-ceiling gallery space with snapshot photography. The images downloaded and used by the artist had been uploaded on Flickr, the online photo sharing platform, over the course of a single day in 2013. The photographs were printed on 3x4 inch

photographic paper and arranged in piles in the exhibition space. The installation is both flexible and adaptable to the needs of a variety of spaces; it has since travelled to a number of venues.

We experienced this work at the *Secondhand* group exhibition that opened in August 2014 at Pier 24 Photography in San Francisco, USA [4]. The installation comments on the sheer quantity of photographic output, which appears to be both awe-inspiring and overwhelming (Fig. 1a). Furthermore, the visual content of the photographs---weddings, births, smiling friends and families, landscapes and plates of food---testify to the fact that everyday photography is guided by social conventions that determine what is considered appropriate and desirable to photograph and how. After all, what is considered “natural” to photograph is a cultural idea [5] that is usually socially regulated [6]. This, in addition to the affordances of photographic equipment, make the resulting photographs seem visually uniform, unsurprising, almost cliché. It is easy to dismiss these photographs as images that “don’t matter,” as images “lost in the geological strata of Internet time” [7]. But anyone who owns cherished personal photographs knows that visual representation is only the tip of the iceberg that we call meaning.

When examining individual photographs -- instead of mass photography -- the landscape of personal photography changes completely. Personal photography, be it offline (in family albums, in frames, on fridges, etc.) or online (on social media, websites, etc.), has a specific context, audience, materiality and purpose; it has a biography. We have argued elsewhere that a photographic image can have multiple and parallel biographies and that these biographies can be broken down, for analysis’ sake, into three distinct but interrelated forms: social, material and value [8]. The *social biographies* of a photograph can include various “events” and interactions with “actors” that shape its contents, materiality, values, uses and narratives. It can also include a photograph’s movement through time and space. *Material biographies* can include the form the photograph is presented in and the context it can be found. The concept of a photograph’s *value biographies* might refer to parameters of perceived value and how value may change over time, in various contexts and in the hands of different people.

Shifts in various photographic ecosystems, such as the change from a family album to an institutional archival context, or the change from an online social platform to an exhibition space, can influence the biography of a photographic image and therefore the meaning and uses of its content. Stripping personal photography from its social, material and value biographies renders it nonsensical, repetitive and unimaginative, much like the photographs in Kessels’ exhibition.

The tension between mass photography and individual photographs is evident in Kessels’ installation at Pier 24 Photography. Let’s take as an example Fig. 1b, a close-up of Kessels’ installation. In the center of the image there is a photograph of a man tenderly holding a newborn baby. From undistinguished, mass photography, we turn our attention to a unique individual image that a viewer is likely to momentarily connect with and have feelings of empathy [9]. After all the viewer understands that for the people depicted in these photographs, or the photographer himself/herself, each picture has a specific meaning, affective value and use. Furthermore, the viewer can bring in his/her own similar experiences.



Figs 1a and 1b. Erik Kessels, general view and detail of *24 Hrs in Photos*, 2013. At the *Secondhand* exhibition (1 Aug 2014--31 May 2015), Pier 24 Photography. (Photo and © Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert, 2014)

The Loving and the Cold Gaze

Now, let's take the discussion a step further. Let's assume we have two individuals looking at the photograph of the man with the baby (Fig. 1b): (a) a random visitor who stumbles upon this image and (b) the actual man who is holding the baby in the photograph. Their viewing processes will most probably be radically different. We are of course aware that each observer is a unique individual and his/her interpretation will be equally unique. We also take into consideration that the viewing process will vary based on the frequency of viewing the same photograph. We are not referring here to the various interpretations of a photograph, but to the viewer's level of involvement and affective engagement when confronted with a personal photograph.

The random visitor, a bystander who knows nothing about this photograph, is viewing an encrypted image. Without the ability to decode the photograph, the visitor depends on common knowledge and social understanding (a newborn with a male: the latter must be the father), and empathy (the viewer recognizes that kind of smile or has had similar experiences) to make sense of the photograph. The viewer is also making sense of the photograph in the context of an art installation by a specific artist in a specific show. *She/he is a detached viewer and her/his gaze is most likely a cold one.* If the man represented in the photograph stumbles upon this photograph today, at one of Kessels' installations, he would certainly be surprised at the new context in which his photograph is found. He might pick up the photograph and recall the experience of holding the baby; the baby's movements, sounds and smell, the temperature of the room, the feel of the blanket. He might even smile the same smile while reminiscing about how the baby has grown. *He is an invested viewer and his gaze is a loving one.*

The loving gaze uses photographs of familiar people, spaces and objects to connect to something external to the frame; stories, experiences, emotions and ideas. That is, the focus is not on the representation itself, but on associated multisensory experiences. The eyes of the person with the loving gaze are like two small projectors, animating a still image with *specific* and concrete stories, ideas and feelings. This animated presence does not, however, reside in the photographic image, the photograph itself nor the viewer, but in the viewing process: the meeting between the

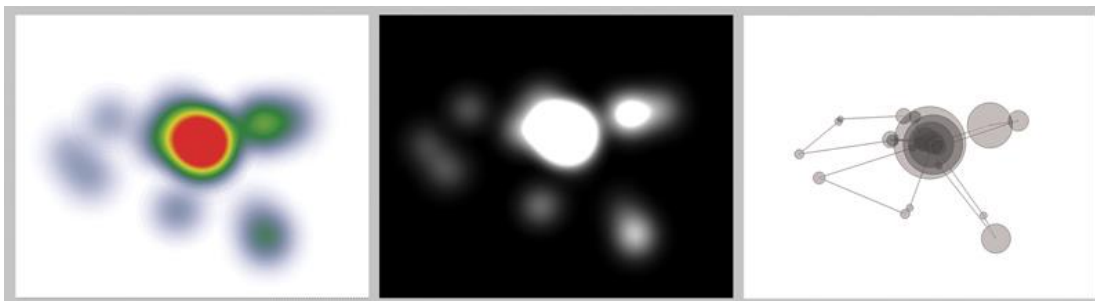
invested viewer and the photograph. Furthermore, some pictures that are not born digital have an extra element of materiality---the paper, the photo album, the framed photograph---that can be touched, handled or displayed. The materiality of the photograph also becomes a part of the viewing process.

When the loving gaze is absent, as in the case of a detached viewer, the image becomes silent, mute and still. The detached viewer can recognize the representations in Fig. 1b (of a man, a baby, an event, etc.), but the viewing process does not animate the image in the same way as the loving gaze. Assumed stories, associations and feelings might emerge, albeit not specific enough to be classified as the loving gaze. As the “projectors” are turned off, there is no animated image invested with specific affective memories. In this case, photographs appear to be cliché, much like the millions of similar images that are circulating the web or can be found offline.

The *Tracking the Loving Gaze* Project

Our collaborative art project titled *Tracking the Loving Gaze* is a futile attempt to follow, map and capture the loving gaze, emphasizing the viewing processes of personal photography by invested viewers. To explore this, we used an eye tracker to map how people view photographs they love. Eye trackers are usually used in neuroscience, psychology, marketing, and human-computer interaction research. It has been claimed that eye-tracking technology can measure points of gaze and fixations (where and for how long one is looking) [10]. Using a scientific process that involves technology to map something that is really impossible to map is an essential part of the project. This tension between “cold” scientific, technological methods and the “warmth” of loving feelings, runs through the whole project.

We asked 30 people to share with us a photograph they love, or one carrying a very special meaning. The participants were colleagues, friends or students from the Cyprus University of Technology who were willing to participate in this creative experiment. The participants were asked to look at their photograph on a computer screen while using an eye tracker. An associate researcher, Dr. Thomas Photiades, who is an eye tracker specialist, collected the photographs and helped with the experiment from start to finish. At the end of the experiment, we asked participants to provide a title and description for their photograph, as well as fill in a consent form. Each participant’s first name or pseudonym, age, photograph title and description were then recorded as part of the work. An eye tracker provides raw visual data, for example, heat maps, focus maps and scan paths (see Fig. 2a, 2b and 2c). This data became the foundation of our project.

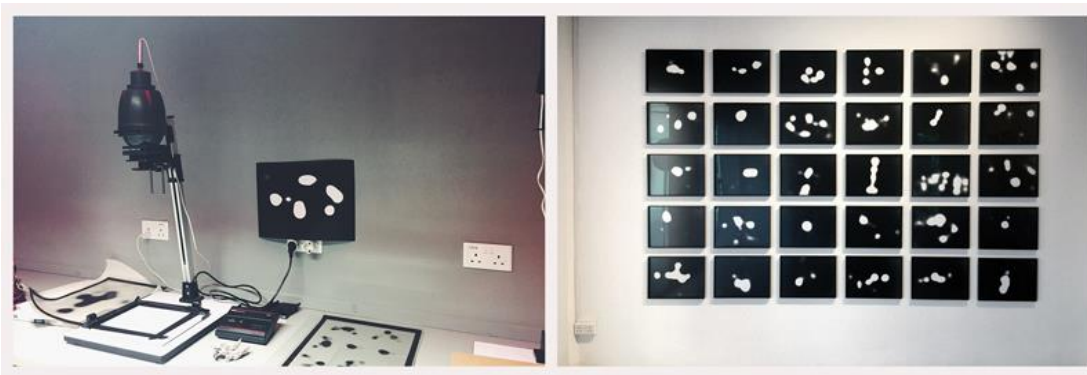


Figs 2a, 2b and 2c: (L-R) Example of a heat map, a focus map and a scan path (© Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Omiros Panayides, 2018)

The preliminary results of the project were shown at a group exhibition along with the work of American artist Shella Pinkel (USA) and German artist Tim Otto Roth titled *Phenomenological Lightworks* at NeMe Arts Centre in Limassol, Cyprus in September 2018. The exhibition was curated by Yiannis Colakides and Helene Black and focused on camera-less photography (Fig. 3b). Our work was divided into three parts: *Focus Maps*, *Absences* and *Scan Paths*. A limited-edition artist book published in 2019 joined the work as a fourth and final part. During the exhibition, in order to emphasize viewing processes over representation, none of the original photographs participants brought in were shown. Nevertheless, the book gave us the opportunity to showcase some of the original photographs alongside other visual material.

Tracking the Loving Gaze: Focus Maps

For the first part of the work---*Tracking the Loving Gaze: Focus Maps*---we printed the participants' focus maps on film and then developed these in the photographic darkroom on gelatin silver print paper (see Figs 3a and 3b). Effectively, we started with the mainly digital photographs that the participants had provided, tracked the participants' loving gaze with the help of a technological device, and fixed that gaze on photographic paper in the traditional darkroom. As the eye tracking process required a unique photograph and a few seconds to register the participants' gaze, so did the darkroom process: it required a few seconds for the print to register and develop and the final result was a unique photograph. The 30 prints, each measuring 12x14.5 inches, are 1 of 1 prints. In a sense, we produced a unique registration of a unique loving gaze.



Figs 3a and 3b: Focus maps printed in the darkroom and photo from the exhibition titled *Phenomenological Lightworks*. (© Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Omiros Panayides, 2018)

Figures 4a and 4b respectively comprise a photograph provided by one of the 30 participants, Irene, and her resulting focus map. Irene brought in a photograph she loves; one that shows herself (in the middle), her daughter and her first grandchild. She aptly named the photograph, “Three generations of women: grandmother, daughter, granddaughter.” The white spots indicate where Irene’s gaze lingered the longest and reveal that she paid equal attention to all three individuals in the picture, effectively creating a loving triangle.



Figs 4a and 4b: Irene, 56 years old, “Three generations of women” Original photograph and focus map (© of original photograph: Irene Touringou, © of focus map: Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Omiros Panayides, 2018)

Tracking the Loving Gaze: Absences

The second part---*Tracking the Loving Gaze: Absences*---consists of five images of original photographs superimposed with focus maps (see, for example, Fig. 5). In this case, it is impossible for the viewer to see what the owner of the photograph saw, because the area most viewed by the owner is obscured by white spots. The idea behind these prints is that the detached viewer can never really see what the invested viewer sees. For example, the viewer of the photograph in Fig. 5 cannot see the faces of the two sisters with any clarity. The owner of the photograph---an invested viewer---with her own viewing process, has denied access to the affective content of her photograph to the detached viewer with a cold gaze.



Fig. 5: Myrofora, 20 years old, “My only sister.” (© Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Omiros Panayides, 2018)
Tracking the Loving Gaze: Scan Paths

The third part---*Tracking the Loving Gaze: Scan Paths*---is an installation of four videos. With the help of four pocket projectors, visitors could follow the loving gaze of a photograph’s owner in “real time.” The participants’ titles and descriptions are an integral part of the work, but the representation---what the photograph shows---is not available. By reading the story that accompanies each video, the viewer can map distance, emphasis and

connections between elements, but is limited to conjecture around the actual content of the image. For example, Amaliana, a 19-year-old student, had recently lost her mother and brought in a cellphone photograph of her and her mum just before she passed away. Figure 6 shows some screenshots of the video. The text that accompanies the video reads: “*Mum*. I love this photograph because it depicts a moment in my life that I’ll never forget, in a place I love. My mum is not alive any longer so photographs of her are very important for me nowadays.” The viewer struggles to recreate the photograph with the meagre clues provided: an evocative text and the eye movement of Amaliana’s loving gaze.



Fig. 6: Amaliana, 19 years old, “*Mum*.” Three screenshots of a scan path video. Video duration: 26 seconds (© Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Omiros Panayides, 2018)

Artist book

In 2019, we produced the final part of our project: a limited-edition book in 100 numbered copies (Fig. 6) that includes at the back an original darkroom print (4x6 inch) of a focus map. The book, as a medium, was an intended outcome from the beginning and as such, renegotiates the work that was produced in previous steps, attempting an alternative, more intimate viewing experience of the project.



Fig. 7. *Tracking the Loving Gaze* artist book, 2019. Book design: Philippus Vasiliades (© Omiros Panayides & Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert, 2019).

The book engages with the viewing processes of 19 participants by narrating their personal loving gaze with layout decisions using the data collected. The reader of the book is engaged with the personal gaze of each participant and may interpret the final outcome based on his/her own experiences and triggers. As one flips through the book's images, heat maps, tracking paths and pieces of text, he/she fills in the missing parts with personal experiences and memories. For example, in the spread in Fig. 8, the photograph of a newborn baby next to its owner's scan path and heatmap could trigger the reader's personal heatmap/scan path of a comparable experience. By positioning the participant's heat map next to it, we are visualizing the "warm" feeling towards parts of the image, emphasizing what matters most to the owner of the photograph. The reader can sense the intensity and focused attention of the owner of the picture and can connect, however briefly and superficially, with the photograph owner's loving gaze.



Fig. 8: *Tracking the Loving Gaze* artist book, 2018, spread of pages 18-20. Book design: Philippos Vasiliades. (© Omiros Panayides & Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert, 2019)

Conclusion

Everyday photography has been described as mute, unimaginative and cliché. We argue that it can appear like that to the detached viewer, but something captivating can happen when an invested viewer gazes upon a cherished photograph. The loving gaze of the invested viewer can animate an image with particular stories, feelings and thoughts. With the *Tracking the Loving Gaze* project, we focus on the invisible and often neglected viewing processes of personal photography and engage in an exercise of recording and capturing the loving gaze. The use of a scientific method with a specific "gaze-catching" technology is at odds with the affective practices of the participants and their meaning-making processes. In conclusion, *Tracking the Loving Gaze* is a homage to the viewing processes of personal photography and the futility of attempting to capturing them with scientific methods and technological tools.

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