How Do Photographers Challenge Society’s Boundaries of Privacy and Social Morality in Contemporary Photographic Art?

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Abstract

In today's digital age, the concept of private space is undergoing a profound transformation, mainly due to advancements in technology and the pervasive influence of media. As a powerful visual medium, photography plays a pivotal role in shaping and reflecting these changes. It can capture personal moments, document public scenes, and even challenge societal norms regarding privacy. However, navigating the boundaries of private space in photography is a complex and contentious issue. On the one hand, photographers can explore the nuances and depths of intimate spaces by capturing intimate scenes or creating intimate portraits. This approach can lead to a deeper understanding of human emotions and relationships. However, it also raises ethical concerns regarding the subjects' privacy rights. Photographers must tread carefully to avoid violating these rights and sparking social controversy. On the other hand, photographers can choose to protect the privacy of their subjects by employing techniques such as blurring, cropping, or obscuring some aspects of the image. While this preserves the subjects' privacy, it may also diminish the expressive and artistic impact of the work. Finding the right balance between artistic expression and ethical responsibility is crucial.

Keywords

Public space, Intimate space, Contemporary Photography, Aggression

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the contemporary challenges posed by photography to notions of privacy and public morality. The delineation of public and private spheres, traditionally clear in societies, becomes increasingly blurred in the modern era of pervasive photography and video. Accessibility afforded by technology exacerbates issues such as unauthorized photography and online dissemination, prompting a critical examination of the ethical implications of contemporary photographic practices. Subsequently, the study investigates the conceptualization of privacy and publicity by photographers, who, through their artistic endeavors, challenge societal conventions by portraying intimate aspects of life, thereby influencing the discourse of public representation in photography. Finally, the thesis addresses the portrayal of taboo subjects in contemporary photographic art and the potential for exploitation therein. While such exploration can enrich our understanding of human experiences, it necessitates a nuanced consideration of ethical boundaries, particularly in the depiction of intimate spaces that may be motivated by factors such as sexuality and rights.
2. Challenges of contemporary photography to privacy and public morality

2.1 The connection between the concepts of privacy and public space and family photography

In ancient Roman and Western cultures, a distinct boundary existed between private and public spaces. Privacy was primarily associated with the domestic realm of the family, delineating a much narrower concept than the expansive Roman domus or Greek oikos. On the other hand, public life encompassed activities beyond these intimate spaces (Newell, 2018).

This historical understanding of privacy and public space bears resemblance to contemporary conceptions. The concept of intimate family spaces is mirrored in photography, particularly in the context of family photography. These photographs are often taken to document family members, anniversaries, celebratory events, and other familial occasions, serving as a means of preservation. Family photography can be seen as a prototype of contemporary intimate photography.

In family photography, meticulous attention to lighting and composition is often eschewed to capture moments using natural light in snapshots and posed shots. Despite their seemingly casual nature, these photographs usually capture the intimacy and emotional expressions shared among family members, reinforcing their bonds. Moreover, family photography frequently captures significant moments and milestones, such as a child's first steps, reunions, or other special events. These photographs memorialise these moments and individuals, forming an integral part of the genre of intimate photography.

2.2 The blurring of privacy and public space

The line between privacy and the public sphere is becoming increasingly blurred with the rise of contemporary photographic art and video. Charlotte Cotton (2016) notes that our visual creations and online activities erode traditional distinctions between public and private expressions, creating more potential selves. This trend is particularly evident on social media platforms through ubiquitous surveillance and advances in photographic technology.

Social media has enabled individuals to easily share their daily lives, family interactions, and other previously private activities with a broader audience. This trend of sharing family-oriented photography fosters social interaction and connectivity among people.

Surveillance technologies in public spaces, such as those used by businesses or government offices, often inadvertently capture private areas, including parts of surrounding homes. Additionally, people captured in live-action shots for electronic maps must be made aware of being photographed, further blurring the lines between public and private spheres.

Advancements in photography technology, particularly the accessibility of smartphone cameras, have democratised photography. People can now capture moments in their lives without the need for professional equipment or studios. However, this ease of capturing moments can sometimes lead to unintentional violations of others' privacy.

Overall, the rapid growth of social media, increased surveillance, and technological advancements in photography have blurred the boundaries between private and public spaces. This shift has led to a more fluid division between personal privacy and public exposure, impacting how our private lives are exposed or monitored.

2.3 The challenge of contemporary photography to traditional public definition

In contemporary photography, a significant challenge to public morality is the issue of subject knowledge and consent. This is a complex matter as photographers must obtain permission from their subjects to avoid potential privacy violations, mainly when the subjects are vulnerable or unaware of the consequences of being photographed. On the other hand, as a contemporary art photographer, there is a need to sometimes intrude on the privacy of others to capture untold experiences and intense emotions. For instance, Merry Alpern's work in "Dirty Windows" showcases intimate moments from a strip club dressing room opposite her apartment, exploring themes of eroticism and intimacy. Alpern, who was single then, found the couples' interactions intriguing, delving into details such as exchanges of money, gestures, and potential future encounters, driven by a sense of voyeuristic curiosity.

Alpern did not include identifying markers to protect the subjects' identities in her portraits. However, the personal characteristics of the subjects, such as tattoos or facial features, could still be discerned. Despite her efforts, the subsequent exhibition of her work could be seen as an invasion of privacy, as Alpern did not engage with her subjects during or after the shoot, remaining unaware of their identities. This lack of communication and disregard for their
privacy could be considered offensive and irresponsible.

In contrast, photographers like Gillian Wearing take a more respectful approach by consulting with their subjects in advance. In her series "Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say" (1992-1993), Wearing asks her subjects to hold up a writing board with their private thoughts while being photographed in a public place. This method allows for a direct and honest expression of the individual's inner thoughts while respecting their autonomy and right to refuse participation. Wearing's approach contrasts with Alpern's voyeuristic style, highlighting the importance of communication and consent in ethical photography practices.

3. How contemporary photographers define privacy and public perception through their work

In the development of contemporary art photography, some photographers have actively sought to blur the boundary between public and private spheres in modern society. Charlotte Cotton's exhibition "Public, Private, Secret" (2016) delves into this phenomenon, exploring the roles of photography and video in shaping identity and redefining the social conventions that delineate our public and private selves.

With the proliferation of social media and technological advancements, there has been a notable increase in the interconnectedness of people's lives, leading to a heightened exposure of personal information on the internet. This deliberate blurring of boundaries, spearheaded by photographers, is a focal point for this chapter.

The blurring of the boundaries between privacy and the public can take many ways, one of which is to capture intimate moments of people in public places. These intimate moments are also expressions of the photographer's exploration of the relationships of their subjects. In Dirty Windows, for example, Merry Alpern is just one of the photographers who explores the relationships of those behind the window. They often capture real photographs of people in the street, capturing their emotions and behaviour in public.

For example, in Nobuyoshi Araki's collection Tokyo Story (1989), Araki photographed a woman hiding on a street corner (see Figure 1), with the street scene and elements surrounding the woman being underexposed to create a sense of isolation and privacy. This technique also conveys the alienation and loneliness of the subject, which is an extension of the subject's emotions. The photographer's approach is subjective, intimate, and without the permission of the subject. He captures moments of vulnerability and intimacy in his photographs, revealing their intimate behaviour in public places.

Furthermore, the work in Keizo Kitajima's Photo Express Tokyo (1979) also reveals the personal moments and connections that can occur even in the most public of spaces by showing a man's hand holding a woman's head (see Figure 2), which could be any relationship between them, but the action is intimate, even though this is not an action
that would take place in a so-called public place, and the filming of such an intimate action blurs the boundaries between public and private. The subjects may be unaware that the camera is pointed at them at Keizo Kitajima. In Keizo Kitajima's work, he emphasises small details and intimate moments. However, he does not directly show the people or the background, instead using high-contrast, high-contrast black and white photographs to show the ambiguous and intimate relationship between two people while presenting the public with a new and different way of looking at boundaries, the relationship between privacy and the public, and even social order.

![Image](Image)

Figure 2. Keizo Kitajima, Photo Express Tokyo.

4. How taboo themes are represented in the contemporary world of photographic art, and the exploitation in the art world

4.1 Taboo subjects in contemporary photographic art

In contemporary photographic art, taboo subjects are socially unacceptable or culturally sensitive, varying in context and cultural interpretation. This section focuses on representing such subjects in contemporary photography, acknowledging that not all taboo topics have been documented, preserved, or shared with the public. However, contemporary photography offers a unique platform to explore these themes meaningfully and thoughtfully.

In contemporary photography, the predominant approach to documenting taboo subjects is often documentary. This approach emphasizes realistic scenes, natural light, and unembellished compositions, eschewing the typical aesthetic enhancements in portraiture or landscape photography. This method presents a challenge, as it requires the photographer to maintain control over the image's aesthetics while navigating complex ethical considerations, such as informed consent and privacy issues during the shoot. Due to the taboo nature of the subject, informing the subject in advance may only sometimes be possible.

Despite these challenges, documentary-style photography can offer a powerful and authentic representation of taboo subjects. By presenting these subjects in their unadorned and unrehearsed state, photographers can capture a high level of authenticity that is artistically compelling and ethically charged.

In the series Drag Queens (1974) by contemporary American photographer Nan Goldin, for example, the daily lives and social circles of the male transvestites with whom she lives are portrayed with realism and compassion. The intimate photography itself is a way of breaking the taboo of social distance, and with the marginalised group of male transvestites, the series is both artistic and documentary. This documentary approach to the subject's life is also evident in Nan Goldin's other collection, "I'll Be Your Mirror". In this collection, she documents the effects of different illnesses on people, including AIDS, drug addiction, rehabilitation, and those who have suffered violence. The pain and suffering of these people are exposed to her camera. Nan Goldin's documentary photography is not only an art form but also a social phenomenon and a social issue that the general public is not aware of and has not published. And an experience that can only be known by those who are close to the victims or the subjects themselves.
4.2 Ethical issues of exploitation in artistic activity

There is often a lot of exploitation in artistic activity. In the process of photographing, some photographers use legitimate or illegitimate means to photograph and gaze at their models, and in the process of photographing, the gaze itself is a form of exploitation of the subject by the object. This is a second level of exploitation in the secular sense, as the photographs are then commercially exhibited and sold. In this process, the fee paid by the photographer to the model and the public opinion and moral influence on the model after the shoot far exceed the value paid by the photographer, and the financial or fame gained from the photograph of the subject far exceeds the return paid to the model. In this case, the photographer will often only attribute these financial and prestige gains to his or her 'artistic inspiration'. Thus, during a shoot or an intimate shoot, the model is subjected to "moral exploitation" and "economic exploitation" beyond the monetary value.

In photography, 'mental exploitation' of the subject by the photographer and 'moral exploitation' by society are often unavoidable. 'Mental exploitation' occurs when photographers direct subjects to pose against their will for creative purposes. For example, Araki used Kaori's nude photos without consent, arguing that art should transcend monetary concerns. This exploitation can happen during and after the shoot, leading to moral exploitation by society and traditional culture. Despite the photographer receiving credit and benefits, the model may be targeted by a patriarchal society.

Additionally, the model may face societal judgment for exposing her body, further exacerbating the issue. The more these images are promoted in the media, the wider the market for the photographer's work, but the model may endure 'mental exploitation' and 'moral exploitation.' The neglect of the rights of the photographed person and wholesale plundering is not justified by exploitation and moral judgment. Photography is inherently aggressive, and considering the subject's wishes might hinder the production of iconic works. For instance, Araki's "Tokyo Lucky Hole" documents Japan's entertainment industry and society, including sex workers, reflecting societal development. Despite ethical concerns, such documentation plays a significant role in social development.

Financial exploitation is also a significant concern in photography, often overlooked. Photographers may shoot with models under the pretext of art, but all the proceeds go to the photographer. However, the model is a crucial part of the creation and deserves a share of the photographer's earnings. Many photographers do not compensate their models adequately, instead exploiting them financially under the guise of artistic expression. For example, Araki referred to Kaori as his 'muse' and claimed her as 'his woman,' blurring the lines between art and exploitation. This kind of moral and labour exploitation, disguised as artistic inspiration and emotional connection, does not justify ignoring the model's labour and rightful compensation.

5. Conclusion

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between privacy and public morality in contemporary photography. It aims to explore how photographers today define the boundaries between private moments and public displays. Furthermore, it objectively analyses contemporary photography's portrayal of taboo subjects, voyeurism, and the ethics surrounding the exploitation of models by photographers. The paper seeks to illustrate the evolving relationship and boundaries between the public sphere and artistic expression through these discussions. It highlights the evolution of intimate photography, originally stemming from family albums, and how photographers continuously push and blur the lines between private and public realms. This evolution has led to a significant shift in the public's perception of "private space" from the past to the present. With the development of information and digital media, different photographers will present more definitions of private and public in their works in the future.

References


