

Scrapbook Love Story
Memory and the Vernacular Photo Album

September 7 - December 15, 2018



Unidentified Compiler, [Photobooth Portrait Album Page], ca. 1940. Courtesy The Walther Collection.

Opening Reception: Thursday, September 6, from 6 – 8pm
The Walther Collection Project Space
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The Walther Collection presents *Scrapbook Love Story: Memory and the Vernacular Photo Album*, an exhibition of albums and scrapbooks from the 20th century. Given the ubiquity of photo albums and their complexity as visual objects, it is surprising how little critical attention such albums have received as historical documents and artistic achievements. This exhibition brings together a select group of distinctive photo albums from the 1890s to the early 1970s, compiled by assorted makers to record their everyday experiences in love, in war, and in domestic tranquility.

Following the increasing availability of affordable photographic tools, along with the proliferation of print media in the early twentieth century, the photo album provided an accessible format for narrating, commemorating, and shaping everyday stories. In this exhibition, over twenty selected albums show the ingenuity and passion with which they were assembled, including surprising and dynamic arrangements of photographs, handwritten notes, and ephemera on the page. One album was compiled by the alumni of the Ohio State School for the Blind during several reunions; another contains the obsessive recollections of serviceman Richard Hicks Bowman during and after World War II, vividly illustrated with brightly colored stamps and souvenirs; yet another describes a blossoming college romance through collages of heartfelt correspondence and memorabilia—a lasting record of one couple’s courtship and hopeful future.

Such tactile, intimate chronicles demonstrate that vernacular photo albums derive not only from the plush Victorian portrait album, but also a more quotidian and impressionistic domestic archive, the “book of scraps.” Scrapbooks began as friendship albums, incorporating notes, sketches, and signatures from communal circles, and, later, clippings, cards and other ephemera. In this way they are simultaneously private, domestic records, while also drawn from publically circulated material. When shared within self-appointed communities, they distill a moment in time and communicate its particularities—acting as the visual and material equivalent of oral histories.

These diverse volumes also demonstrate two salient characteristics of the modern photo album: a lively engagement between photographers and subjects willing to pose or enact spontaneous performances; and the makers’ subsequent creativity in arranging, cutting, and collaging images and texts. This act of compiling signals an innovation in autobiographical storytelling, in which everyday images could be appropriated, reassembled, and concretized into vibrant narratives.

Scrapbook Love Story aims to reconstitute these powerful photographic objects and memories—no longer exclusively of personal significance—within a larger cultural context. Such private histories are also an expression of social histories, revealing contemporaneous attitudes toward family, gender, race, and nation. As a precursor to the pervasive digital compilations found on social media platforms today, the vernacular scrapbook and photo album captures a distinctly modernist impulse to document, to archive, and to interpret our everyday lives.

Scrapbook Love Story: Memory and the Vernacular Photo Album is organized by Brian Wallis, with curatorial coordination from Sara Softness, and support from Felix Ho Yuen Chan and Doris Lin.

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Scrapbook Love Story is the third exhibition in The Walther Collection's multi-year series focused on the history of vernacular photography—utilitarian imagery made primarily for commercial or personal purposes—which considers its social and historical significance in a wide range of applications. Entitled "Imagining Everyday Life: Aspects of Vernacular Photography," the series will include five exhibitions in New York and an international scholarly symposium on October 19 and 20, 2018, organized by Columbia University, Barnard College, and The Walther Collection. It culminates in May 2020 with a comprehensive exhibition organized by Brian Wallis at The Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm, Germany, accompanied by a catalogue co-published with Steidl.

The Walther Collection is an art foundation dedicated to the critical understanding of historical and contemporary photography and related media. Through a program of original research, in-depth collecting, scholarly publications, and extensive exhibitions, The Walther Collection aims to highlight the social uses of photography and to expand the history of the medium. At its three-building campus in Neu-Ulm, Germany, its Project Space in New York City, and with traveling installations worldwide, The Walther Collection presents thematic and monographic exhibitions drawn from its expansive holdings of modern and contemporary photography and media art from Africa, China, Japan, and Europe, nineteenth-century European and African photography, and vernacular lens-based imagery from across the globe. The collection's exhibition program is complemented by public lectures and screenings, international scholarly symposia, and a critically acclaimed series of catalogues and monographs co-published by Steidl.