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Albume fotografice private în colecții din Transilvania: istorie, practică
și utilizare până în anii 1950.

Private photo albums in Transylvanian collections: history, practice, use
until the 1950s

PhD Thesis Summary

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Keywords: history of photography, photo album, feminist art history, private photography practices, transylvania, collection, amateur photographer, microhistory

Researching private photo albums requires empathy and, perhaps more importantly, self-reflection. As they are performative objects, it is impossible otherwise: the images immediately trigger interpretative processes, and my role as a researcher is to guide these as consciously as possible. These conscious reflections give the basis and the structure for my thesis, for which the various disciplines - especially art history, media studies and visual anthropology - have provided the framework and inspiration. Grounded in these principles, my reflections are not only a young woman's emotional engagement with the images of the past, but also an analysis that can be integrated into the contemporary art historical discourse.

The difficulty and the advantage of the topic is that there is no single established way of analyzing photographs, and their research is linked to several disciplines. Philosophers, literary scholars, art historians, ethnographers, anthropologists, among others, have written and are writing about it. In recent decades, however, there has been a strengthening in most fields of an approach that focuses on the people who make and use the photographs. In addition to analyzing and interpreting images on the basis of their aesthetic character, there is also a place for exploring the use and the rites associated with photographs. In my research, I aim to emphasize these characteristics: to explore the practices of making and using albums and the attitudes associated with them. Of course, this is also intertwined with the private use of photography, the evolution of which I am also exploring.

Since photo albums are both images and objects - the medium and the representation are physically linked, I consider them as a medium. Hans Belting also sees the image and the medium as inseparable: he calls them two sides of the same coin, but stresses that the image cannot be reduced to the form of the medium that gives it its visibility.¹ In the case of albums, on the other hand, it is the form of the images displayed - whether they are photographs developed on paper or the memories they evoke - and therefore the medium that gives them added meaning and creates a kind of unity. Therefore, in the case of albums, I find it more useful to adopt the

¹ Hans BELTING, *Kép-antropológia. Képtudományi vázlatok* (Budapest: Kijárat kiadó, 2003), 15.

concept of McLuhan, which sees the medium as a transmitter and mediator of meaning. Indeed, the form determines not only the interpretation but also the process that precedes it: the making of the image and then the compilation of the album. My research can thus be understood not only as an investigation of the history of photography, but also of the medium: the history of the emergence, spread and use of albums shows how a medium that is now in a state of great transformation (and disappearance) can become a means of representation and storytelling for its users. Then, once the albums are removed from the milieu where they were created, they become part of the collective memory undergoing musealization, or start to be seen as works of art through various acts of transformation and/or decontextualization. At the same time, it also reports on the characteristics of private photography in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, contributing to a better knowledge and understanding of the visual culture of the region.

The mediality of the albums is reinforced by the performances that, if we look at the private setting, consist of the making of the image, the compilation and presentation of the album. The exploration of these factors and of the rituals associated with the albums, both contribute to the understanding of the processes outlined above and at the same time creates another performance: it creates the possibility of interpreting and understanding the albums as they become public. It is precisely this conscious, performative relationship that researchers of photo albums in recent years have made the basis of their investigations, even supplementing it with a strong personal motivation. In this way, they incorporate the emotional relationship which becomes the driving force behind the interest in the subject. In this way, they reflect the experiences of the men and women who compiled the albums in their original context and then discussed these images and shared the tales connected to them.

My personal motivation, which directed my attention to the exploration of private albums, is connected to two drivers: one is that my own family lacks albums from before the Second World War, despite having photographs of family ancestors dating back to around the 1880s. Albums were mostly created from the second half of the 1940s, but hardly any of them are elaborate or completed. The second reason is related to the astonishment I felt when I first encountered an extensive photographic legacy within the Kabay family's collection, descendants of László Schäfer, an amateur photographer. Thus, the question immediately emerged: what motivation or social situation is associated with the presence or absence of albums in a particular

community? Here I deliberately refrain from using the term "family environment": so far, I have been using the concept of private albums, as albums are not only associated with what is conventionally perceived as nuclear families – father, mother, child(ren) – but individuals in other diverse life situations have also created photo albums for themselves.

In my research, I aim to explore the Transylvanian media history of personal photo albums, spanning from their emergence in the 1860s to the 1950s. I do this primarily by examining the legacies of individuals associated with two cities—Cluj-Napoca and Târgu Mureș. Convinced that the materiality and tactility of albums are integral aspects, I have predominantly included only those albums in my investigation that I have physically encountered. Thus, I have only made reference to albums found in various online archives and collections. Gathering sources has not been easy, as institutions do not have a large collection of photographic albums, and they are not easily found even in private collections. Circumstances have limited my choices, so I am aware that the resulting material cannot be considered fully representative. I have attempted to adapt the criteria for selecting albums to this circumstance, determined both by quantitative considerations and temporal ones. For the former, that is, to decide on the number of albums to be analyzed, the most important work I considered was "Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums" by Martha Langford, as her volume is the most comprehensive work to date on the history and usage of photographic albums from the beginning and first half of the 20th century. The Canadian art historian examined 41 albums from the collection of the McCord Museum in Montreal and interpreted them by illustrating the connection of photographic albums with orality.² For the development of her theory, she needed a broader selection of sources, for which the collection of the Canadian Museum of Social History provided a perfect basis. In Transylvania – and even in Romania – there is no possibility to research dozens of albums in a single public museum. The main reason is that the collecting policy has been (and in some aspects still is) different from Western countries, and there is not much attention given to the collection and preservation of photographs. During the socialist period, museums rarely collected photographs, and when they did enter the institutions' collections, their value was primarily illustrative or documentary. The neglect of photographs has led to the destruction of many collections (sometimes even after they became part of museums',

² Martha LANGFORD, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2001), 206–213.

libraries' collections, as often there were inadequate storage facilities), resulting in their loss/disappearance. In recent years, I have managed to find 33 albums that fit my research. However, this number does not correspond to the number of creators, which is lower, as there are individuals who have created multi-volume albums.

Another crucial consideration was the feasibility of digitizing the albums under research, a service not universally provided by institutions. Nonetheless, every item examined in the research underwent scanning or photography to generate a digital replica. These duplicates were essential for the appendices of the thesis, yet I underscored the significance of digitization also in terms of conservation.

The last, yet most significant selection criterion was linked to the individuals who created the albums: I aimed to establish a collection that represented participants from various social backgrounds. I endeavored to find and analyze albums created by members of the nobility, bourgeoisie, and the working class. Although I was unable to find examples from the latter category, I included an album created by a young person from a possibly rural family, which diversified the examined material. While the selection may not be sociologically representative, I believe it managed to capture the largest and most general portion of photography users from that period.

For the research within my doctoral studies, I have been continuously collecting sources since 2015, some of which are privately owned, while others are found in public institutions. Four collections originate from private ownership: the albums of the Kováts siblings, of Schäfer László and his sister, Kónya Gyuláné Schéfer Teréz, were made available to me by their descendant, Kata Kabay. The legacy of László Teleki is also in the possession of an heir, Zsombor Galánthay, who, upon being informed about the subject of my research, provided me with the opportunity to research them. The other albums come from public institutions in the counties of Cluj, Mureș, and Covasna. In addition to those listed here, I also conducted research at other institutions – such as county libraries, the Lucian Blaga Central University Library in Cluj, the National Museum of Transylvanian History – but they either didn't possess personal albums (or only retained some from the late 20th century), or they were not accessible for research. This occurred at the National Museum of Transylvanian History, which, due to the

inventorying and reorganization of its collections, could not permit access to the photo albums it holds.

At the National Archives in Cluj, I also intended to research the collections of several noble families. I attempted to explore the collections of the Esterházy, Teleki, and Kemény families, which were assumed to include photographic albums, but as of September 2019, these were not available for research. They may have become accessible later, but then the institution was closed for several months due to the coronavirus pandemic. Ultimately, from the personal collection of Ottilia Wass, I was able to examine her personal albums, and from the Gyulay – Kuun collection, I could consult the scrapbook album composed of two volumes belonging to Vilma Kemény, the wife of Géza Kuun.

From institutions in Mureş County, I included albums from the Teleki Library and the Mureş County Museum in my research. At the Teleki Library, three personal albums are preserved: among these, I wrote about the photographic collection of Andor Teleki and an unknown woman, while the third album, dating from the second half of the 20th century, was excluded from the study. Due to my work at the institution, I am familiar with the photographic collection of the Mureş County Museum. There are four private photo albums in the museum, all consisting of carte de visite format photographs from the 19th century. There are no personal albums from the 20th century in the museum, only a few albums made by associations or factories. In the collection of the Szekler National Museum, there are several albums, but many of these are also from institutions. Thus, only two albums from their collection – a 19th-century visiting card album and a small album from the 1940s – were included in my research.

The albums composing the research corpus have been divided into three major units, following a chronological and thematic classification. The resulting chapters present an analysis of the albums in the form of case studies, each preceded by an introductory section addressing the reception of photography during that period, as well as its history of usage and techniques.

The first unit comprises the most popular type of photographic album from the 19th century, namely albums containing photographs typically taken in studios, often in carte de visite format. These albums feature cardboard pages equipped with slots of various shapes

(rectangular, oval) for securing the photographs. Alongside these, the chapter also includes a scrapbook, a compilation whose primary organizational element is collecting.

Since the first decades following the emergence of photography have been primarily examined from a historical and technical perspective, my thesis will emphasize the ways in which photography was used on a personal level. To accomplish this, I rely on personal documents – journals, memoirs – and press articles, as they reveal the performances associated with the creation of albums. That is, how these compilations were made, what rituals were associated with viewing the images. The two written sources, because the writers, creators approach the new phenomena from different positions, also show the different ways of perceiving photography in public and private life.

Regarding 19th-century photographic albums, the primary starting point is the extensive collection of Otilia Wass, alongside which I analyze the photographic genealogical compilations of the Gábor–Hankovits and Hints families, preserved in the Mureş County Museum, as well as an album belonging to a family of Czech origin living in Braşov and its surroundings, and an album of an unknown person. Additionally, I address the album of Gyárfás Jánosné Czintos Anna, preserved in the Szekler National Museum, which also contains *carte de visite*-type photographs but has collected the photographs in this album over several decades. Although not exclusively photographic compilations, another type of album that emerged in the 19th century is the scrapbook: this usually includes, alongside photographs, prints, drawings, and other paper-based objects. In my research, there is such a two-volume album, the scrapbook of Kuun Gézáné Kemény Vilma, dedicated to the memory of her husband. I consider it important to present this, as creating scrapbooks is a practice associated especially with women, with the most well-known examples being those from the West.

The second unit is dedicated to studying the new photographic habits and the creation of albums that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. The broader dissemination of photography creates new practices that reinforce the personal nature of photographs and photography itself. Amateur photography also enriches itself with new dimensions, and in this context, terms such as *műkedvelő* (amateur) or *kodakoló* (one who photographs with a Kodak camera) become widespread, each denoting a new pattern of usage. To explore these different

practices, I have adopted a dual approach: I use the reports of the Chamber of Commerce from Cluj-Napoca and Târgu Mureş to examine the situation of professional and amateur photographers in the two cities in the last decades of the 1800s and the early 1900s. The reports also contain numerical data regarding the number of photographers and amateurs in the respective cities. In parallel, I will discuss the emergence of the first exhibitions and photo clubs in these locations, through which photography becomes an autonomous artistic and creative practice. The processes involved in these activities reveal the new social aspects of photography, and given that the names of the organizers and participants are known, it will also be possible to have a general understanding of the participants in these activities. Despite the fact that the first decade of the 1900s is well-documented in written sources, there are not many photographic sources from this period. In this chapter, the albums of Teleki László, comprising eight volumes, serve as examples of intensive photography, while the experimentation with photographs by the Kováts siblings is what characterizes their albums. Both cases illustrate the varied forms of amateur photography.

The third unit is actually a continuation of the aspects already outlined in the second part: here, I examine how the meanings of albums evolve from the immediate post-World War I period until approximately the 1950s. In connection with the previous chapter, I trace how the Hungarian amateur photo clubs in Transylvania reorganized and operated during the interwar period. Additionally, I will address their programs – exhibitions, courses – that promoted photography. These still represented the main source of publicity for this medium and provided insight into how photography was received in society. Contextualizing these aspects is essential, as among the albums examined is the three-volume compilation, comprising thousands of photographs, made by László Schäfer, the manager of a photography equipment store in Cluj and an amateur photographer. The albums in this unit are the most diverse of the three: they include albums by amateur photographers, travel albums (albums with photographs taken by tourists), and autobiographical albums made by women. Andor Teleki's four-volume travel album presents the perspective of a high-ranking diplomat, and in this case, the type of photographer and album creator-collector reappears. The albums made by women are far behind those of the two men in terms of the number of photographs in them. These are usually composed of a single volume and contain only a few dozen photographs or, in the case of Teréz Schéfer, a few hundred. Teréz Schéfer, being the sister of the above mentioned László Schäfer, had greater access to

photography. From the album made by a young woman preserved in the collection of the Teleki Library, it can be inferred that its creator, Jucy, primarily relied on studio photographers, but there was also a photographer in her circle who took snapshots on various occasions. The last album I will mention was composed by a girl who lived near Târgu Secuiesc, Guzbeth Gizella: she herself did not take photographs, but her brother or a close friend photographed her many times, and in her album, these images of their common games can be found. By examining the albums of these five individuals, we will have the opportunity to observe the different approaches of men and women in organizing albums, differences that are already reflected in access to photography.

In my research, I have endeavored to consider both the visual, textual, and tactile aspects of photo albums and to let all three elements "speak" for themselves in exploring their development, use, and the personal choices their creators made. At the same time, albums reveal much about the local context of photography. Because in Transylvania and indeed throughout Romania, there is a lack of extensive, accessible, and contextualized photographic collections, much of the history of photography relies on written sources. In this sense, albums become essential as they visually contribute to a better understanding of local photography practices.

Conclusions

The early albums have several common characteristics, mainly due to the function of exchanging *carte de visite* format photographs. Anyone could be included in the albums: friends, relatives, acquaintances, celebrities, portraits of people from the past or even mythological figures appear in collections. The selection was not always rigorous or consistent; however, the emphasis was always on people. Although there were studio photographs of objects, animals (i.e., non-human images), and views, urban landscapes exist in *carte de visite* format, such images are not found in the albums I have researched; there, we only find various types of portraits. In the albums examined, the theme of collecting seems to have been very consistent: it shows relationships of kinship and friendship. It can be observed that none of the albums are complete; there are missing photographs from various places. This indicates that if photographs were later removed, then the pages were not rearranged but retained their existing structure. The inscriptions and annotations, if contemporary with the images, contain the most essential

information: names, places, and date. However, it was not a common practice in the 19th century to make inscriptions on the back of the photos; rather, descendants returned to albums preserved for several generations and supplemented them with details of kinship and other brief descriptions of individuals. This is done when living memory is no longer a completely reliable reference point. For most of the studio photograph albums from the 19th century, the format is essential as long as it can serve as a repository for the portraits of the individuals captured. However, it is evident, even to today's observer, that some of the photographs in these albums are associated with stories carrying strong emotional weight.

Due to the simplification of photography techniques, the spread of paper-based photographs, and the increasing number of amateurs in the early 1900s, a type of album where the photographs are glued onto pages became more common. This was associated with other practices, such as collecting newspaper clippings and creating scrapbook-style albums. However, glueing photographs into albums did not become a dominant phenomenon, and most of the albums that were researched contain insertable images, offering greater flexibility and freedom to the creator, as the photographs can be easily removed or changed.

The last two chapters of the thesis focus on the photographic albums of seven individuals, coming from different social backgrounds and with different attitudes towards photography. However, what all these individuals had in common was that photography was present in their immediate environment. Their parents or relatives had already taken photographs, so they could connect to an existing tradition. The process of photography's domestication and diversifying subjects, due to technological innovations, also had an impact on albums, which became more intended for presenting personal experiences. The use of albums from the 19th century, where they served as a kind of conversation medium, and viewing a collection of portraits was a social pastime, is on the decline. Instead, photography takes on a much stronger collective character, through the proliferation of amateur photography movements.

For the reasons mentioned, the history of photography in Romania and Transylvania cannot be accomplished within the traditional framework of exploring photographers' works and writing studio histories. However, by exploring other secondary themes, such as the development and use of private photographic albums in this case, it is possible to gradually gain an

understanding of the history of local visual culture. Indeed, albums could reveal the complex systems that characterized the use of photography within a smaller community. The simultaneous and parallel study of written and visual sources has revealed how the emerging new media – photography and the photographic album – were perceived by the public and what happened to them during their use.

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