

Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*. Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, 256 pp., 80 black-and-white illus., \$49.95 Cdn

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prevented a more critical, theoretical reading of his work.⁶ The authors' decision to avoid a theoretical approach, while it may be wholly consistent with Curnoe's own beliefs, does not make for a critical art history.

What makes us so avidly consume the details of Curnoe's personal life, and what effect does this have? As David Bromwich points out, "we care about the lives of artists for any number of reasons, only some of them artistic."⁷ Perhaps, on a basic level, biography satisfies our desire to know more about "celebrities", or perhaps we believe that by gaining access to the minutiae of Curnoe's everyday life we will become privy to the true meaning of his art. Because we understand biography as an instructive story, we inevitably connect it to "the stories we tell about texts".⁸ It is important to remember that meaning is interactive – it is tempered by the social, historical, political and theoretical context of the viewer or reader, not inherent in the work or determined by the artist's biography. By rigidly adhering to biography to "explain" Curnoe's cultural production, scholars are limiting the potential meanings of his art. As Bromwich notes, "by construing an author's work as a transparent apology for his life ... our esteem for the work is diminished and our interest in the life sharpened."⁹ We need to re-sharpen our interest in Curnoe's works, by mitigating the overpowering influence that his biography exerts.

While its dustjacket bills the work as a "book length study" of the artist, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* does not live up to its lofty claim. Yes, it is book length (although it includes 74 full pages of illustrations, and 35 pages with both text and illustrations), and yes, it is a study of his "life and stuff". Published in conjunction with the AGO's retrospective look at his career, the authors present Curnoe's life and art in an easily accessible, entertaining manner that is sure both to please a general audience unfamiliar with his work, and to reconfirm and reassure the opinions of those who knew him well. It would also undoubtedly have pleased the artist himself. It does not, however, forge any new ideas or analyses of his work. *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* it is neither an exhibition catalogue (it does not

function as a guide to the exhibition) nor an academic work. While it presents many interesting details about Curnoe's life and work, by relying on his life story to explain his cultural production, it limits the possible interpretations of his work. Scholars need to be aware of how biography can contain and condition their research and analysis. By lessening the stranglehold that Curnoe's life story exerts on the understanding of his art, I believe that scholars may be able to separate the "life" from the "stuff", and Curnoe's art will finally get the critical attention it deserves.

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Notes

- 1 Dennis Reid and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* (Toronto and Vancouver, 2001), dustjacket.
- 2 Greg Curnoe, *Some Lettered Works by Greg Curnoe 1961–1969*, exh. cat., London Art Gallery (London, 1975), 1.
- 3 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, 1979), 11.
- 4 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge and London, 1995), 7.
- 5 Robert Murray and Ian and Ingrid Baxter (N.E. Thing Co.) were the other Canadian artists chosen for the São Paulo Bienale.
- 6 Some recent notable exceptions are: Katie Cholette, "Autobiographical Metaphors: The Interaction of Text and Image in the Works of Greg Curnoe," M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 2001; Walter Klepac, *Reading: Public Signs, Private Acts*, exh. cat., Art Gallery of York University (Toronto, 1991); Diana Nemiroff, "This is Great Art Because it Wasn't Made by an American," *Vanguard*, 10, no. 8 (October 1981), 24–31; Barbara K. Stevenson, "The Political and Social Subject Matter in the Work of Joyce Wieland and Greg Curnoe," M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1987.
- 7 David Bromwich, "The Uses of Biography," *The Yale Review*, 73, no. 2 (January 1984), 175.
- 8 Bromwich, "The Uses of Biography," 162.
- 9 Bromwich, "The Uses of Biography," 162.

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While much has been written in Britain and the United States recently about the significance of the family photographic album, sadly up to now, little had been published in Canada.¹ Martha Langford's comprehensive study, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* fills a gap in photographic history. Langford, an art historian and inde-

pendent curator, was the founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. She has written widely on photography both nationally and internationally. Langford has painstakingly researched her subject and produced a book that is both a scholarly reference and well-crafted example of the reading or decoding of the narratives hidden in the family photo album. Her astute observations about the nature of photo albums reference a selection of key theorists and writers on photography including: Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Rosalind Krauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Marianne Hirsch, John Berger, Susan Stewart, Griselda Pollock and Halla Beloff. Particularly note-

worthy is the volume's detailed bibliography, which provides the reader with a vital research tool.

Langford bases her research on an examination of amateur photographic albums in the collection of the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal. She makes the argument that photo albums as repositories of memory are significant because of their performative nature. They exist as a means of communication that carries a narrative to their viewer. The act of looking through a photo album is often a shared activity where the album owner or creator explains or "reads" the images to the viewer as the pages are turned. It is important to keep in mind that the impact of an image may not only be a found meaning discovered by the viewer but, also, a coded sign constructed by the image's producer or the editor of the family album. The making of the family photograph album is a form of social practice; however, the maker of the family album should not be seen as a social historian searching for a kind of "truth", but rather as a constructor of personal truth. This act of "showing and telling" the album links to the oral tradition of storytelling. Langford states that her approach to examining these albums combines ideas taken from Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) with "interactional techniques employed by sociologists, ethnologists, folklorists and photo theorists who bring photographic albums into their work" (p. 21). It is this linking of "orality and visuality" that sets Langford's study apart from those of other writers who have examined the significance of the photo album.

The book's chapters are a thorough investigation of the nature of the photo album and include: *The Idea of the Album*,

The Album as Collection, Memoirs and Travelogues, The Idea of Family, Orality and the Family and "Photographs" 1916–1945. While the book contains numerous insightful readings of images, it is the final chapter I find to be particularly intriguing. It examines closely a number of photographs from a private album with photographs of two sisters. Langford details a way of studying these images that she refers to as "reading the album". She guides the reader through the sisters' album through an oral photographic framework that includes "patterns of inclusion, patterns of organization and patterns of presentation" (p. 159). It is in such unassuming images, the family photographs arranged carefully and presented in the narrative photographic album, that we can find clues to the identity of their makers and the society in which they functioned.

Langford's study of Canadian photographic albums is a thoughtful addition to the reading of photographic history. For readers with a passion for the photographic image, this book will not disappoint. For those readers with an academic interest in photography and whose bookcases lack in Canadian content, it is a must.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover and London, 1999); and Patricia Holland and Jo Spence, eds, *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography* (London, 1991).

Michael Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, 313 pp., 100 black-and-white and 70 colour illus., \$55.00 U.S.

In 1909, art historian Richard Muther wrote that Adolph Menzel would be remembered as "the first German to have discovered the poetry of the everyday".¹ Just as Courbet displaced history painting with painting of contemporary life, Menzel "stepped forward into the present. Instead of focusing on the past, in which he had whiled away perforce, he now focused his camera, which he carried in his head, directly onto life."² Writing a century later, Michael Fried similarly compares Menzel to Courbet and retains the notion of the everyday as crucial to Menzel's artistic endeavour. But unlike Muther, Fried distances Menzel from any sort of photographic or optical realism, preferring to describe Menzel's modernism in terms of embodied vision.

Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin is a continuation of Fried's examination, begun in the 1960s, of issues related to absorption and theatricality. There is consistency and conviction in Fried's writings, whether he is discussing the sculpture of Anthony Caro or the painting of Chardin. Fried situates his latest book synchronically, as part of his realist trilogy, with *Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration: Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (1987) and *Courbet's Realism* (1990), as compared to his diachronic series on French painting, consisting of *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980), *Courbet's Realism* again, and *Manet's Modernism* (1996). In *Menzel's Realism*, Fried expands not only his earlier conception of realism in terms of his categories (embodiment, absorption, anti-theatricality), but also his views on modernity in the years 1840 to 1880.

One of the problems facing the historian working on Menzel is the diversity of his *oeuvre*, which includes but is not limited to history paintings, landscapes, genre scenes and book illustra-