



THE FRAME AROUND THE PHOTOGRAPH—
THE PHOTO INSIDE THE FRAME

A I M E E L E D U C

This thesis project is a collection of essays revolving around the photograph and how we use this object as a tool to both represent and construct our self-awareness.

The first essay explores the relationships between objects and our identities, specifically how a photograph as a temporal object allows us to reckon with our inability to reexperience the past in real time. Pictures are the material we use to build our personal narratives and evolving histories.

The second essay is a detailed reading of both Catherine Wagner's *Home and Other Stories* and Pepon Osorio's installation *Badge of Honor*. These artists offer us an opportunity to reexamine how we determine meaning in our domestic spaces through the personal photograph. Their work pulls from the visual imagery of everyday life, history, religion, myth, and popular culture. By simultaneously considering Osorio's and Wagner's work along with our own spaces of home, we are able to view some of the ways in which larger, cultural concepts of identity inform our own histories.

The final essay is an account of interviews I performed in a variety of homes. From these intimate encounters, I delve into people's spaces to critically investigate messy, strange, and stunning examples of how the photograph functions at home.

Excerpts from the first and last essays are included in this catalog.

The Frame Around the Photograph—The Photo Inside the Frame

When do you know you are at home? What does it look like, feel like? We have all heard of the two-story house with a white picket fence gently protecting the man, his wife, and their two children. We also can comprehend that this world is a fantasy, a romanticized version of our real and imperfect lives. Yet the fantasy does exist. The idea of the perfect home does swirl around in our heads, creating a dizzying effect. It is a picture, in fact. A picture hanging like a photograph in our minds, representing a combination of images, experiences, and desires—perpetually mixing our lived experiences of a variety of domestic spaces with evolving concepts of our dream home.

This romanticized version of home comes out of a post-World War II materialist aesthetic, when the idea of the American dream became the singular goal of American moral, social, and family life. As Sheryl Conkelton states, "The dream house became a unifying element in a newly prosperous post war society."¹ The American home had come to symbolize a static security—an integral symbol of an accomplished life. The nuclear family and the responsible lifestyle required a home, preferably in the suburbs, nestled between rows of identical houses filled with families just like your own. However, few of us, not even those of us currently living in suburbs, experience such a monolithic framework of the domestic landscape.

American home life is representative of the country's diverse and at times contentious mix of cultures, histories, and changing localities. Gentrification, mass immigration, urban sprawl, greater opportunities for travel, and mobility all inform how textured the current sensibilities of American culture are becoming—and in turn, these sensibilities inform where and how we live. Neighbors and neighborhoods are constantly changing populations. Histories are written, forgotten, retold, and rewritten as both private experiences and combined experiences are lived and remembered—and as these histories proliferate, as the places of “home” begin to add up, our life experiences and the memories of those experiences leave evidence in the objects displayed in our homes.

Eventually, home comes to be expressed through a visual combination of memories arranged in one place. The imagined desires of a perfect existence bleed into our daily happenings that bleed into how we remember our pasts and plan for our futures. The pictures in our imaginations, the photographs we take ourselves and display on our walls or family-room mantles, all contribute to a whole of domestic space.

So if home is a frame of mind, an evolving site of our personal identities, then the objects in our homes are the tools we employ to represent our personal identities and the ways in which these identities change over time. The domestic landscape is a unique place where our personal constructions of identity are on display for an intimate audience. While at home, we can reflect on how the communities in and out of which we perpetually move are represented by specific materials we display. Home is a site of intersection between the larger concepts of culture and our individual lived experiences, resting precariously in the surface of the things around us. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton state in their landmark book *The Meaning of Things*:

The home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of a person, and therefore that are the most involved in making up his or her identity. The objects in the household represent, at least potentially, the endogenous being of the owner. Although one

has little control over the things encountered outside the home, household objects are chosen and could be freely discarded if they produced too much conflict within the self. Thus household objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as shapes the pattern of the owner's self.²

By reentering our homes with a critical eye toward this “ecology of signs,” we can effectively examine the relationships between our concepts of self and the objects in our homes that we use to represent them, and this ecology is most present in the domestic space—in the accumulation and display of our personal photographs. These pictures of ourselves, our families, and our lives, whether taken by ourselves or given to us by intimate acquaintances or family members, tell us how we write our life's script. We use our photographs to attach ourselves to a past history, to foster a sense of identity, and to place ourselves in the multiple subjectivities of our lives. Moreover, we can confront how we arrange these inherent subjectivities in the domestic landscape by confronting the inherent subjectivities in the photographs we display in these spaces.

This function of identity, assigned to tools and objects (and particularly to photographs) is investigated in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's *The Meaning of Things*. In it they state “Objects also make and use their makers and users.”³ We are all aware of this relationship between our selves and things. How we make use of this awareness, however, deserves more exploration. We use objects in and around our

environments to better understand both ourselves and others. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton further elaborate on the role of the object:

One could never attend to all the feelings, memories and thoughts that constitute what one is; instead, we use representations that stand in for the vast range of experiences that make up and shape the self and enable one to infer what the object of self-awareness is. Because self-awareness is a process occurring in time, the self can never be known directly. Instead, self-knowledge is inferential and mediate—mediated by the signs that comprise language and thought. Self-awareness, resulting from an act of inference, is always open to correction, change and development.⁴

Of course, a number of possible objects within our domestic interiors contribute to the construction of our personal subjectivities; however, it is the personal photograph that informs our self-awareness in a way that no other household object can. The personal photograph is a unique object of self-awareness. It is a representation that stands in for a previous experience that both contributes to self-awareness and makes what is seen (in the photograph) an object of that very self-awareness. Throughout our lives, being photographed marks certain people, experiences, and moments as the material not only of who we are but of how we've become who we are in real time and at an actual place. The photograph is also a tangible object—in the home. It defines the visual space of the home. In doing so, it both reveals our fractured and multifaceted histories and functions to reconstruct our histories into seamless narratives.

So what is it then about photographs that give them precedence over other objects that inform who we are in our homes? A photograph is a temporal object that allows us to reckon with our inability

to re-experience the past in real time. The fact that we cannot relive past experiences, visit with dead friends or family members, or go on that long vacation again makes us value the photographs we have of those people and moments all the more. However, the fact that we display these photographs reveals how difficult it is to wholly accept this inevitable disconnect with the past. We habitually photograph our children, our friends, holidays, birthdays, weddings, and parties. We surround ourselves with these photos and spend countless hours and dollars framing, arranging, and displaying them, all in an attempt to recapture these experiences. In the end, though, these immediate experiences evolve into the narratives we build both around and with the accumulation of these photos. In the end, it is not our initial experiences that infuse our photographs with value; it is the power we give the photographs to represent who we see ourselves to be that make the photos we display in our domestic spaces the signs and signifiers of our personal narratives in our homes.

Pictures, in one form or another, appear in nearly all types of domestic spaces. Of most concern to this project are what I refer to as personal photographs. Photos are considered “personal” if the owner has either experienced what is shown or had experiences with the person or place shown, even distant relatives or relatives hardly known but nonetheless credited as being part of his or her self-awareness. When we display such photos, we are essentially displaying a longing for an experience of their subjects' presence in our lives. Something at a specific time has been shared between the photograph and viewer. A moment is more than just recorded. It is created, in that, by a photograph's nature, something is left out of view by the choice to focus on a person, a group, a monument, a place; and yet the photograph, once developed and displayed, takes the place

of the whole scene. It becomes the representation of an entire and specific moment in time. Events are left out, added, and shaped into a representation that we desire to become or perhaps regain.

The denoted meaning of these snapshots, from the most banal to the most precious, is intrinsically bound to the connotations of identity viewers find lurking inside the frame. In the introductory essay to the 1991 New York MOMA exhibition *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, curator Peter Galassi points to the value of these personal photographs in our homes:

Perhaps the most ubiquitous of all photographs, snapshots are also the most hermetic. To the insider, to the member of the family, snapshots are keys that open the reservoirs of memory and feeling. To the outsider, who does not recognize the faces or know the stories, they are forever opaque. At the same time, because we all have snapshots of our own, and thus know the habit of understanding them, we are all equipped to imagine ourselves into the snapshots of others, into the dramas and passions they conceal. . . . Pictures are intimate without being voyeuristic. It is this aura of intimacy that lends emotional weight to mundane subjects.⁵

This aura of intimacy is shared in our homes, using the personal photograph as the material we all have in common. Therefore, as soon as pictures are developed and displayed, the photographer is erased and it is the viewer that then defines the snapshot's subject and its value, and we use these malleable definitions, stewing with fictions, memories, and events, to manipulate our lives into stories.

Take, for example, the cultural legacy of studio portraits available to the masses in shopping malls and department stores across the country. The photographer is intentionally absent in these photographs and it is the child's school picture or the family posed next to one another, with their dated clothing and hairstyles, that define what the picture means to the viewer. These moments, these subjects are all marked not by the photographer, but by what time records—their ages, fashions, and expressions. The task of connoting the personal photograph and its image is shifted to the photo's caretaker and the intimate audience for which he or she displays them.

This however, is no simple task. Looking at these snapshots, even though they may only focus on our common daily rituals, is a complex process. In looking we realize not only that we can never return to the past, but also that we cannot stop desiring that return. We cannot stop wanting to wear these representations of ourselves as ourselves.

As Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida*, "The photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both."⁶ It is both an object and a subject. It is a material thing that contributes to the visual make-up of a space and a visual representation of the people and experiences of that space. Barthes continues:

If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents. Lost in the depths of the Winter Garden, my mother's face is vague, faded. In the first impulse, I exclaimed: "There she is! She's really there! At last, there she is!" Now I claim to know—and to be able to say adequately—why, in what she consists. I want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of an intense observation; I want to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth. . . . I believe that by enlarging the detail "in series" . . . I will finally reach my mother's very being. . . . I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I *retard*, in order to have time to *know* at last. The photograph justifies the desire, even if it does not satisfy it: I can have fond hope of discovering truth only because Photography's *noème* is precisely *that-has-been*, and because I live on the illusion that it suffices to clean the surface of the image in order to accede *what is behind*: to scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side.⁷

An image as potent as one of our mother must contain more than one meaning. To find these meanings and our relationship to them, we participate in this visceral experience of looking at and into these photographs. The type of looking to which Barthes' refers is a physical process of constructing bonds to a past relationship or a present experience. Further, this act of looking is not a static one—it changes as often and as deeply as our relationships to family change.

It can be truly painful if viewing exposes our most private parts. It can be marvelous if looking gives to our worldview. It can be devastatingly lonely if seeing passionately reveals what we have lost. Our understanding of the photographs in our homes perpetually changes, but the process of looking endures, even as our inscriptions of meaning and value evolve, fall away, or swell over time.

The type of representation to which Barthes refers is mediated through the photographs and it certainly evolves, erodes, and grows over time. Just as one picture is one moment, caught in time, our awareness of these pictures is just as affected by temporality. When we look at a picture, we know we will never be "there" again in the way we were in that picture: the dead relative will not return to life; the past will always be in the past. It cannot be re-experienced, but it can be reinscribed into our present sensibilities by the display in our homes of photographs that depict our past. Through the process of looking at a photograph, through the ritual of displaying photographs, we are not only representing ourselves in the present but representing our past selves as well.

Photographs are material objects that uniquely bind our sense of self to the lives we live and have lived, even to the very lifetime we experience. The objects we move from one apartment to another, the pictures we tenderly frame or nonchalantly display on a bedroom mirror—all of these materials influence how we remember who we are or learn about where we've come from. Our homes are not idealized structures. They are the exhibition sites of our selves, and the photographs we display at one time or another create the body of work we use to represent our selves.

Looking At—Looking Into: A Snapshot of Snapshots in Domestic Spaces

As human beings, we make use of objects. They are the tools we use for physical survival, but we also make use of objects, particularly personal photographs, to define the roles we play in society. Through this process of role assignment, we can construct what Jennifer González has called "a rhetoric of objects."⁸

A rhetoric of objects can thus be defined as the use of material culture within a context of presentation of display (such as commercial market, museum, private collection, or art installation) for the sake of producing a visual and material argument at a particular historical moment and within a legible semantic "code."⁹

Although González was referring to objects within installation works in a gallery setting, what is to stop us from extending this work into our own homes? Why not give our own things the same value as those on display in a museum? In the end, this exhibition environment functions similarly to our own front rooms, bedrooms, and even refrigerators. They are all sites pregnant with potential and multiple truths. These sites are where we bear witness to our experiences of self as they transform into a narrative mediated through personal photographs.

To explore this parallel between the exhibition space and the domestic space, I am using the photograph to mine the domestic space, which can be viewed as a frame for how we visually exhibit our subjective identities and the way these identities evolve over time. By examining how

we display personal photographs in our homes, we can better engage in the larger social issues and personal histories that inform how we represent subjectivities of self inside our domestic spaces. I intend through this process to reveal how we use our own photographs displayed in our homes to construct and represent our identity.

I drafted a questionnaire and an interviewing process in order to clearly explore various home sites. Each interview¹⁰ was conducted in the subject's home and took anywhere from one to three hours. I recorded the responses and photographed each photographic display wherever it was located in the home. The questions were intentionally framed in a very casual manner. I wanted the subjects to feel comfortable enough to share intimate accounts of why certain photographs were displayed and what they meant to them personally. I was careful to explain to each interviewee that I was not looking for a "correct" response, but for an honest description of how each of them valued and displayed the photographs in their homes.

My subjects were selected on a semi-random basis. I contacted colleagues, peers, and family members and asked them to recommend people who might be interested in participating in my project. An entirely different selection of subjects could have been interviewed, and although the content of the narratives would have been different, a relationship still would have been present, and it is this relationship—between the process of constructing subjectivities and how we reveal these constructions with the display of personal photographs in the home—that is the heart of this project.

The interviews serve both as lived representations of how we use photographs to materialize our identities in our homes and as metaphorical representations of the perpetually evolving relationship between objects and self-awareness.

Conducting the interviews was a challenging process. Other domestic surveys, such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton's *The Meaning of Things*, are expansive sociological examinations of objects in the home as they relate to the self. They seek to understand how the entire home contributes to the development of individual personalities and entire communities in the Chicago area. The scope of my project is far more exclusive, and my subjects did not need to reflect multigenerational, racial, or socioeconomic classes. This is not an investigation of specific types of people or photographs; rather it is a point of entry into the relationship between personal photographs displayed in the home and how they both reflect and create the personal narrative in our lives.

I specifically examined three elements of the presence of personal photographs in the home: the location of the pictures in the home, the various strategies of display, and how the actual content of the displayed photos is influenced by the interviewees' conceptions of themselves. These characteristics will be used in an attempt to demonstrate how the personal photograph functions within a rhetoric of objects.

Location dictates intimacy. We talk about personal photographs formally presented in shared spaces differently than photos privately hanging in a bedroom. Conversely, snapshots on the fridge in the kitchen are entered into with a far more casual connotation than pictures displayed elsewhere. These pictures represent the spontaneous experiences and fragments of time that we can easily discard or that we can easily change. Photographs are on display in order to be seen by other people. Where the photos are displayed greatly influences who will see them and how they will be considered.

Our lived experiences, as mediated by the photographic displays in our homes, are being organized into a rhetoric of objects by the dialectical relationships we create when we look into our personal photographs and even more so when we look at our personal photographic displays with others.

I focused on three areas in the home where the location of photographs seemed the most concentrated, the living room and/or office (commonly used as a shared space for all occupants of a domestic space,) the refrigerator, and the bedroom. Granted, all of these areas are not present in every subject's domestic space, nor does every subject's space have photos in each of these areas. However, these three places were overwhelmingly the locations of the most valued photographic displays.

The places where photographic displays were purposefully constructed and exhibited were the living room, the front room of the house, or the family office. These were spaces where guests were entertained, where parties were hosted, or where holidays were celebrated. Whatever the uses for these specific rooms, the photos on display were there to be seen by an audience. These pictures tended to represent family lineages, to mark major events in life, or to generally paint a comprehensive conception of the people or kinds of people the respondents most valued in their lives. These displays also tended to include family members from a distant past—the family members not intimately known but who had influence on the respondents' general idea of what is important about family and heritage.

The second element investigated during these interviews was strategies of photographic display, or how a rhetoric of objects materializes within the domestic space. Many of the interviewed subjects took time to describe why certain photographs were framed. Other subjects were careful to explain aesthetic choices or tactics of preservation involved with certain pictures. Frames were selected because they matched a style or color in a picture. Other frames were chosen to agree with interior decoration. Still others were picked to protect old or rare photographs. These strategies certainly exposed how and why we value certain pictures over others. This concept of value further revealed how some photographs held greater personal meanings for some than for others. (I can't help but wonder where Roland Barthes might have displayed the picture of his mother that he so intensely considered in *Camera Lucida*,¹¹ and what frame he would have selected to display and preserve it.)

As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton state, "The cultivation of individuality serves a larger goal of integration because the intention to differentiate oneself from others still needs other people to give it meaning."¹² As we are distanced from our experiences by expanses of time, we attempt to sustain our connection to those experiences through the rituals of collecting and displaying our pictures. It is the stories we tell, illustrated by our personal photographs, that replace the times of life to which we never return. This process, the process of living within various gazes as we rebuild our identities, could partly explain why the intentional display of our photographs is as important as the photographs themselves. How we will be received is an inseparable thread from the fabric of our sense of self as the very content of self.

The third element explored during the domestic interview process was the actual content of the photos on display. The dialogue of these interviews was akin to witnessing the denotation of our personal pictures collapsing under the weight of their connotations. Conversations relating to the

subjects in the pictures ultimately exposed descriptions of how we use photographs to represent the evolution of our personal narratives and how we can use this information about ourselves to comprehensively engage with our public realms. It is valuable to note what types of photographs are being exhibited in our homes. Family members, alive and long dead; children or pets; celebrities or heroes; memorable vacations: photos of the subject him or herself—these are all engaging and effective qualities to observe when looking at domestic spaces. These qualities all reveal what signifies our self-awareness. Choosing what to include or edit out of our narratives by choosing what to include or edit out of our photographic displays points to the molding of a rhetoric of objects, which could open up our self-awareness to a dialogue about a relationship with a culture and community. From this, we can leave our homes, dorms, apartments, or domestic spaces and walk out the door with a coherent method of looking at what looks back at us, living in the everyday.

The following section is one of the selected domestic interviews.

Astrid's House

Bound inside a frame made from red masking tape, a woman's face gracefully sits in profile. It is a black-and-white photograph (Figure 1), looking almost timeless, with its soft focused light and haggard condition—almost as if it exists outside of anyone's actual history. Next to her, in identical red-tape frames, three cityscapes linger in this same liminal space. There aren't any people in the city pictures. The light and aged state of the photos make it difficult to tell what time of day it is, what season it could be, or where this city even exists. The photographed woman, draped in a white chador, looks on as if she knows the answers to all my questions as I stand transfixed in front

of her, consumed by Astrid's explanation of this small display, which hangs just above the near side of her couch in the front room of her San Francisco home.

I interviewed Astrid on a day typically cloudy for the city in fall. She was excited to share her pictures with someone else—excited to tell her story. The objects in her house were her props—points of entry into her private art practice, into her memories, and into her passions for living. She had her own photographic work in all of its imperfections (that Astrid would immediately point out), hung in the kitchen, the dining room, and her office. There were paintings, flea market treasures, and plants of all types draped over the walls, tables, and mantle above a fireplace that doesn't work.

The four pictures of the woman and her city were postcards of Morocco from the 1940s. Astrid's father lived there when he was just barely twenty. He gave these old postcards to his daughter as a gift. He had framed them himself originally, but over time the frames fell away and she reframed them with the same kind of red tape. Admittedly, they were falling apart again, but her father had given them to her. So whenever she looked at them, she could imagine her father living in Casablanca. These photos weren't even memories, she seemed to confess, "It's a whole fantasy. It's all fantasies. I look at this and just think, ahhh." This imagined (not recollected) life of her father, seen through the photos and sustained in Astrid's account of them, is how she currently experiences her father.

I took an inventory of Astrid's photographs during the interview. She had a few pictures in the front room, more in



Figure 1
Her Father's Morocco
 Photograph by Aimee Le Duc, 2002
 Courtesy of the author



Figure 2
Astrid's Family with Light
Photograph by Aimee Le Duc, 2002
Courtesy of the author

her bedroom, and even more in her office. One of the few photographs in the front room, aside from her father's postcards, was on top of a cabinet that probably held a small TV. It was a wide, distance shot Astrid took while she was traveling in India four years ago. In it was a little girl draping large expanses of fabric, of saris, on top of concrete stairs, so they could dry in the sun. The saris were orange and deep royal blue. Astrid was on a boat when she took this picture, and looking at it brought her right back to that day. "It was seven or eight in the morning, and I have a very distinct memory of that—the temperature of the day, the feel, the quietness of the water. There was no one on the stairs except this little girl, maybe ten years old, carrying this bundle of cloth in her arms and walking through."

It took years before Astrid found a frame she liked and could afford. She was exceptionally conscious of a frame's relationship to a picture. The frame had to complement the subject of the snapshot as well as the aura of intimacy¹³ captured by the picture's display. For the picture of the girl and her saris, she really wanted a frame that would blend in with the colors of the stairs and somehow sustain her vivid connection to that memory.

Other pictures in the house materialized, notably one as a business-card-sized magnet on the side of her fridge with a photo of her mother on it. The actual picture that she used originally had her father in it too, but she cut him out because he was scowling. Using personal pictures allows her to edit out unhappy relatives and preserve space for preferred relationships and episodes.

While showing me around the rest of the house, she took great pride in her laborious selecting and arranging of objects. Frames

were intentional additions to images and she was conscious of "who would get which frame." She carried a portrait of her grandmother with her for months before she found a frame to suit her. Astrid also often mentioned issues of protection when she explained how she displayed her pictures. There were some framed pictures with no glass, and Astrid would point that out almost as a reminder to herself to protect these images, these pictures of her life. Saddled with this pride though, was a sense of longing in both the objects and how she referred to them, almost as if her disconnect from the subjects of these images could only be rescued by the display of this visual evidence.

Her cat, Pooky, died two years ago. She adopted the cat while she was living with her boyfriend, and when the relationship ended, Pooky came to live with her. Astrid and the cat lived together for only five years. Pooky eventually died and Astrid nursed her through the entire process. There were three pictures of this cat in her office, one on the printer, another inside a novelty snow globe that sat on her desk, and one in a photo-tree. Astrid didn't see just a cat in these photographs, but an entire period of her life that was sad and far away, unlike the snapshots that define her space.

This photo-tree was a casual but meticulously curated exhibit of the people and pets Astrid most valued in her life, an exhibit that could change, be rewritten, and be retold. Also included on the tree was a postcard of two

dogs that were the same breed of her childhood dog. She didn't have any pictures of that dog with her, so the imitation dogs in the postcard have become her dogs. They are not displayed as a substitution but as an attempt at a recreation of the memories of her pet.

She continued her story about Pooky: "She is my baby." This cat played a precious part in Astrid's process of getting through the failed relationship, and pictures of Pooky were symbols of that time in her life. Pooky sustained Astrid, and still did in many ways. For a long and loaded minute, Astrid stared at one of the pictures, of Pooky lying on a plastic bag. Dangling in that small wire photo-tree were both her stories and a collection of objects that could tell these stories to others.

Being able to tell her own story held a great deal of gravity for Astrid. She has been living away from her childhood home and family for years. She was born and raised in France, but had lived in the United States for a long while. Her entire family still lived in France and her dearest friend, present in many of her photographs, had recently moved away. Her longing for a tactic to sustain connections while unable to physically participate in them is present in the tender attention she pays to the personal photographs in her home.

Astrid's family never had professional portraits taken of themselves while she was growing up, but in the past few years, Astrid began a tradition that whenever she went back to France, her immediate family—her parents, two sisters and herself—would get together for a group picture (Figure 2). "The reason I started that is because I realized that my parents were aging, or even myself, or anybody—one of us could die and we had no photos of the five of us. So I started this tradition which was not so easy to start because one of my sisters at the time was in big conflict with my mom, so she didn't want to be next to my mom, so she is on one side and my mom is on the other. But over time, we have worked something out. It's very, very important to me."

These images of her family are her family, the tangible connection to them as mediated through her photographs of them. Another snapshot (wedged in the photo-tree) caught a camper van in the middle of a desert-like environment in the early morning light. The dark red sand created a strong contrast with the blue sky. The camper was in the middle of the shot and at a slight angle. I could only barely get a taste of its scale or quality. To the left of the front of the van was a woman, on her head, in a yoga pose. The camper belonged to Astrid's father and the woman was her mother. Astrid's mother was in her late seventies when the picture was taken. All of a sudden this simple snapshot became an explosive description of Astrid's parents. It could have been a spontaneous moment, playfully arranged or entirely staged—but that is of little importance against the snapshot's power to definitively image her parents.

One day, Astrid could take that picture out of the photo-tree. Tomorrow she could look at the family photograph to see her parents. At any moment the dialectic could change as remarkably as a photograph receiving a new frame.

There were other photographs in the office that revealed even more of what Astrid saw as the textured layers of her life. She is physically far from home and has been for sometime. She has wholly re-created families with the people around her, but does not let go of the biological family connection, as seen through



Figure 3
Office Altar
Photograph by Aimee Le Duc, 2002
Courtesy of the author

the abundant display of family photographs. Her narrative, her rhetoric of objects, reveals moments of vigorous maintenance of all of the families to which she belongs.

Recently, she witnessed a dear friend of hers die a long, slow death. She had a xeroxed copy of a photograph of him taped to the front of her files on her desk. She sees him before she begins any task in her office, and he is still there when she's done with her work. His image is with her every action in that space.

On the opposite side of the comfortably crammed office, Astrid had another display of other friends (Figure 3) who have died, and she remarked that over the years she

had learned how to frame them instead of just pinning them on the wall. "It's not an altar really, it's just like a little something."

The interview migrated from the office to the bedroom, and I couldn't help wondering how each picture ended up in its intended location. Astrid explained her logical or practical decisions having to do with the wall or counter space allowing for some pictures to be displayed over others. There was, however, also an aesthetic design behind these choices having to do with color schemes in each room. There were, though, precise reasons why some pictures hung in the bedroom instead of other rooms of the house. Years ago, a friend took some



Figure 4
Astrid's Bedroom Mirror
 Photograph by Aimee Le Duc, 2002
 Courtesy of the author

nude photographs of her—a triptych in black and white. Astrid really viewed these photographs as works of art and displayed them as such. When she first moved into this house, she was so pleased to have the space that she put the triptych on the mantle in the front room. Later on, when Astrid's first roommate moved out, she told Astrid that she could never *really* live with her because she had naked pictures of herself on the mantle. This was something that obviously affected Astrid. She confessed, "It really shut me down." She immediately took the photos off the mantle and put them in her room and will never put them in open space again. Intimacy here is not defined by her most precious experiences but by how she displays these experiences.

I saw the photos while I was in Astrid's room. They looked like sentimental renderings of one friend from another. The light is so soft and everything seemed as if it was just coming into or going out of focus. They were like pictures from a deep history or like a history instantly created. Now they are of the kind of intimacy that belongs to bedrooms.

Astrid's history with her refrigerators came out as a side note to her current residence. In past houses and apartments, she and another roommate used to curate ad hoc exhibitions on their fridges. They would collect cards, art announcements, snapshots, or magnets, and arrange them spontaneously. Visually, the materials would all come together and slowly move and change over time. "For whatever reason, these things would make it into our home and were very telling about our current life." Some pictures show painted egg collections on top of the freezer; other times there was a display of teapots. A duck magnet held a picture of Astrid's father at one time, and later on it actually held a picture of the fridge hanging on the fridge.

Astrid ended up photographing the fridge exhibits and kept them in a scrapbook. She has noticed the ecology of signs in her objects that make up the materials of home after home after home. Even the most banal of sections, the fridge door, takes on a meaning. All of this became part of her personal narrative—the history of what she has become. "There are photographs and there is stuff you put up." Watching Astrid's face looking at these pictures was like witnessing time travel. She was back in those apartments, reliving those days in the pictures.

I asked her what she thought her pictures said about her (Figure 4). "Well the naked portraits of me say I have no shame. The other photos, what they say about me—I don't know what they say about me. I guess they allow someone else to ask a question or say, What's going on here? It's an opening. It's a way to say, ask me questions. That's how I look at it. I love it when people say, Where did you get that? or Who took your photo?" Astrid uses her photographs, her meticulously conscientious display, to establish a rhetoric of objects in her own home. She is using the material of her own life to argue for both what and who she values in her life, and to pass these values on to her selected audiences.

Astrid's objects around her house and other people's homes are both visual images and signifiers of taste and personality. Peppered throughout the rooms of her house were photographs of a Buddha's feet, and in her bathroom, a picture of her hand decorated with henna on a trip to Morocco. I found pieces of dried lichen in front of

snapshots of friends that have passed away that she used for a Day of the Dead altar, and there were intentional piles of foreign coins in her bedroom, the magnet of her mother on the fridge, and unusual types of tea literally spilling out of her kitchen cupboard.

Back in Astrid's bedroom, the view from her window was a welcome site, especially for someone who had spent most of her time in San Francisco apartments with views of nothing more than other San Francisco apartments almost close enough to reach out and touch. Astrid was quite attached to the view and compared it to the view from her childhood home in the French countryside. The comparison seemed like a stretch. Astrid's bedroom view was the 101/280 interchange, the Bay just beyond that, and the Berkeley hills just at the horizon, but she said it wasn't the view that was exactly the same but the relationship of land to water to faraway mountains that was similar. Astrid had discovered how to tend to herself by tending to her own home—an American dream home is both realized and dreamed. She had enriched her own visual landscape to the point where a freeway at the edge of a continent could be transformed into a French lake at the foot of the Alps.

Ultimately, the whole of Astrid's house suggests a rhetoric of objects, an individual's narrative told with personal photographs. This rhetoric has changed and will change over time. In turn, her sense of the past will change over time, and this present will never exist the way it did on the day I photographed it. This very process of conducting interviews, and photographing and recording various people in their own domestic places, is a hopeless attempt to comment wholly on our use of personal photographs to define our selves. Truly, this project can do no more work than can one photograph. It can capture a moment in time, when we looked into our photographs to see who we are. Truly, Astrid's home is one grand photograph.

Notes

- 1 Sheryl Conkelton, "Home and Other Stories: Photography by Catherine Wagner," L.A. County Museum exhibition catalog (1993) p. 1.
- 2 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 17.
- 3 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, p. 1.
- 4 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, p. 3.
- 5 Peter Galassi, *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, Catalogue for 1991 Museum of Modern Art exhibition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), p. 11.
- 6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 6.
- 7 Roland Barthes, pp. 99–100.
- 8 Jennifer González, "Archaeological Devotion," in *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, ed. Lisa Bloom (Minneapolis, 1999), p. 186.
- 9 Jennifer González, p. 186.
- 10 Initially, I interviewed close friends and family members. This was not an effective strategy. The tone quickly became too intimate and the responses to the questions were too intertwined with my own, shared experiences with the subjects. I quickly determined that I needed to interview people with whom I shared little or no common history. I asked colleagues, peers, and co-workers to suggest people who might be interested in participating in my survey. I have included results from five interviews, although this number might change in the final thesis.
- 11 Roland Barthes, p. 6.
- 12 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, p. 33.
- 13 Peter Galassi, p. 11.