

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design  
Doctoral School

Title of the Dissertation:  
FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL TO CREATE ILLUSIONS

Title of the Doctoral Work:  
THE ALBUM OF THE FAMILY

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*"Don't you think that a fiction can suggest a truth?"*

*"Maybe, but whose truth is it?"*

Larry Sultan

*Pictures from Home*

## ABSTRACT

The transformation of family photography through history has always depended on the economic, political and religious circumstances of the given era, but most of all it has been determined by the actual state of technology, the social norms and the conception of family. I examined the use of domestic and family photos in the public sphere and their emergence and interpretation in the art world at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This has led me to the multifaceted contradiction between the family narrative and the real chain of events.

I investigated the use of family photography in the art world and in the public sphere from four aspects.

The first section embraces the notion of *archetypes and interchangeability* in terms of the strict conventions around family photos. Occasionally the attachment to visual conventions is so powerful as to make people see their own kins in completely foreign family photographs.

I examined the emergence of domestic photographs in public spaces in the second section, namely their propagandistic and *political use*.

Defining *gender and identity* plays a crucial role in the socialization of individuals, as well as in the social system of values. It is also important whether these features may or may not appear in the photographic representation of the family. I shed light on these aspects in the third section.

My research on taboos in family self-representation led me to state that, mainly due to the taboos – and other factors – *family photography is a tool to create illusions*. The

difference between the narrative provided by the family album and real history may be insignificant or the two may completely oppose each other.

The aim of my thesis is to prove that family photographs and albums, being constructed and attached to conventions and being ruled by strict taboos, may mislead their viewers to such extremes as to claim the absolute opposite of true facts.

## THESES

**One of the most significant spheres where gender roles may manifest themselves is family.** Besides family, work and social life are those spheres where social sexual roles can be perceived and which affect, determine and shape these roles at large.

Family occupies an extraordinarily significant place in society as it is an ancient form of co-existence that has been protected by tradition and written rules and law to date. **The institution of family undergoes radical changes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which reflects the major changes in society.** The hegemony of the middle-class model of family has been taken over by the pluralism of co-existence.

*"From the beginning of photography, the family has been a focus of attention."*<sup>1</sup> Apart from many other factors, family photo depends on the technology of imagery and presentation, the structure of family, and social norms of the given period. **Family photography is an important tool of the family's self-representation, thus is a result of selection: it reflects the the family's expectations to the representation of its own self-image.**

Besides the expectations of the family's self-representation, the photographs to be presented in the album are further selected by moral and representational taboos. There is always a difference between the narrative of the family photos and the real chain of events, and its proportion varies by family. **The family album always creates the illusion of the happy family.** Owing to this fact, politics uses it as a tool, and due to its being illusory it is criticized by artists.

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1 Val Williams: Lost and Found in the Family: Tales of Effects. In: Val Williams: *Who's Looking at the Family?* pp13

Visual culture has radically changed due to the digital revolution that also affected family photography. This is, in fact, a formal change. Although some taboos have been fading, the difference between sacred, special moments and banal, profane scenes of everyday life have decreased, idealism is still influencing our family photos all intents and purposes. The revolutionary change of family forms in the second half of the 20th century did not trigger a similarly enormous transition in the content of family photography. **The reason why radical change in the content of family photo failed to come about must be the insistence of society on the values of the traditional middle-class family model.**