

Snapping to Attention: Vernacular photographs (Johannesburg, 19–22 Nov 25)

University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Nov 19–22, 2025

Deadline: Mar 31, 2025

Brenda Schmahmann, University of Johannesburg

Snapping to Attention: Vernacular photographs as sources and subject-matter for the visual arts.

This is a call for papers for a conference hosted by the NRF Research Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg. It is envisaged that the conference will begin on the afternoon or evening of 19 November and will end at lunchtime on 22 November. Selected papers from the conference will be developed into either a special issue of a journal or an edited volume.

THEME

The MOMA website explains that “Snapshots capturing everyday life and subjects are a major form of vernacular photography”. Broad in its range, “vernacular photography” is an “umbrella term used to distinguish fine art photographs from those made for a huge range of purposes, including commercial, scientific, forensic, governmental, and personal” (<https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/vernacular-photography>). Unlike fine art photography and documentary photography, which recognise photographers as creative individuals, vernacular photography is normally by unidentified makers.

Nonetheless, while distinct from photographs classified as “fine art”, vernacular photographs have been, and continue to be, of significant value to visual artists. Whether through collage, montage, printmaking, painting, sculpture, installation or video, amongst other techniques, vernacular photographs have been – and continue to be – invoked or referred to in numerous works of art.

The range of vernacular photographs deployed by artists is extensive. Family photographs, photographic albums and various other kinds of snapshots taken informally in domestic contexts have been of increasing interest to artists since the twentieth century. These have served as a forum for engagements with personal histories, matters of gender, and the workings of memory or post-memory, among other concerns. Likewise, photographs taken for commercial, scientific, forensic or government purposes often make their way into the visual arts. These include ID photographs, wedding photographs, or commercially produced family portraits or graduation photographs. They also include promotional travel brochures or postcards, stock footage, satellite photographs, forensic images of crime scenes and various other kinds of photographs that were made to serve some form of practical function other than a purely aesthetic one. While frequently enabling artists to engage with social, political or personal concerns, and/or the complexities of specific

histories, they have also led to works in which artists explore vernacular photography itself – its conventions or characteristics.

In this conference we seek to look at how vernacular photographs of any type have informed or been invoked in works of art, and the significance of these references. We are interested in art practices involving vernacular photography from any geography and in works from the second half of the twentieth century or the new millennium.

PROPOSAL

A prospective presenter is invited to offer a 30-minute paper on an artwork or series of works undertaken in the late twentieth century or twenty-first century in any geography that refers to or incorporates vernacular photographs of any type. Potential participants are encouraged to focus on single works, or groups or series by a single artist, exploring them in depth rather than offering broad surveys.

Please note that we are not looking at exhibitions or collections of vernacular photographs themselves, nor at how or why vernacular photographs have been curated or become a part of museum collections. Rather, our focus is on how they may be referred to, incorporated into, or invoked by works of art.

Papers must be in English.

Papers must be on material that has not already been published. A prospective presenter must also be willing to develop the proposed paper into an article or chapter of a book emanating from the conference, should it be selected for potential inclusion in this publication.

Please submit your proposal with “Snapping to Attention” in the subject line, and send it to the conveners, Brenda Schmahmann (brendas@uj.ac.za) and Irene Bronner (ireneb@uj.ac.za), also copying it administrator at the offices of the Research Chair of South African Art and Visual Culture, Neelofir Nagdee (nnagdee@uj.ac.za), by 31 March 2025. Please submit a single WORD document with the following information:

1. a title for your paper
2. an abstract between 350 and 500 words in length for a 30-minute paper
3. a short biography, including your current institutional affiliation (up to 200 words)
4. your contact details, i.e. e-mail address, postal address, mobile phone number
5. a statement confirming that your paper has not been previously published and that, should it be selected, you would be willing to develop it into an article or book chapter emanating from the conference.
6. Applicants will be notified of decisions by the end of April.

FUNDING

Presenters will need to organise and pay for their own travel costs to the University of Johannesburg. However, international presenters and those from out of town will be provided with bed & breakfast accommodation sponsored by the host on the evenings of 19, 20 and 21 November 2025. Additionally, there will be no conference fee, and meals and transport within Johannesburg during the conference will be provided by the host. A post-conference outing to an exhibition or

museum, paid for by the host, will be organised for the afternoon of 22 November.

Reference:

CFP: Snapping to Attention: Vernacular photographs (Johannesburg, 19-22 Nov 25). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 12, 2025 (accessed Mar 29, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43664>>.