Doc Chat Episode Forty-Three Transcript

Social Networks of Photographers, Curators, and Critics during the Photo Boom of the 1970s (February 10, 2022)

JULIE GOLIA: Welcome to Doc Chat. I am the curator of history, social sciences, and government probation at the New York public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program from the Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stores of the most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Zulay Chang, Photography Specialist in the Library's Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, is joined by Tal-Or Ben-Choreen, an art historian who is currently the Howard Tanenbaum Fellow at the Ryerson Image Centre. Today, Zulay and Tal-Or will explore artist Mike Mandel’s 1975 series Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards – a work composed of baseball cards originally sold in packages accompanied by a piece of bubble-gum – and discuss the way Mandel’s work provides insight into the networking that occurred between photographers, curators, and critics during the 1970s. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments - though make sure that you change your chat mode to "Panelists and Attendees" so everyone is included. Once we begin the question and answer segment, please use Zoom’s question and answer function, rather than the chat function, to pose your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous please click that option before submitting your question. So, with all that, I will pass it over to Zulay.

ZULAY CHANG: Thank you, Julie, for the introduction. Mike Mandel's baseball photographer trading card collection includes 135 cards featuring photographers, curators, and critics posing as baseball players. The cars were randomly grouped together and sold in packs of ten, complete with a piece of Topps bubble gum, just like real baseball cards. Museums acquired the cards and held trading parties to collect the entire set. The Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs owns the whole set, including some duplicates, of the 135th cards and a checklist of everyone who has been photographed. These cards were acquired directly from Mandel in the 1980s. Mike Mandel is an American conceptual artist and photographer who is active today. The 1970s were, according to him, a very dynamic decade of art making, of producing thought-provoking works of photography, specifically, the photographic image of a popular culture. Growing up, he was a big fan of the San Francisco Giants baseball team and collected baseball cards himself. So what was the climate of photography like when Mandel made this work? What were his intentions with this project?

TAL-OR BEN-CHOREEN: So, in a letter written in 1981, Mike Mandel explained the motivations for this project as follows. Here I am quoting, “The Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards served as my political cartoons that cut through the pretentiousness of the photo world. More than the
potential of the cartoon, or even the collage, the photograph of the photographer, dressed in the
garb of a baseball player, participating in the satire, achieved a level of self-critical humor where
the aggressiveness was not directed at the knowing participants but rather the game in general.
The ‘photo world’ was equated with celebrity baseball and the Americana children's pastime of
trading and collecting cards, which is not to be confused with the trading and collecting of gum
prints, or even with the collecting of images or butterflies as the case may be in the late
afternoon light.” The statement by Mandel is very telling of the perspective in the field. He wrote
about it at a time when the photography market was booming. Prices for some photographs
soared, and in turn, helped establish some photographers’ careers at an extremely rapid pace.
This series formed the documentation of a social network at a time where celebrity
photographers, curators, and critics could still be easily contacted, and were eager to engage in
conversation surrounding photography. Mandel wrote this letter several years after completing
the project, and at a different stage of his career. He began conceptualizing the series in 1974
with Alison Woolpert when they were both graduate students at the San Francisco Art Institute.
The two created a list of individuals they believe were central to photography. We can think of
the series as the outcome of a networking project developed by students, to allow them to meet
the individuals that they believed were significant in their industry. We can see several social
networks play out throughout these cards. We are currently looking at two cards. One depicting
Mike Mandel and one of Alison Woolpert. Such cards represent Mandel's immediate social
circle, that of his peers and friends. Next, his teachers and local photographers formed the
second circle, as they were the easiest ‘professionals’ to access. We then see an expansion into
further social spheres as Mandel photographed individuals across the United States. Mandel
and Woolpert traveled extensively to photograph the individuals included in this project and they
used the Society for Photographic Education’s member directory as their guide. The Society for
Photographic Education was formed in 1962, as a means of sharing pedagogical resources
and finding peer support. At the time, photography was not readily accepted as a creative
medium. Photographers who were working in higher education institutions found that they were
typically the only faculty members who conceptualized photography as a tool for personal
expression. This would change rapidly over the course of some ten years, as photography
expanded across different industries including education. According to a 1963 survey of
Canadian and American programs conducted by Dr. William Horrell, 47 schools[3] were teaching
photography in art departments and 20 had independent photography departments.[6] By 1975,
photography courses could be found in 184 schools in Arts departments and 51 schools had set
up photography departments.[5] These statistics demonstrate the significant growth of the field in
education alone. We can imagine the impact some of these graduating students would have had
on the expanded job market, circulation, and consumption of photography. In order to find peer
support, photographers frequently traveled great distances to connect to various photography
hubs across the country. The amount of travel undertaken by Mandel and Woolpert crossing
some 14,000 miles over the course of four months, speaks to the distance between the various
photography communities. In that sense, we can see this project as representing a time capsule
of a select social landscape of photography during this period of significant growth.
CHANG: I think it's also worth mentioning that many photographic collections development departments, typically in museums, were not formed until the 1970s and 80s either. For example, MOMA, The Museum of Modern Art. For NYPL, it is not a coincidence that our department was born out of the photo boom, just as education and scholarship were taking off. We have chosen three baseball photography cards to discuss that are representative of the social network. Here is Peter Bunnell, on the reverse are stats. It includes baseball ones, such as throws, left or right arm, batting score. Then there are photo stats. FC for favorite camera, FD for favorite developer. FP favorite paper, FPH favorite photographer. Then on the back, whatever they wanted to say, which was not always photography related. Some were about baseball. Where does Peter Bunnell fit into all of this? And for those who don't know him, who was he?

BEN-CHOREEN: At the time, Bunnell was working at Princeton University where he held the first Professorship of the History of Photography and Modern Art in the Department of Art and Archaeology. That role helped solidify photography as a serious discipline for academic research. Prior to joining Princeton's faculty, Bunnell had worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. This card is a wonderful example of the way Mandel is really utilizing the codes of baseball culture beyond the card's format and portrait staging. Typically Baseball cards don't use player's formal names but rather nicknames; for example, Michael becomes Mike or Micky, Robert becomes Bob or Bobby, and so on. So in this case, Mandel transformed Peter to Pete. We can consider the significance of Mandel's choice to photograph Bunnell as an umpire, given his role as a photography scholar and curator. The umpire's role in baseball is to officiate the game, to make sure that the rules are being followed. Could this then be seen as a nod to Bunnell's role in the field as Mandel saw it? Without having Bunnell and Mandel's input we can't get the full picture of who decided to use this costume. We know from the statement I read earlier that the sitters did collaborate with Mandel. Some photographers gave Mandel clear instructions on the manner in which they wanted to be represented. We can see an example of this in Imogen Cunningham's card. Cunningham was a well-established and respected photographer. She is perhaps best known for her involvement in Group f/64. Throughout her career she held a variety of photography workshops and mentored many students. According to Mandel, Cunningham was among the first photographers he contacted to photograph for the series. Cunningham agreed to partake in the series as long as she could replace the baseball cap with a Mao hat, a part of the Zhongshan suit, a signifier of Chinese Communism. To an American audience of the period, this gesture would have been seen as a rejection of Western norms. We can see from the final portrait selected for the series that her request was indeed fulfilled. Cunningham's selection of this politically charged clothing item isn't the only nod we get to the broader socio-political climate. For example, we can tease out some photographer's sentiments towards the period's social gender norms. In Margery Mann's card she elected to write in her notes, "I became a photographer because I sure as hell never could learn to type." This sentiment references the anticipated career trajectory for many women of her generation who were encouraged to join the work force as office administration staff. Photography in this context, functioned as a career path in opposition to the norm. Mann took on many roles in photography, she was a photographer, a critic, a curator, an educator, and an avid member of
the Society for Photographic Education. This career trajectory was typical for men and women because they couldn’t sustain themselves from pursuing a creative photography practice alone. By de-coding the different aspects of these cards as I’ve done through their format, image, and text we can gain insight into the photography field and find new areas of research to probe.

CHANG: Thank you for your insight and wonderful explanation and social network between the three individuals. Just want to call your attention to a technicality, these are considered photo reproductions. However, the concept of the artwork is very much a photographic creation. I would say they had the same status as a real photograph, by the way it is described and preserved in the collection. So how can educators and researchers use this as a primary source material?

BEN-CHOREEN: Part of what makes this series so rich is the different research paths this series can take you on. An economist for example, may be interested in the value of the cards over time. As a researcher interested in photography education, I was always drawn back to questions regarding the role of pedagogy in shaping the outcome of the list of players and thereby the represented social network. I’d be interested in the potential of this series to educators and students now. What would producing a map of your circle look like? How would one’s social map change over time? How can educators encourage students to engage with those active in the industry outside the classroom? How does the material we show in schools influence what students believe is important? This project is interesting because it presents a social network frozen in a particular time. It connects individuals that may no longer associate with one another, the quotes found in the stats of the cards reflect attitudes of the period, and the represented players may have shifted their positions in the field or elected to stop playing at all. Our reading of this series has similarly shifted. When the series emerged it was understood as a fun exploration of the field by an emerging photographer, readily traded and purchased for small sums of money. Now, the series has been established as a photographic body of work with a set value worthy of being maintained, in our case, within a library special collections. It’s essentially come full circle from an object poking fun at the market to one embedded within it.

CHANG: Obviously, we don't have time to discuss the cards, it would be a good teaser for anybody who is interested in the series. Most of these photographers are in the Photography Collection-- we have photo dealers and curators in the cards. They were instrumental in the growth of photography as an art form. Do we have any last takeaways for the audience?

BEN-CHOREEN: Once we’ve analyzed the series for what it reveals about the field I think it’s important to go back and consider what its inherent limitations might be. We can question for example who was left out of this series and what the implications of this exclusion could be. Or the ratio of male to female players. These gaps provide us with insight into the period and remind us that this is just one entry into a rich and expanding narrative of the photography network during the 1970s.

CHANG: Thank you Tal-Or. With that, I will pass it over to Julie for questions from our audience.
GOLIA: Thank you so much to both of you. This was wonderful. Someone has mentioned in the comments that there is such a lovely dialogue between today’s conversation and yesterday’s Work/Cited, which covers the really fascinating topic of postcards. We will share more about those two episodes together. So, I actually want to pick up on your last comment about the series being an exclusionary force and potentially analyzing who was included in who wasn’t. I wonder how Mandel was negotiating these themes of the democratizing of photography and on the other hand the kind of club feel of this pervasive?

BEN-CHOREEN: I think that was certainly an aspect of what motivated his project, at least initially. He was definitely satirizing the idea that these individuals were suddenly celebrities. Typically when we think of celebrities they are an inaccessible group. By including his friends or less famous or celebrated photographers in the series, he is leveling things out to a certain extent, making everyone equals. But it is still a project that reflects the individuals that were already within a particular network. So, they would have had to have been able to connect to the individuals involved. Meaning, if you are not a photographer active within a particular social circle, the chances of Mandel knowing of these particular photographers, or seeking them out for this project would have definitely decreased.

GOLIA: My favorite was Ansel Adams. How did NYPL come to get the collection? Did we acquire them early, did we buy them later when they were already a hot commodity?

CHANG: Well, I can't say anything about the price... I did mention at the beginning that we did acquire them during the 1990s from Mandel. From what I read, there was an overprint of these cards. I think that you can still acquire the set. They are available in the art market. So, I think perhaps in the 1990s ... because they had received a lot of attention when they first came out, certainly, we didn't buy them for $1 each for the ten pack. It was a bit more than that.

GOLIA: Tal-Or, I wonder if you have a favorite?

BEN-CHOREEN: That is a really hard question. Even picking out these examples to show, I was very torn. I can't pick a favorite.

GOLIA: Fair.

BEN-CHOREEN: Like asking a favorite child …

GOLIA: Have you interviewed or talked to Mandel about this?

BEN-CHOREEN: I have not. Perhaps one day soon I will. I've spoken to many of the individuals that were captured for this series, as part of my research. I got to hear their perspective and take on the series. It was interesting to hear the different perspectives of how much this series impacted individuals. Many of the photographers included just sat as a one day event.
CHANG: We can think about it, similarly, to a social gathering, right?

BEN-CHOREEN: Oh, yeah. I did this thing awhile back. It’s interesting to see the way this project has really developed, in terms of its conceptualization and the way that we are seeing it now.

CHANG: I have a question. Are there any questions?

GOLIA: Bring it on.

CHANG: So, what happened with his partner that participated in this series. She’s [Woolpert] not credited towards the series. So, what do we know about her collaboration in this series?

BEN-CHOREEN: I don’t know too much about Woolpert. I did know that she went with him on this trip. They spent their time together, in terms of traveling and staying at the different locations. In that sense, they were collaborators. Certainly the final project is credited to Mandel.

GOLIA: That is interesting, the gender politics. I’m also struck by how the social networking project really happened in just a few years before the, sort of, growth of digital communities, the emergencies of the world wide web, the social networks that we know today. I wonder if you have any thoughts, it’s a big question, but the way the emergence of the Internet might have made something like this, like, something that we do today. Are there digital examples of these kinds of community networking, sort of, experiences? After the Internet, taking place online, rather than 14,000 miles around the world?

BEN-CHOREEN: Yeah. That is definitely, I’m not sure what the iteration of this project would have been had it occurred during the internet stage. I know that photography students at this particular moment in the 1960s and into the 70s were really encouraged by their faculty members to travel across the United States to meet and collaborate with people across the country. That was a central element to photography education. In that sense, this desire to travel to other photographers, was really, a desire to engage with other individuals who believed in photography as a creative medium. It is important to point out that at that particular time, that understanding of photography was a rarity. So, you really had to seek out peer support. It’s interesting that they used the Society for Photographic Education’s directory as their guide to find where photographers were living. I mean, that kind of information isn’t readily available in the same way that it would’ve been then. So, I think that people were much more willing to travel a great distance to find information. That requirement of travel isn’t needed in the same way now, with the internet.

GOLIA: Such a great point. This was such a wonderful talk. Thank you so much, to both of you. One thing to know for those regular dock chatters, these are not in our Digital Collections so,
these are items that are best seen in person. So, Zulay, will you tell us how researchers can come in and look at this remarkable collection?

CHANG: Yes. So, unfortunately, these are not digitized. We may digitize them in the future. Usually, it has to do with copyright issues. To find things in our catalog, we have in our prints and photographs online which you can find through the nypl.org website. You can search Mike Mandel in the search box. The item record will pop up. This is an example of one of the cards. So, it's not an illustrated catalog. It is more a regular library bibliographic record. It's just a description. What's nice about it is that we do have the title, the medium, dimensions. Most importantly, we have the object number, the accession number. You can cite that and, also, with the photographer's name, just email us to make an appointment in our study room at the Schwarzman building. room 308. Thank you.

GOLIA: Thank you to both of you for this wonderful talk. So, just to wrap up, thanks to everyone for attending today. I'm going to pop a bunch of things in the chat, as usual. Links to the catalog records that Zulay just described, along with a video and transcript of the episode, will be published shortly in a post on the NYPL blog, which we’ll send out to registrants. All previous episodes can be found there as well. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the “Doc Chat” channel of the NYPL blog - you will find the link in the chat. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode, NYPL's Elizabeth Cronin and art historian and curator Bonnie Yochelson explore the photographs of Alice Austen, a well-to-do Victorian amateur photographer from Staten Island, who in 1895 and 1896 took her camera onto Manhattan's streets to photograph working people, many of them newly arrived immigrants. Register at the link in the chat, and look for future Doc Chat event pages on NYPL's Calendar, Research Newsletter, and Social Media. Many thanks, again, to you both.

CHANG: Thank you, Julie. Thank you, Tal-Or.

BEN-CHOREEN: Thank you so much.