ROLL OVER

The Snapshot's Museum Afterlife

JOEL SMITH

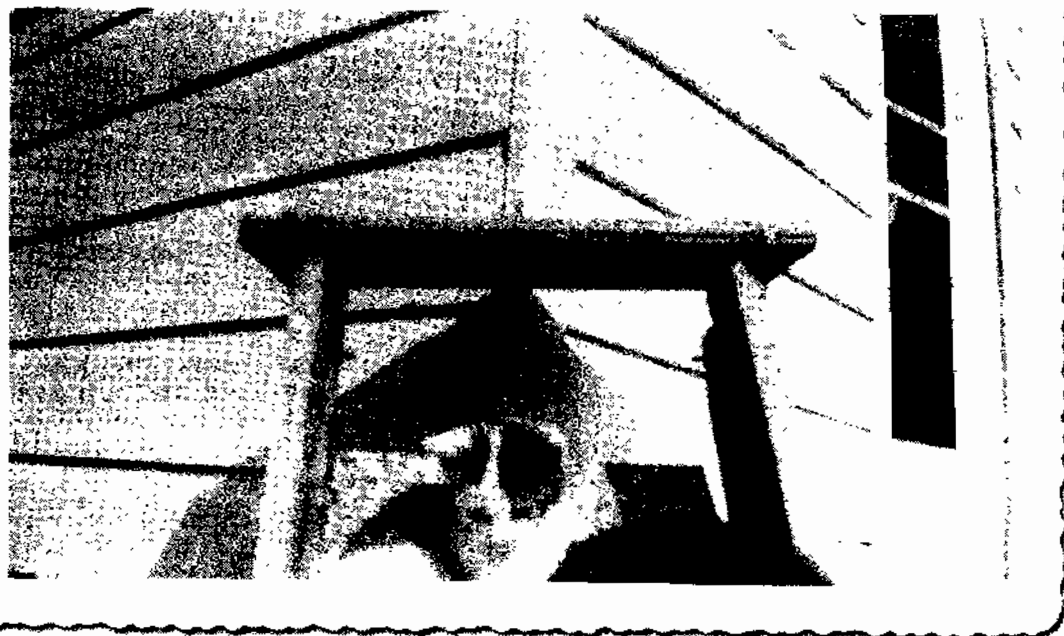
A diver's suspended body defines the topmost edge of a soft sepia-gray sky. In a fraction of a second, he will plunge toward the sea below. The blurred figure of a soldier crumples as though hit by enemy fire. Abstracted in close-up, a machine fragment on a tabletop returns the camera's mute robotic gaze. A woman's sunlit face, neatly bisected by shadow, peeks from the window of a black Ford automobile. These descriptions evoke a pantheon of classic photographs, to which one reflexively attaches authors: Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Robert Capa, Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz. But a glance at the pictures undercuts all iconic pretensions. The diver's clinging swimsuit betrays more anatomical detail than it should; the soldier dropping his stick-rifle cracks a baby-toothed grin; the would-be Futurist still life bears a mundane engineer's caption; and on the car's running board rests the stiff leather shoulder case of a vest-pocket Kodak. The evident high-modernist references and the pleasant shock of their quick deflation are equally to the point, for the pictures are four out of the hundreds of anonymously made snapshots that were matted, framed and submitted to aesthetic scrutiny in summer exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA) in 1998 and New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000.

In these pages in 1992, David Trend wrote that as a visual corollary to the study of domestic life, the family snapshot was due for critical reckoning among "activist cultural producers," a trend for which he saw encouraging signs.[1] The intervening decade has indeed proven a boom period for public analysis of the snapshot in its myriad capacities: emblem of social communication, enigmatic New Historicist artifact, home-grown performance document. These investigations have in large part occurred, however, not under the aegis of cultural studies, but through the varied efforts of artists and curators, who have given the snapshot a prominent role to play in the reinvention of public exhibition venues for photographic media. A survey of the snapshot's long twentieth-century history of near misses at museum worthiness, and a closer look at some of the still-evolving aesthetic and historical uses to which the snapshot is being put today, may serve to highlight the predicament faced by the media of memory. For it has been pointed out that in the acute self-consciousness of this, the early digital era, the analog photograph has "taken on a memorial role, not of the subjects it depicts but of its own operation as a system of representation."[2] Not unlike the skipping, popping, long-playing vinyl record, an object of fetishistic nostalgia among listeners raised on compact discs, the snapshot with its blurs and thumbprints is taking shape as the most potent emblem of a dying medium's historicity.

In their catalog essays, Douglas R. Nickel and Mia Fineman, curators of SFMoMA's "Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present" and the Met's "Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection,"[3] are appropriately circumspect about whether the art museum in its present form is truly prepared for the type of questions invited by the decontextualized snapshot—a genre of image that in both exhibitions, and especially the Met's, leaned toward the obstinately inexplicable, if not the wacky. And yet in both catalogs the photographs, in all their double-exposed, misfired, crookedly-held-Brownie glory, are reproduced in full color or duotone, one to a spacious page—the treatment that art photography books have taught us to expect for expertly-crafted contact prints on the silver-rich paper of modern photography's golden age—which is, after all, what these pictures are.[4]

When approached as objects of folk-art, industrially abetted yet domestically conceived (or vice versa), snapshots brilliantly illustrate the kinds of collective invention and bracing incoherence that modernity at its best made possible. The comical, curious "successful failures" (as Fineman dubs them)[5] that compose Walther's photography collection are of a type that has become, as A. D. Coleman puts it, "eminently collectible and culturally chic," even though, he says, they were "not only unexpected surprises to the photographers responsible but unwanted—hence the discarding of them that makes [Walther's] collection possible."[6] The latter point, one must object, is overstated, if not misconceived; the growing availability of nostalgia-ready snapshots is probably better explained by the gradual dying-off of a generation of baby boomers' parents and the dispersal of their closet contents into the public realm. To incinerate, tear up or throw out an actively unwanted and monetarily valueless drugstore print is the work of an instant, yet many of these vulnerable objects have endured for the better part of a century. The simple fact that "other pictures" survived (pictures other, that is, than the ones deemed worthy of putting in albums, mailing to relatives, or publishing on page one) hints at the subversive glee that the snapshot contributed to modern vision—not despite its ineradicable imperfections and surprises, but in large part because of them.

The snapshot's promotion to what was once called respectability, among the one-time guardians of that mode of acuity formerly known as taste, was not the sudden occurrence it might have appeared to summer museum-goers in New York and San Francisco. Shoppers at the annual exposition of the Association of International Photography Art Dealers had already had several years in which to notice the snapshot's increasing presence, along with other vernacular fare, at a growing number of dealers' booths. At the most basic practical level, the exhibitions at SFMoMA and the Met were made possible by the accumulation of a critical mass of formally intriguing snapshots in the private collections and dealer inventories from which loans were secured.



Whether out of skepticism toward the biases of the institutional and commercial filtration apparatus, or simply out of happy inspiration, in November 2000 Baltimore's Contemporary Museum debuted a traveling exhibition titled "Snapshot: An Exhibition of 1000 Artists" that displayed, as it turned out, 1300 snapshots mailed in by as many lenders, ranging from invited art-world luminaries to the unknown (including myself, in response to a public solicitation via email list). The exhibition's submission form, notably, did not even inquire whether a submitted snapshot's lender was its maker. In effect, therefore, each participant was left to decide whether "snapshot" constituted a category of one's own camera activity, a variety of keepsake, or a genre of collectible ephemera. The resulting exhibition, hung in grid formation on walls throughout the museum, in alphabetical order by lender, presented in effect a democratic matrix of responses to the question: what is it that an exhibition of snapshots is exhibiting?

That is a question well worth asking for the good of the art museum itself. In a system of commodities that translates rarity into charm (a system that emphatically includes the objects that public museums place on view), old snapshots such as those in SFMoMA's and the Met's exhibitions would seem to have less to recommend them ontologically as art (as objects of visually codified intention, variation and innovation) than as antiques. That is to say not merely that the snapshot's journey to museum, auction and eBay-category status began—like that of teddy bears—in flea markets and yard sales, but that the modes of viewing pleasure that the decontextualized snapshot offers have more in common with the pleasures of, say, antique furniture than with those of pictorial art. Even when lacking in conspicuous visual interest, anonymous snapshots engage the imagination by putting one in contact with an idealized version of the past: idealized insofar as it is schematic, being quite literally objectified, in the form of an artifact.

What uniquely inflects the snapshot's antique status, however, is that besides bodying forth the past in the form of an inherently fragmentary piece of material culture, as any doll or salt-shaker does, the snapshot also presents eye and mind with a commemoration of a unitary act of attention, delivered to the present as though by telegram from the trigger-finger of an unknown maker. A fossilized cross-section of experience, the snapshot is a figment rather than a fragment of the past, a picture built up out of tangible traces of gestures, spaces, modes of behavior and values—the latter being emblematized in the form of the photographer's choices of subjects to portray, relationships to ratify and so on, as well as physical details of the print as an object, such as its "wallet size."

As an historical artifact, even the most desultory snapshot fails to be senseless or witless. Intelligence and intention are, rather, concentrated in it with great intensity. But those characteristics are present in (to resort to digital-era nomenclature) the snapshot's "back end." The utmost ingenuity has, for example, produced cameras, films and flash systems that answer to the exigencies of point-and-shoot photography; the work of generations went into the sociological shaping of public rituals such as weddings, graduations and press conferences around photogenic moments that, when photographed, become episodic narratives. These circumstantial factors are dimensions of the snapshot over which the amateur photographer has no semblance, nor would profess to any pretension, of conscious control. They can, however, be got right or wrong. When a slice of wedding cake is captured gliding gracefully on its fork into the bride's mouth, the print succeeds in equaling the rite, and is placed in the album. When the flashbulb transforms the slice into an eerily glowing axe-blade that occludes the bride's face, the print is slid back into its drugstore envelope and onto a shelf—to await matting, framing, labeling and display on a wall in New York City's museum of record.

So, what is the present relevance of the art museum's embrace of the vernacular snapshot, not only as a tonic accent amid works by long-established "masters" but as material for exhibitions all its own? One cannot help thinking of the antique appraiser's law of cultural metabolism—"the more there were, the fewer there are"—and suspecting that the snapshot's arrival on the art museum's walls is a symptom foretelling its passing from our lives.

The snapshot, disappear? To be sure, slapdash visual records are not on the decline but—like every other kind of image—are multiplying exponentially. But the new tools that began overtaking the market of the roll-film still camera some years ago are not far from dismantling the "Kodak System" that George Eastman christened in 1888. A throw-away, single-use camera is to the old take-everywhere family camera as a drive-through lane is to the neatly set dining room table: not so much an updated model as an abject admission that even the least of the old domestic procedures now asks too steep an investment of time and care. Digital cameras, still more fatally, surrender the memory-making process to conscious editorial control before an image even gets to the hard drive; together, the preview screen and the "Trash" button insure that the pictorial era of the headless grandma is truly at its end. (Snapshot-style slapstick is becoming the exclusive province of the handheld family video camera, which now supplies an entire genre of television comedy.) On the "image-delivery" end, laptops and PalmPilots invite users to download the virtual faces of family and friends for occasional visual reference amid email and stock quotes—the final stage in miniaturization of the pre-computer office desk environment. Emailed picture files are our era's true ephemera, unlikely ever to graduate into physical form for the accidental benefit of later generations; even those that are printed will lack the archival hardiness of 70-year-old drugstore prints.

If the word "snapshot" is taken to mean nothing more specific than a quick, aesthetically-challenged exposure, then its respectability in the museum world has hardly come out of nowhere. In the postwar decades, the snapshot was a steady if subtle presence throughout the art world. As one looks back at modernism's self-conscious fragmentation in the 1960s into alien schools of high craft, high concept and high camp, the snapshot stands out as that fractious decade's sole universal donor. Suiting everybody's notion of visual representation degree zero, untainted by taste, wisdom, skill or power, the snapshot served equally well whether it was posing as a (presumptively naïve) model for (ostensibly knowing) photorealist paintings, providing an effortless signifier of affected Warholian affectlessness, or filling in as a low-budget (and helpfully un-stoned) witness to Happenings, actions and installations.

In the matter of photography's long-contested status as a fine art medium in its own right, the snapshot poses more complex issues. With its preloaded roll-film and its fixed shutter speed and focal length, the first we-do-the-rest Kodak camera of 1888 was, as its inventor readily emphasized, less a technological advance than a master stroke of marketing. George Eastman's keys to success—mass produce, sell cheap, ease down standards, distribute internationally, advertise and sell to the broadest conceivable market and, most crucially, manufacture need on a mass scale—converted photography from a specialized tradesman's science into the very prototype of twentieth-century consumer capitalism. Not incidentally, Kodak and its thousand successors succeeded by fueling what proved to be a growing middle class's dual fascinations with gadgetry and self-memorialization. The point-and-shoot camera came early into the hands of artistic photographers, whether through daily domestic circumstance, as an emblem of the demotic enemy, as the means to a distinctive new formal idiom free for the taking or even, as in Stieglitz's famous case, for all three reasons at once.

Throughout the twentieth century, the snapshot served malleably as the foil, inspiration or offstage line coach for photographic artists as diverse as Harry Callahan, Lee Friedlander and Nan Goldin. The "snapshot aesthetic," a virtual house style at art photography's break-out moment in the 1970s, boasted a broad aesthetic range that included Henri Cartier-Bresson's poetic humanism, Bill Dane's existential slapstick, Ken Josephson's shrugging conceptualism and instances of what might be called the ephemeral sublime. As a dialect of art photography, the snapshot's appeal derived in some cases and to some degree from its populist associations, but had more to do with the high creative dividends that the 35-millimeter camera repaid the slightest—least "artful"—of gestures. Tilt a hand, and the world tilted with you; turn your head in another direction and you might stumble upon a new world of subject matter.

For all the sincere flattery paid it by artists, the real snapshot—that is, the globe's pictorial archive of everybody's graduation, wedding, first house, kids, vacation, funeral and left thumb—played scarcely any larger part in the academy's or the museum's histories of photography than house painting played in histories of modern painting. From 1938 to 1982, the successive editions of Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography* recurrently cast the vernacular snapshot as a distant, non-evolving cultural horizon line at the perimeter of consciousness for a succession of artists concerned with their changing political and professional milieu. Even the most sympathetic of commentators wrote in 1974 that amateur snaps, whatever their virtues, failed to qualify as photography. Although Joel Meyerowitz's photographs, Jonathan Green noted, had been "made in the swift and artless manner of the snapshot, it is their cumulative formality and their insistent vision that make them photographs."[7]

If the snapshot was denied relevance as (indeed, was cast as the abortive doppelgänger of) authored photography, nor did it get much credit for insights on what would seem to be its rightful territory: the everyday, "democratic" circumstances and passages of modern life. As photography's museum presence matured and evolved at MoMA in the postwar years, an interesting sequence of causes excluded the snapshot from consideration there, with broader implications for art photography generally.

When assembling "The Family of Man" (1955), his widely-toured photographic concordance to the universals of human experience, Edward Steichen solicited and reviewed, he claimed, two million photographs in a search for the 500 he needed for a sequence unfolding around a central metaphor ("Family") for human continuity across time and geography. Rather than reviewing submissions culled from the albums, attics and wallets of many nations—a call for which would have yielded countless case studies of photography as a literally familial bonding agent—Steichen directed his appeal to photo agencies, picture editors of mass-market publications and other professionals.[8] When asking to see their best work, Steichen had in mind images that conveyed emotional and editorial themes with maximum synecdochic concision—for ultimately, his exhibition was to be organized (like its own latter-day descendant, the stock photography catalog) into master themes built up out of syntactically complementary images. Images of pregnant women in Africa, Japan and the Arctic, for example, were followed by scenes of childbirth at an American hospital, with a rhetorical rigor that was the very antithesis of the jumbled shoebox of snapshots in a family closet. The well-crafted, monumentally enlarged and calculatedly installed sequences through which Steichen expressed his populist theme determined that the show would be of, but necessarily not by, the people.

All images on pp. 8-9 by anonymous photographers.

The version of the medium enunciated by John Szarkowski was democratic in quite a different sense than his predecessor's had been. In a defining early book and exhibition, *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), Szarkowski proposed five technical components (thing, detail, frame, time and vantage point) common to all photographs. In the articulate grammar of its physical makeup, he suggested, the camera socratically elicited a fundamental set of visual decisions from every photographer, whether surveyor, journalist, ironic artist or—the exhibition's most frequently credited contributor—Photographer Unknown. In a striking echo of Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation" (1964), which had urged recognition of the "transparence" of lived historical experience and the insufficiency of all theories of art,[9] Szarkowski's exhibition proposed a digging down to Jamesian-Deweyan bedrock: photography's accidental, yet inherent, identity as a physical grammatization of optical experience. Prizing photography as the flower of individual apperception, Szarkowski suggested approaching every photograph as an index to the operations of its maker's "eye."

Though less overtly than in Steichen's *Family*, in the *Eye* of Szarkowski's title a metaphor, and with it a distinct set of theses about photography, was hard at work. Szarkowski asserted each photograph to be fundamentally about—to be something like a materialized version of—a selected moment of prosaic vision. As such, photography's perpetual rhetorical charge consisted of the loaded, if detached, act of pointing out: "just look." Among the five technical divisions proposed in *The Photographer's Eye*, the key variable was the frame, as would become clearer in Szarkowski's survey *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (1978). Procedurally cognate to the contained scope of an eye, the photograph's frame also grounded photography in the post-Renaissance pictorial tradition, revealing the medium's ultimate referential basis in the "frame"—the worldview and imagination—of a picture-maker's authorial mind.[10] Through the restrained matting and framing standards he instituted as a curator, Szarkowski distanced himself from Steichen's infamously invasive, spectacular showmanship. At the same time, he underlined the frame's evident inherence in the language of photographic pictures. The typically household-mirror-sized prints that Szarkowski arrayed evenly across the span of MoMA's walls encouraged (and indeed, pleaded a case for photographs as embodiments of) successive acts of proselytical attention: "just look."

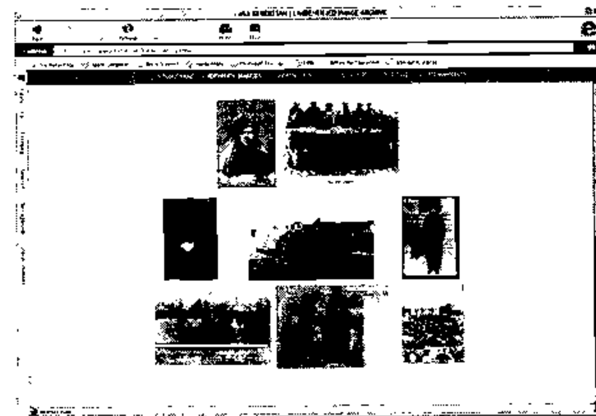
During Szarkowski's tenure at MoMA, and in no small part due to his curatorial proclivities, the "snapshot aesthetic" became the photographic sibling—the camera equivalent—to Minimalist sculpture and color field painting, which like it were playing out the final stages of Greenbergian medium-determinism. A spate of books and magazine portfolios in the 1970s celebrated vernacular photographic genres, in the case of the snapshot often emphasizing the humorous and disturbing ways that point-and-shoot cameras exposed the workings of photography's marriage of artifice and fact. Heads were lopped off; airplanes landed on dogs' noses. Countless students in nascent photography programs of the time sought to achieve such effects on purpose, but (Photographer Unknown seemed to admonish) serendipitous surrealism was less compelling when it evinced effort; the point was to refer viewers to an ironic wit at loose in the phenomenal world, revealed accidentally by the evidently unthinking (snapped) camera image.

The snapshot, to be sure, was not the only type of vernacular photograph being conscripted into documenting the universe's ineffable Zen persona. Books as different as Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's *Evidence* (1977) and Barbara P. Norfleet's *The Champion Pig: Great Moments in Everyday Life* (1979) excavated a bounty of home-grown dadaism, Westnnian abstraction and existential dread from the negative files of rural newspaper offices, insurance adjusters and Main Street photo studios. If such books took on cult status among practicing art photographers, it was precisely because the peculiar and visually arresting pictures in them combined unimpeachable professional competence with a presumed aesthetic naïveté like that of Mom or Dad with Instamatic in hand. The photographic vernacular seemed—at least, when edited to appear so by artists and curators—to be full of disinterested wielders of a frame saying, "just look."

Peter Galassi's debut effort as Szarkowski's successor at MoMA was a major survey of home-and-family-themed contemporary art photography, "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort" (1991). In part because it came on the heels of two blockbusters ("Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" [1984] and "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" [1990]) that had purported to give equal time to modernism's source materials, "Pleasures and Terrors" was widely expected to explore the strong family resemblance between popular domestic snapshots and the home-based work of contemporary camera artists. In fact, "Pleasures and Terrors" passed on that opportunity, for which (along with many tendentious organizational choices) it was sharply criticized. And yet the snapshot tradition, though absent from the galleries, was acknowledged in the catalog. Galassi wrote that prior generations of art photographers had either dealt with their home life in pictures that were "essentially snapshots, quarantined from the demands and opportunities of the photographer's art," or else—like Stieglitz, Weston, Callahan—had photographed their loved ones with such rarified aestheticism that they left familial subject matter "drained of domesticity."[11] In contrast to those sharply segregated traditions, Galassi located his exhibition's poetic point of departure in William Eggleston's influential reconciliation of a transparently simple point-and-shoot technique, on the one hand, and on the other, personal aesthetic motives so gnomic as to repel outsiders entirely.

Galassi suggested that many artists in the show were united by a (likewise Egglestonian) conviction "that true tenderness begins where sentimentality ends."[12] As a practicing dogma, that pseudo-postmodern truism, laudable (or at least unexceptionable) in the abstract, left "Pleasures and Terrors" without the dangerous vibration that snapshots so

effortlessly exude: the genuine irresolution between candor and concealment that testifies to cross-purposes, known and unknown, among the participants. In the social niche notionally occupied by snapshots—the collective gaze of a family gathered around their album—what reads as "tenderness" to one viewer/subject will horrify another, or morph into low comedy on the subsequent page. Generally speaking—or perhaps, by way of definition—one might say that the vernacular snapshot is a picture only instrumentally; firstly, it is a conduit for human relationships, in which "true tenderness" is not the object of acquired pictorial formulae but a living presence. In the end, the white rooms of "Pleasures and Terrors" were haunted by the absence of—indeed, the contextual impossibility of—the three-dimensional social relations conveyed by the humble snapshot. Standing amid the exhibition's variously arch, generic, cinematic and vaguely cynical images of the domestic, one became acutely aware that the stranger at one's elbow not only had a real home life, but probably also had (on his or her person, in some cases), photographs with stories to tell in a language beyond the means of the objects on the walls.



Captions from top to bottom:

- Photographer Unknown, America, ca 1930. Promised gift of Thomas Walther, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Photographer Unknown, America, 1910s. Thomas Walther Collection.
- Germaine Koh, postcard (original in color) from the "Sightings" series, 1992-1998. Offset postcards printed from snapshots found in public places. Printed on verso: "One of six photographs found 14 December 1993, 34 Street between 6 and 7 Avenues, New York // Verso marked 'Kodak PAPER.'"
- Lorie Novak, "Collected Visions," 2000 Computer-based installation at the International Center for Photography. Music by Elizabeth Brown, software by Jonathan Meyer and sound design by Clilly Castigha.
- Screen capture from www.akakurdistan.com/kurds/identity.html, August 2001.

The following year's exhibition at San Francisco's Ansel Adams Center, "Flesh & Blood: Photographers' Images of Their own Families," drew upon a still narrower strain of art photography, and when catalog contributor Andy Grundberg noted that the show was "not about family snapshots, however much its pictures are indebted to photography's most widespread practice; it is about the construction and inner workings of the family itself," he suggested more baldly than Galassi had that reflective insight was beyond the reach of the family album.[13] Val Williams put the point still further beyond doubt in the catalog for "Who's Looking at the Family?," an edgier 1994 exhibition at London's Barbican Art Centre, in which she called the happy front presented in family snapshots "a talisman against the real."[14]

As late as the mid-1990s, it seemed that every historical usage to which photography had ever been put was on its way to due process in galleries, museums, auctions and coffee-table books. Crime scene records, film stills, science lab documents, cheesecake and head shots, realtors' "landscapes," x-rays, immigration mug shots, all found monographic treatment in a gallery world ever hungry for virgin wilderness. But the wall that split photography's discursive territory into an aesthetic-commercial-public realm, on the one hand, and home duty, on the other, remained inviolate. Even in the recent exhibitions at SFMnMA and the Met, the snapshot's domestic role was not, in itself, the primary thematic focus, though of course many family subjects and format cues (such as album pages and, in San Francisco, whole albums) were on view.

The snapshot, it appears, is poised tn serve the museum as something like an Outsider art, gamely gesturing toward the dominant narratives of avant-gardism around which modern art was once displayed, but not with undue seriousness. As the modernist era retreats to a perceived stage of historical remoteness, such that art and artifact convincingly blend into one (as in galleries of early nineteenth century art that unflinchingly combine painting, silverware and furniture), it will appear increasingly natural for museums to pay attention to cultural media such as the snapshut, which served, no less than productions of the avant-garde, as venues for the widely-distributed genius (individual, industrial, commercial, technological) of the epoch.

Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Maria Morris Hambourg was faulted by Coleman for "muddying the waters" when she called the botched bizarreries in "Other Pictures" some of "the most innovative avant-garde art of the first half of the twentieth century."[15] But the salient point, surely, of Hambourg's winking appraisal was that a few million people with hand cameras (think monkeys with typewriters) had achieved in four decades, and accidentally, things that the Fine Arts had taken centuries to begin dreaming of. As Fineman puts it in her catalog essay, "the road between high and low runs in both directions."[16] When recognized as an enduring sourcebook of styles, subjects and surprises, the snapshot truly does muddy questions of originality and influence, for its unique characteristics provided artists from the surrealists to Gerhard Richter with idioms by which to explore the impossible and the impure. Intriguing, then, to assign the snapshot (or, some snapshots) a museum niche as art-without-artists, an *avant-gardisme sans avant-garde*. But the decontextualized snapshot, like the African mask before it, stands to lose by too quick an absorptioo into the formalist narratives of modernism.

Io fact, in forfeiting its real-world context for the no-context of the museum wall, the snapshot arguably stands to lose more than other types of photographs do, for the snapshot camera and its pictures exist specifically in order to record phenomena of situational relevance to the image-maker. A snapshot's intended viewers are typically the photographer's close associates. Relationships are certified, and sometimes even created, by the snapshot itself, as when a co-worker's portrait of a pet, taped to the side of her computer, invites conversatinn. Each snapshot's implicit refcrent, and at the same time its distinctive discursive space, is the network of human relations that gave rise to it. It is this circumstance, in its myriad implications, that has begun to define the projects of many curators, authors and artists.

The inaugural re-opening of the midtown International Center for Photography (ICP) in November 2000 included two installations exploring the snapshot's role in the making, mediation and memorialization of community and family. Upstairs was "Striving to be Seen," a survey of African American vernacular photography, including cabinet cards, cased images and tintypes as well as snapshot album pages. In her wall text, curator Cynthia Fredette noted that from a historical distance, studio portraits and family albums may "be seen as a collective expression of the struggle for African Americans to envision themselves as a group in American culture," and that while "the need to counter . . . negative [popular culture] representations was probably secondary to the desire to capture and share personal histories, these pictures nonetheless offer contemporary viewers an expanded vision of the complexities of African American life and its visual representation."

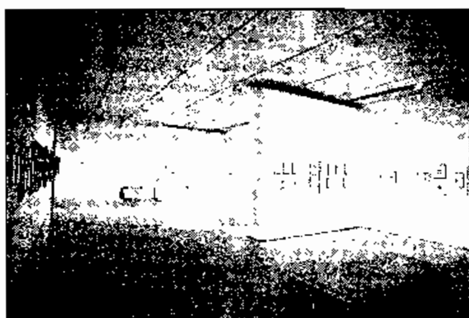
Chief among those complexities, as the variety of works on view suggested, is that within stigmatized ethnic and immigrant minority communities, the imperatives of "striving" and of community identity can diverge. A proud parent's baby album, a couple's self-portrait in Sunday dress, can be seen as outtakes from several intersecting stories at once. Some of the stories are about communitarian solidarity, others about individuation: about the makers *picturing* themselves, quite literally, apart from an imposed (racial, economic) community, as well as in alignment with an embraced (ethnic, familial, historical) one. That modern photographic curation so long dismissed the family camera and its products as occupants of an "uneventful" domestic realm says less about the pictures and their multivalent historical functinns than it does about ingrained historical assumptions about white middle-class identity as a natural condition that albums inertly, simplistically and sufficiently "reflect."

Downstairs at the ICP, tucked in a corner behind the billboard-sized "Annie Leibovitz Women" exhibition, was a darkened room housing Lorie Novak's ongoing project "Collected Visions," begun in 1993. Visitors sat on a bench facing a corner of the room, where two perpendicular floor-to-ceiling video projections (looking somewhat like the open pages of a room-sized family album) cycled through sequences of snapshots from several hundred family collections. The photographs—typical, odd, hypnotizing—were impressionistically combined with fragmentary recordings of conversations among people flipping through their own family albums. (Such conversations have a distinctive sound, just as one can recognize by sight a group of people looking at pictures of themselves.) Quoted out of context, the fragmentary audio component ("Is this me?"; "we're never touching, we're *arranged*") might suggest a mood of existentialist alienation, but in combination with the likewise fragmentary yet cumulatively coherent imagery onscreen, the speakers' words (fighting their way through a superfluous string quartet soundtrack) made perfect emotional sense.

"Collected Visions" finds surer footing as an interactive Web site that iocludes a family archives bibliography and links to related sites.[17] Users are invited tu reflect upon posted family pictures (preseotly 2200 in number), or to submit snapshots and statements of their own, thereby eliciting further commentary by others. The submitted essays range in length from a few terse words to a screenful of close type. Like good graffiti (a suitable standard, one might suggest, by which to rate reality Web sites), at their best the site's word-aod-picture combinations can be darkly comical, wretchedly poignant or intriguiugly opaque. By and large, the specificity a snapshot gains by personal testimony trumps all imagination, let alone the boilerplate sentiments for which one has been prepared by snapshot-style photographs of children in popular advertising. One's perceptions of a posing father, mother and toddler, for example, are indelibly and uncannily changed by reading that the wide-eyed child grew up tn be crowned Miss Deaf Black America.

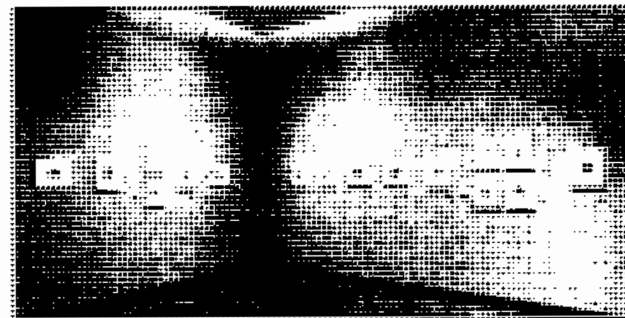
Overall, Novak's Web site has the salutary effect of achieving human connection throngh the soapshot's blank facade of archetypes. In an image striking enough to have fit into the Met's exhibition, a smiling girl sits holding hands with a child-sized, but rather experienced-looking, sloe-eyed woman doll. The accompanying 40-word essay inflects the image considerably: "martha is my best friend. got her for my birthday last year. she tells me her secrets. we ran away together but my mother found us and took martha away. i found her head in the trash in the garage." The look of the doll, potent Barthesian *punctum* though it may be, is outdone by the banal and therefore credible commentary, which has an immediacy one is tempted to call "photographic." In another image, two bored children gaze at the camera, the older one giving the camera a wan smile. The younger une, now grown, recalls: "I remember these horrid family gatherings, a bunch of loud people I did not know, and did not want to know"—and suddenly the flat demeanor on the children's faces wakens into keenest eloquence. "Collected Visions" is not aimed exclusively, or even primarily, at a fine arts photography-oriented audience. To just the extent that it is pitched in broader humanistic terms, it rewards the close attention of photography specialists; its format and content provide, in many respects, the democratized "Family of Man" to which museum curation has proven unequal in the past half-century.

Although Novak's project is political in the very broadest sense, its contributors stick to personal and household issues, seldom venturing beyond the autobiographical and diaristic implications of the snapshot. Gert Tschögl and Eva Brunner-Szabo's "Memory Projects" Web site solicits snapshots and written reflections in much the same manner as Novak's, but puts them to use in service of a wider historical inquiry.[18] The black and white snapshots on the site—anonymous, unidentified ones from "flea markets and garrets" rather than family album fare—evoke the historical upheavals of life in early and mid-twentieth-century Europe: urban buildings burning, a uniformed group before an open pit, two children sharing a bed, peasant women carrying bundles of wood. The historical period, and the issues under scrutiny, are those of the generation of grandparents to



Installation view of the exhibition "Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998.

Installation view of the exhibition "Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998.



Installation view of the exhibition "Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection," Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

many who submit texts to the site. Some entries, however, find elders contributing highly specific bits of firsthand insight (of a plane wreck: "In 1946, there were no nails . . . the downed planes got stripped for parts") that throw the images into high relief as late-arriving illustrations to long-mute memories. Combining the self-conscious labor of historical empathy with gestures of explanation, remorse and recrimination, the site as a whole takes on the tone of a group reflection on the irretrievability of history, and the lost snapshot's aptness as an emblem of lost time.

Given their shared perspective on snapshots as imperfect yet necessary vehicles of historical knowledge—and given the putative worldwideness of the Internet—it is striking just how seldom Novak's project and Tschogl and Brunner-Szabo's overlap, in either subject matter or temperament. One literal intersection between the two projects (in which the twain do not meet so much as agree to disagree) is Tschögl's submission to "Collected Visions": an old snapshot of a relative in military uniform, paired with reflections on Austria's complicity in the Holocaust. Yet the themes plumbed by these Web sites are deeply complementary. Novak suggests that the struggle, in family snapshots, between the told and the untold, the symbolized and the forgotten, reveals history's status as a contest among memories, always individual and fragile. "Memory Projects" asserts that snapshots are paradigmatic historical documents precisely insofar as they are inherently partial (meaning both slanted and fragmentary); as such, they call for creative reconstructive labor on the part of historians—including, potentially or inevitably, any of us.

These themes converge in Ann Weiss's 2001 book *The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau.*[19] The book, and the touring exhibition for which it serves as a catalog, tells the story of Weiss's discovery of over 2400 snapshots confiscated from incoming prisoners by the Nazis. Removed by Red Army personnel at the time of the camp's liberation, the archive was returned to the camp years later and consigned to a storage room, where Weiss came across it in 1986. She spent years pursuing leads in an effort to restore identities—names, genealogies, life stories, social networks—to faces in the pictures, some 400 of which are reproduced. What is striking about the pictures, though it should not be, is precisely their unremitting normality. One is looking not at the proverbial burning house, but at the precious keepsakes that were taken away as it burned: the human-scaled hopes and desires of people. And yet those in the pictures, and those who saved them, would appear to us now as no more than masks of generic loss, if Weiss had not reassigned them specificity. Providing a counterpoint to historical and cinematic accounts of the Holocaust, in which citizen Jews assume the two-dimensional passivity of the already-victimized, the snapshots in *The Last Album* indicate, as Leon Wieseltier writes in his foreword, "how martyrs must be remembered: for what they remembered . . . in the memory of their memory they live."[20] The daunting voids of modern history that underlie Weiss's small victory are hinted at by the "Unknown Image Archive" on Susan Meiselas's "aka Kurdistan" Web site, where members of the worldwide Kurdish diaspora are asked to help identify and comment upon anonymous photographs dating from the past century—a means, as the Web site notes, to "build a collective memory" for this "people who have no national archive."[21]

The unusual redemptive dynamics of *The Last Album* and "aka Kurdistan"—in which the stakes attached to a name and a date are very high indeed, and research is more than rewarded by its outcome—have nearly nothing to say about the boundless jetsam of unaffiliated snapshots at loose throughout the world. What to say, what to do, about the billions of orphaned images that modern civilization has spun out all around us, and which we cannot prevent sliding through the cracks of history? Why does it (or does it?) matter?

In a series titled "Sightings" (1992-98), Canadian conceptual artist Germaine Koh has, indirectly but strikingly, come close to providing an answer. Saving the snapshots that she found discarded in public areas of cities where she lived over a span of several years, Koh had a commercial firm mass produce full-color picture postcards of selected examples. (The images, as befits their provenance, tend toward the markedly substandard: accidental self-portrait, ripped porno shot, end of the roll, heavily abraded pet picture.) Printed on the reverse side of each card, where a typical postcard's caption would be, is a record of the time and place where the snapshot was found, and the inscriptions it bore.

Koh exhibits the cards by slipping them into postcard racks in museum gift shops, to be found and purchased by any patron who comes along. To trace, in imagination, a snapshot's progress through the stages of Koh's project—from a photographer's attempted treasured memento to a piece of trash to a collector's unique but enigmatic "find" to a 50-cent commodity, and back again into the indeterminate public realm—is to witness an inanimate object's full life-cycle of possibilities, as it bears the brunt of desire, hope, clumsiness, indifference, wit, industry, curiosity and forgetfulness. No doubt a browser and a digital image archive can do many things to keep the past on life support, but they will never succeed in looking quite so human as a boot-scraped scrap of paper does, drifting across the windswept surface of the dustbin of history toward the quiet victory of sheer persistence.

JOEL SMITH is the Emily Hargroves Fisher '57 and Richard B. Fisher Curator at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, and the author of *Edward Steichen: The Early Years* (New York: Princeton University Press/Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999).

NOTES

1. David Trend, "Look Who's Talking: Narratives of Family Representations" in *Afterimage*, Vol. 19, no. 7 (February 1992), pp. 8-11.
2. Geoffrey Batchen, "Post-Photography" in his *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 111.
3. Douglas R. Nickel, "The Snapshot—Some Notes" in *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998), Mia Fineman, untitled essay in Thomas Walther, *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000).
4. A recent coffee table book edited by Sharon Delano, *Summer Vacation: Found Photographs* (Tom Adler Books, 2001), provides a striking parallel to both catalogs in its design, production values, historical span and nostalgic charge
5. Fineman, unpaginated.
6. A. D. Coleman, "Visual Literacy" in *Photography in New York International* (November/December 2000), p. 58.
7. Jonathan Green, *The Snapshot* (Aperture 19:1), Millerton, NY, 1974, p. 36.
8. In his Introduction, Steichen called the photographers in the exhibition "273 men and women . . . amateurs and professionals, famed and unknown," but other than Lewis Carroll's portrait of Alice Lidell and Steichen's own early snapshot of his daughters, one would be hard-pressed to identify "amateur" works in the exhibition. *The Family of Man* (New York. Museum of Modern Art/Simon & Schuster, 1955), pp. 5, 190, 191
9. "What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. . . . Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are. . . . Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. . . . The function of criticism should be to show how [art] is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means." Susan Sontag, "Against interpretation" (first published in Evergreen Review, 1964) in *Against interpretation and other essays* (New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 12, 13, 14
10. Szarkowski explicitly discusses the historical relationship between Baroque framing methods, stagecraft and the camera in *Photography Until Now* (Boston: MoMA/Bulfinch, 1989), pp. 15-19.
11. Peter Galassi, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* (New York. Museum of Modern Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1991), p. 9.
12. Ibid., p. 20.
13. Andy Grundberg, "The Snapshot Comes of Age" in Alice Rose George, Abigail Heyman, and Ethan Hoffman, eds., *Flesh & Blood: Photographers' Images of Their Own Families* (New York: Picture Project, 1992), p. 14
14. Val Williams, *Who's Looking at the Family?* (London: Barbican Art Centre, 1994), p. 13.
15. Coleman, p. 58.
16. Fineman, unpaginated.
17. See www.cvisions.cat.nyu.edu/
18. See www.t0.or.at/~memoryproject/.
19. Ann Weiss, ed., *The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau*, introduction by James E. Young, foreword by Leon Wieseltier (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001)
20. Wieseltier, foreword in Weiss, p. 15
21. See www.akakurdistan.com/ and Susan Meiselas and Martin van Bruinessen, *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (New York: Random House, [illegible]).