

Excerpted from *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888–1978: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson*
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Introduction / Sarah Greenough

In 1902 Charles M. Taylor wrote a book titled *Why My Photographs Are Bad* in the hope that his study would “aid the ambitious beginner, and enable him to avoid the most common mistakes incident to the first stages of this interesting study.”¹ Noting that photography demanded “perseverance almost equal to that bestowed upon the kindred arts,” he cautioned that readers should not expect to master its intricacies “in too short a time and without labor and study.”² He urged them to join camera clubs and seek out training from commercial photographers. Illustrating his book with “good” and “bad” photographs, Taylor described typical “mistakes” amateurs made, such as double exposures, abruptly cropped or out-of-focus forms, tilted horizons, or the inclusion of the photographer’s shadow. And he gave hints on how to correct these gaffes: to avoid blurred portraits, he suggested using a headrest; to eliminate the photographer’s shadow, he recommended working at mid-day. While he admired the originality of snapshots and their strong personal associations, certain types of photographs, he said, were far too difficult and should simply not be attempted. For example, he admonished amateurs not to take instantaneous photographs because they did not give the photographer time to study the scene carefully enough to achieve the best results.

With such rote prescriptions, Taylor's "good" photographs are, not surprisingly, stiff, bland, and boring. Not only do they possess none of the humor of the "bad" photographs, but they have none of their immediacy or authenticity. Nor has Taylor's book stood the test of time. Only a few years after its publication, artists associated with dada and surrealism celebrated snapshots as a rich reservoir of antirational activity, where chance and contingency reigned supreme. At the same time, such photographers as André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, or Martin Munkácsi were deeply inspired by the freer, looser style they saw in snapshots. They, as well as later artists such as Lisette Model, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, or Garry Winogrand, freely exploited all of Taylor's "mistakes," including blurry or abruptly cropped forms, tilted horizons, and their own shadows within the photographs. Keen to catch life on the fly, they also embraced instantaneous photography. Some were known to shoot their cameras blindly, without even looking through the viewfinders to construct their compositions. They did this not only to suggest the partial and fleeting nature of contemporary experience and to impart a sense of veracity and authority to their works but also to celebrate the accidental quality of both modern life and modern photography. Demonstrating the visual richness and the conceptual fecundity of the humble snapshot, still other artists in the 1960s and 1970s, among them Vito Acconci and Dan Graham, appropriated its banality and deadpan, artless nonstyle as they used it to document their projects and also to rid their work of formal interest and affectation. More recent photographers such as Philip Lorca diCorcia or Jeff Wall embraced the look of snapshots, even though their photographs are actually carefully constructed and controlled.

As snapshots seeped into every aspect of twentieth-century fine art photography, the language of the snapshot became the medium's universal parlance. The term itself derives from hunting and refers to a shot quickly fired with little or no aim, but it began to be applied to photographs in the 1890s following the invention of the Kodak camera.³ By the 1940s and 1950s photographers like Model or Frank did not say they had "made" or "exposed" their photographs, as earlier counterparts had, but instead said they had "shot" them. Indeed, Model implored her students to "shoot from the gut."⁴ Carrying the hunting analogy still further, Walker Evans said of his photographs surreptitiously made on the New York subways in the late 1930s and early 1940s, "I am stalking, as in the hunt. What a bagful to be taken home."⁵

The National Gallery of Art is not in the habit of celebrating bad works of art, and the photographs included in this catalogue and the accompanying exhibition are, like all other works presented in this museum, worthy of serious consideration. For more than a hundred years, snapshots — that is, photographs that are casually made, usually by untrained amateurs, and intended to function as documents of personal history — have fascinated, perplexed, and challenged all who are interested in photography. They call into question our most basic ideas about the medium — its ontology, its history, and its place within twentieth-century culture. Striving to assess the profound power of these modest photographs, the seminal theoretician Roland Barthes used a snapshot of his mother as a way to understand "at all costs what photography was 'in itself.'"⁶ From it he derived the twin concepts of *studium* — the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretations of a photograph — and *punctum*, the often highly personal detail that establishes a

connection between the viewer and the photograph.⁷ Historians such as Michael Lesy have examined commercial photographs and snapshots in relation to other contemporary documents, including newspaper or archival records, thus reinvigorating the photographs with many of the associations and meanings they had for their original viewers.⁸ Other scholars have explored the importance of snapshots as cultural artifacts that provide significant insights into the ways people in the twentieth century lived and worked, how they related to each other, and how they amused themselves. And they have discussed the profound role that snapshots have played in the creation of personal, familial, group, or ethnic identity as well as memory in the twentieth century.⁹

Curators, too, have recognized that some snapshots, once they are removed from the personal narratives that impelled their creation and endowed them with their original meanings, are immensely satisfying visual objects, worthy of careful scrutiny. Since modernist photographs first began to be regularly exhibited in American art museums in the late 1930s, snapshots and the questions they raise about the relationship between amateur and fine art photography have also been addressed. In 1944 the Museum of Modern Art mounted an exhibition titled *The American Snapshot*, which actually included 350 award-winning amateur photographs that had been submitted to contests sponsored by Kodak and were later reprinted and recropped, either by Kodak or the museum curators.¹⁰ A little more than twenty years later John Szarkowski presented a far more serious examination of the subject, also at the Museum of Modern Art, in his highly influential exhibition and catalogue, *The Photographer's Eye*. He asserted that photographers could create meaningful pictures either by being “artistically ignorant” or by abandoning their allegiance to traditional

pictorial standards inherited from painting and the other arts.¹¹ To illustrate his points he compared works by well-known photographers, commercial images, and “artistically ignorant” snapshots, positing that five technical components (thing, detail, frame, time, and vantage point) were fundamental elements of all photographs, regardless of authorship.

In recent years snapshots have frequently appeared on the walls of art museums, often presented as more humble but no less satisfying counterparts to the pantheon of modernist photographers from Kertész to Winogrand whose works usually hang there. Two of the most important exhibitions were *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present*, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998, and *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000.¹² Each of these exhibitions presented many snapshots whose defects — abruptly cropped forms, double exposures, botched exposures, or even poorly articulated subjects — created odd but sometimes unexpectedly compelling images. By focusing on those works that Mia Fineman, curator of the Metropolitan’s exhibition, dubbed “successful failures,” these museums celebrated the same “bad” photographs that Taylor had condemned almost a hundred years earlier.¹³ But in so doing, they also gave greater weight and authority to the collector or curator who had the vision to pluck these gems from the formidable morass of snapshots than to the ingenuity or creativity of the photographers themselves.

Despite this extensive scrutiny, however, few scholars, historians, or curators have examined the evolution of this popular art in America. Even though snapshots have existed for more than a hundred years, most people have viewed them as

a monolithic entity with an unvarying palette of subjects and styles, an inflexible set of intentions, and a predictable bag of mistakes. Few have looked at snapshots in a chronological manner or examined them as a historical phenomenon; few have noted the stylistic and thematic similarities as well as the common tricks and technical gaffes of snapshots made by amateurs around the country at the same time; few have charted the cultural influences and technological advances that both encouraged amateurs to embrace new subjects and styles and forced them to confront new pictorial challenges; few have addressed the notions each generation shared about what constituted correct behavior when posing for the camera; and few have examined the transformation of snapshot imagery over time. That is what this book and exhibition seek to do.

We begin our study in 1888 with the release of the first Kodak camera, which launched the invention of the photo-finishing industry, enabling anyone who could press a button to become a photographer. In the first essay in this book Diane Waggoner examines the kinds of photographs amateurs made from the late 1880s through World War I, when they were first given the opportunity to document and memorialize their lives. Noting the large number of staged snapshots from this time, which defy the commonly held belief that most snapshots are dependent on chance, she analyzes the subjects and practices that amateurs used at the turn of the century, which had their roots in earlier nineteenth-century customs, such as amateur theatricals. She also considers the ways in which the camera and the act of taking snapshots became enmeshed with new forms of leisure and the desire for self-definition. In the second essay Sarah Kennel examines the 1920s and 1930s, particularly how prewar methods of self-representation and the docu-

mentation of pleasure merged with a self-conscious desire for modernity. New technologies — not only faster films but lighter and better cameras — greatly assisted the amateur, yet they alone do not explain the newfound interest in exploiting the unique ways in which the camera depicts the world. Instead, Kennel suggests that the larger popular culture — the advent of photographically illustrated newspapers and periodicals and the profusion of technical manuals and illustrated magazines directed specifically at the amateur — inspired much of this transformation. In the third essay I focus on the 1940s and 1950s, examining the pervasiveness of photographic imagery in the postwar era, which was propelled both by the advent and soon almost universal embrace of television and by the new affordability and ease of photography — coupled, after the 1947 invention of the Polaroid camera, with its now nearly instant gratification. As everything and anything became suitable subjects for photography in this period, amateurs began to explore aspects of their private lives that had not previously been within the scope of their cameras and at the same time came to see photography as a vehicle for self-promotion, even fame. The final essay by Matthew Witkovsky looks at the 1960s and 1970s, which were characterized by the collision of public and private worlds, when the camera became the constant accessory of modern life, the bracelet that hung on the wrist of all young “swingers”; when all things were photographed, nothing was held sacred, and human activity became ritualized into a series of opportunities to be photographed. His essay examines the pictorial impact of the square-format cameras that were so widely embraced in these decades and discusses the profusion of artists who consciously adopted a snapshot aesthetic and snapshot subjects.

Since the 1970s critics such as Susan Sontag and Janet Malcolm have observed that the patina of time will transform any artifact into an object of veneration, even art, and Malcolm in particular has warned against the resulting commodification that inevitably occurs.¹⁴ These dangers are certainly worthy of consideration, but when applied to the history of photography, they become especially murky, for the vast majority of photographs — from daguerreotypes made by anonymous itinerant photographers in the 1840s, to studies of the New York slums at the turn of the century, to NASA photographs of the moon from the 1960s — were not made by people who considered themselves artists, nor were they made to be art. Rather, created as personal, social, governmental, or scientific documents, they were made as cherished keepsakes of beloved friends or family members, as evidence of squalor and deprivation for use in social or governmental reform, or as records of new worlds. And just as often, the primary agent behind their creation and their intended initial use was not the photographer, the mere operator of the camera, but the individual who conceived and commissioned them. These kinds of photographs, which are now commonly described as vernacular and understood to be any photograph not made specifically as art, are also very often anonymous. Thus the usual art historical issues of intention and chronology are complicated and uncertain at best; and the appellations of genius and masterpiece, as well as the issue of canon, are rendered meaningless.¹⁵

Snapshots pose their own set of challenges and opportunities. Unlike other kinds of vernacular photographs — commercial studio portraits, for example — they are made for pleasure not profit. Liberated from the constraints of the marketplace, they are curious mixtures of originality and con-

ventionality that often present highly inventive pictorial solutions — whether by accident or intent — while simultaneously preserving inherited subjects and poses. As art historians look at them more carefully, we quickly realize that they are neither naïve nor artistically ignorant and that they show from one time period or generation to the next an evolution of style, subject matter, and function. But snapshots also raise ethical questions. Made purely for private not public consumption, they were never intended to be seen on the walls of museums or reproduced in books. In the almost sixty years since the advent of the 1948 television show *Candid Camera*, which popularized the notion that anyone could achieve fame and notoriety by being captured unexpectedly by the camera and appearing on television or in print, Americans have not just become inured to the camera's very real invasions of privacy but have even courted it with MySpace and YouTube. We should admit, however, that part of the allure, even the frisson, evoked by the humble, predominantly twentieth-century snapshots presented in this book and exhibition is due not only to what we perceive to be their charming naïveté but also to the voyeurism in which we, as more media-savvy twentieth-first-century viewers, indulge when looking at them. These are private moments, deeply felt and authentic, and we are the interlopers. Walker Evans waited more than twenty years to publish his subway photographs in a book, hoping that “the rude and impudent invasion [had] been carefully softened and partially mitigated by a planned passage of time.”¹⁶ While the sentiment may seem quaint, the example is worth noting.

In addition, though, snapshots have provided a new impetus for a critical reevaluation of the history of photography.¹⁷ Confined until recently to the study of a modernist canon established in

the late 1930s, most histories of photography have examined only a very narrow range of photographic practice, including those twentieth-century photographs made expressly as art and the nineteenth-century ones that were deemed to be their precedents and thus gave the later works a foundation of tradition and authority. Yet because of the immense appeal of snapshots, because they so clearly form a significant part of the rich visual tradition of their time, and because they have had such a profound impact on twentieth-century art and culture, historians have now begun to wrestle with the larger question of how to construct a new history of photography that addresses not only the fine art tradition but also all types of vernacular photographs, including snapshots. They have concluded, just as Alfred Stieglitz, the high priest of fine art photography, did after many years of tortuous twists and turns: "Art or not art. That is immaterial. There is photography."¹⁸

By some estimates, in 1977, the year before our examination ends, more than 8.9 billion snapshots were made annually in the United States, up from 3.9 billion in 1967.¹⁹ With such a truly staggering number of potential candidates for inclusion in our exhibition and publication, the question of selection becomes critical. We have based our presentation on a collection of more than 8,000 snapshots assembled in the last ten years by Robert E. Jackson of Seattle. If his collection represents one small drop in the vast sea of snapshot photographs, then our selection of approximately two hundred of those works is but a few nanoliters of that larger whole. Collectors of snapshots can approach the subject in many ways. Like stamp collectors, they can seek to acquire one representative illustration of each subject ever explored by amateurs, or like archivists, they can endeavor to preserve the origi-

nal contexts — the albums, drugstore processing envelopes, or shoeboxes — where the snapshots once resided. Those primarily interested in American history or even specific issues within that history — the depiction of marginalized aspects of society, for example — can focus exclusively on snapshots that illustrate those subjects. But taxonomy, recontextualization, and American history were not Mr. Jackson's primary objective, nor did he confine his collection to representing the felicitous gaffes that so commonly befell the hapless amateur. Instead, Mr. Jackson has focused on creativity, on those snapshots that break down the barriers of time, transcending their initial function as documents of a specific person or place, to speak with an energy that is raw, palpable, and genuine about the mysteries and delights of both American photography and American life. The snapshots presented in these pages exert an undeniable power. Honest, unpretentious, and deeply mesmerizing, they show us moments of simple truth. They tell us what it felt like to live, work, and most especially to love and have fun in the twentieth century; they remind us of our past and vividly demonstrate how much our past has in common with that of so many other Americans; and they show us, in a way that is both direct and profound, what a truly extraordinary thing photography is.