

## IDEAS &gt; PIC1000 &gt; MAGAZINES &gt; INVENTED WORDS



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON. PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT E. JACKSON

## A PICTURE AND A THOUSAND WORDS

The snapshot's 'nonstyle' not only made smiling possible in photography, but allowed it to evolve into a means of expression

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Let's start with what we know about this photograph. It was taken on July 20, 1939, in Pierre, South Dakota. It's a gelatin silver print.

And we know no more. The image appears in *The Art of the American Snapshot*, a book that accompanies an exhibition of the same name at Washington's National Gallery of Art. The show features anonymous photographs from 1888 to 1978. All 200 images, including the bird girl here, are courtesy of collector Robert E. Jackson, who writes in his afterword, "So-called snapshoters try to capture and impart meaning to their lives by staging scenes that encapsulate the essence of a moment before it passes."

Of course, trying to extract the meanings and memories trapped within the four corners of this image is impossible for the modern viewer. Bereft of narrative, the image provides no hints as to who this girl is — let alone why she has a bird perched upon her.

While some might find such indeterminacy frustrating, for most there is freedom in the mystery. We can enjoy the image on its own terms and create our own story. As we study the girl's half-smile, it's worth noting that were it not for the invention of the \$1 Brownie camera in 1900, and the corresponding amateur photography revolution, her smile might not be there at all. As co-curator Diane Waggoner writes,

"Significantly, the snapshot not only made smiling possible in photography but made it desirable. Previously considered vulgar in portraiture, the smile evolved into a means of expression."

Freed of the formality of portrait photography, the snapshot helped liberate us, providing a means and a device to better express ourselves. And in the case of the Polaroid, it allowed us to expose more of ourselves, in a literal sense.

This image remains compelling almost 70 years later because it retains an emotional immediacy, despite the fact that the photographer and the story behind the image are lost to us. Across decades this girl continues to speak to us, as she squints into the sun with a jaunty confidence, the Depression-ravaged farm behind her momentarily overshadowed.

We can enjoy this image knowing nothing, but lack of information makes assessing the artistry of the photograph more difficult, as intention is impossible to gauge. As Andrew Walker and Rosalind Moulton argue in an article about photo albums, published in the journal *Qualitative Sociology* in 1989, "Naïve amateurs cared less about the form of their images than their content, less about precision than about personal meaning. They did not intend each photograph to be a statement about technical competence and artistic sensibility."

Robert E. Jackson echoes this sentiment, suggesting that the amateur concerns herself with the specificity of the moment (the bird on the head), not the universality of the human condition (our thoughts are often flights of fancy, yearning to soar above and beyond the constraints of our brain).

Despite their focus on the literal, snapshots have inspired photographers such as Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Nan Goldin, William Eggleston, Henri Cartier-Bresson,

**Freed of the formality of portrait photography, the snapshot helped liberate us, providing a means and a device to better express ourselves**

Michel Lambeth and Garry Winogrand, along with contemporary photographers such as Dash Snow and Ryan McGinley.

Co-curator Sarah Greenough, writing in *Art*, describes the "banality and deadpan, artless nonstyle" of the snapshot, arguing that mistakes such as double exposures and lack of focus are considered successful failures by many of the photographers listed above. And since snapshots embodied the accidental quality of modern life, it was hardly surprising that modern photogra-

phers were attracted to the shaky and mistakey.

Still, it would be wrong to say that amateurs were unconcerned with composition and style. *The Art of the American Snapshot* includes a number of Kodak advertisements from the early 20th century that impress upon the consumer the importance of preserving memories ("A Vacation Without a Kodak is a Vacation Wasted"), while guidebooks detailed the proper technique in which to do so (*How to Make Good Pictures*, published by Kodak in 1912).

Of course, take enough photographs and you're bound to get lucky once in awhile. In 1967, 3.9 billion snapshots were taken in the United States; by 1977 the number had risen to 8.9 billion, and six years later, 11.75 billion. Today, given the rise of the digital camera, the number of images produced each year is impossible to calculate.

But what does the click and the flash really capture? In his 1987 book *Snapshot Versions of Life*, Richard Chalfen suggests that we take approximately 3,000 pictures in a lifetime. With an average shutter speed of 1/100th of a second, that stack of hypothetical snapshots represents perhaps 30 seconds of accumulated life.

Despite its brevity, the snapshot provides a window into a whole range of social classes and their preoccupations, a social history in which the ordinary becomes ex-

traordinary. Sarah Greenough, writing in *The Art of the American Snapshot*, believes the allure of the snapshot stems from its "charming naiveté" but also points to "the voyeurism in which we, as more media-savvy twenty-first-century viewers, indulge when looking at them. These are private moments, deeply felt and authentic, and we are the interlopers." Bird girl silently asks us to consider the moral aspects of photography as we subject her to our intrusive gaze.

The emotional honesty that makes the snapshot so compelling emerges from the comfort of its creation. The little girl was caught on film by a friend or loved one. The terminology of hunting is appropriate, given that "snapshot" originally referred to a gun fired quickly and haphazardly.

Does the humble snapshot deserve its own museum exhibit? The answer is, of course, yes. The Washington exhibit, ending Dec. 31, is the first to arrange such images chronologically, which has helped to locate themes and patterns in and across various eras. And, just as importantly, art photography has a long history of appropriating the visual grammar and vernacular conventions of amateurs.

The weekenders and the Kodakers are the accidental artists that inspire the professionals and make them look good, and *The Art of the American Snapshot* provides overdue credit.

## OFF THE RACK: ATTACKING APPLE, LAMENTING LABELS, AND DYING FROM RISING EARLY



## FAST COMPANY

December/January

**What do Apple and Einstein have in common?**

The former has fiercely protected its exclusive ecosystem of iPods, iTunes, and iPhones. "But what does Steve Jobs know that Albert Einstein didn't? Einstein posited that a closed system would become stagnant over time. . . . Has Jobs hit upon a formula that insulates Apple from stagnation?"

With consumers who feel not only accustomed to convergence and simplification but entitled to them, "being 'open' isn't about sharing patent information or computer code but about compatibility and seamlessness, from the phones in their pockets to the movies playing on their flat screens.

"Jobs may have to accept that Apple's next wave of growth — or energy, as Einstein might have put it — depends on syncing up his products and platforms with those of his competitors."



## PLENTY

December/January

**For hibernating animals, climate change can be lethal.**

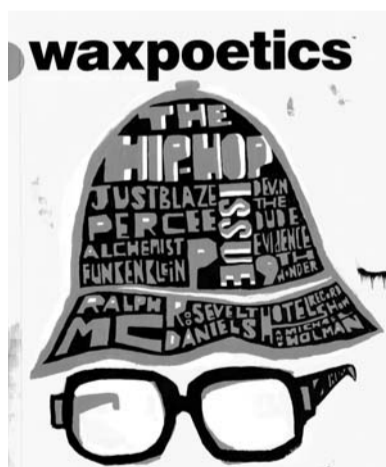
"If global temperatures continue to rise as predicted, some animals may become fatally out of sync with their environment. . . ." writes Alisa Opar.

"In Europe, zoos and hunters have reported bears emerging from hibernation sooner than expected. Last January, rattlesnakes slithered about in New York's Taconic State Park, and tree frogs in Canada that should've been frozen were hopping around calling for mates."

If a rodent such as a marmot, for example, wakes up increasingly early each year, "there might not be enough food" available to sustain it in the short term.

Or males in the long term.

After all, "They arise first to rouse females from sleep, and could be picked off by predators," writes the admirably dispassionate Opar, "impairing reproduction."



## WAXPOETICS

December/January

**Neo soul, underground, crunk . . .**

even a casual listener is likely to recognize those terms, and that's a problem, says producer Just Blaze, whose clientele includes Jay-Z and Mariah Carey.

"Why can't it just be R&B?" he says of so-called "neo soul."

"Folks felt the need to put a different label on it now that people were starting to sing again, but it was the labelling that helped kill it in the first place. Even these days, with hip-hop, you have mainstream, underground, backpack, crunk, hyphy. We have enough outside forces trying to separate us. Why are we separating ourselves from the inside?"

He's particularly incensed over the term "underground." "Just because you don't make mainstream music doesn't necessarily make you underground. . . . You may not do it that well, and maybe that's why you're underground."



## FUSE

30th Anniversary Issue

**Is Disney World a useful model for public art galleries?**

Many cultural institutions "use Walt Disney World as a model for imagining visitors' desires," notes Janna Graham, in a conversation among art-gallery professionals.

It is to the participants' credit that they proceed to explore the notion rather than dismissing it with a sneer and a wave of the hand.

"I think participation in culture can be a Disneyland experience," says Anthony Kiendl, "both in terms of production and consumption, without necessarily being damaging to arts education and institutions all the time. Artists are always smarter, and aware of their location and terms within institutions.

"What is more dangerous is the real challenge to a range and diversity of cultural workers having the capacity to continue their work in various contexts, as institutions narrow their priorities."

## THE WEEK'S BEST INVENTED WORDS

**SNOWMAN'S LAND**, n.: "a small stretch of sidewalk between two businesses that neither is responsible for shovelling." ([home.epix.net/~hce/neologisms.html](http://home.epix.net/~hce/neologisms.html))

**COMPUNICATE**, v.: when two or more people in the same room communicate via email or Instant Messenger instead of talking. Example: "Even though they were sitting side by side, Jesse and Justin chose to *communicate* rather than speaking to each other." ([UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com))

**FRISKAL POLICY**, n.: the security rules implemented at airports. (From Lawrence Chanin, Victoria, B.C.)

**MOOFER**, n.: a variation on "working from home." Mobile Out of Office describes people "who see the office as just one location where they can work." ([guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk))

**MANAGEMENT INSULTANCY**, n.: "when corporate management hires a team of outside consultants to do what it should be doing — deciding how best to run the company." ([buzzwhack.com](http://buzzwhack.com))

**PARENTNOID**, adj.: overly protective mothers and fathers. (From Carole Zaza, Toronto)

Submit your invented words to: [jsakamoto@thestar.ca](mailto:jsakamoto@thestar.ca)