



‘WONDERFUL YEARS’

We owe the origins of snapshot photography to George Eastman, a brooding capitalist who envisioned a vast amateur market in photography for profit. When cheap equipment first democratized photography Eastman gambled, correctly, that the public would accept limited control over the end product in exchange for ease of use. Imperfections were inherent in snapshot photography from the start: in addition to the casual technique of the photographers, the simple cameras and processing farmed out to labs held to no particular standard meant that the result was always somewhat hit-or-miss. The snapshots here date from the mid-1960s, shot on Ektachrome, Kodachrome’s oft-forgotten cousin, and developed using the older E-4 process; the slides themselves are colour-fast for about 30 years, and we’re a good 25 years outside of that window.

Colour, of course, was the original sin of the art photographer. Colour in the purely documentary sense is the domain of amateurs, family snapshots or crass commercialism. Henri Cartier-Bresson said, “color only delights salesmen and magazines,” declaring it “something indigestible, the negation of all photography’s three dimensional values.” The inherent frivolity of colour as a medium lasted as a concern far beyond any practical difficulties associated with working in colour. William Eggleston still faced derision for his first exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976, with Ansel Adams penning a scathing letter to

John Szarkowski, Director of Photography, in which he described Eggleston as “a put on.” He continued, “I find little ‘substance,’” Adams wrote. “For me, [Eggleston’s photographs] appear as ‘observations,’ floating on the sea of consciousness . . . For me, most draw a blank.” The always august Walker Evans famously stated, though later recanted, “there are four simple words for the matter, which must be whispered: color photography is vulgar.” He did, however, allow for one valid application, “when the point of a picture is precisely its vulgarity or its color-accident through man’s hand, not God’s.”

Precisely vulgar, artless accidents. Part of the sheer joy of the snapshot is the photographers’ tolerance. The snapshot photographer is a tenacious hunter, habitual in nature, and will seek the perfect memorial with steadfast determination. So, in placing these images together, it’s not enough to say that we’re seeing something the photographer didn’t intend – the photographer certainly intended, despite results good or bad, to take the photo. We’re seeing it as a sequence the photographer didn’t envision. The repetition of photographs with slight variations in characters and framing gives the feeling of a novel experiment, a stage, livening essentially plotless material with an illusion of movement, into the formally satisfying arabesques of a jigsaw falling into place. Yet the real content of these photographs is an almost placid, scenic

one: the staid black tie against the white shirt, the neatly planted roses and begonias in bloom. In these snapshots we can see what our photographer saw, but we see it differently, and we seek a different satisfaction from the story that emerges. We're not distracted by personal relationships with the subjects; despite neatly plotting to the known parameters of the post-war family, the figures are isolated in moments of memorial, repeated in the static monads of middle-class life.

The snapshot changes in shape and form with surprising regularity. As technology leapfrogs the physical photo with remarkable speed, so we have seen a bloom in shows, books, and retrospective approaches to the various modes of the amateur photograph. The recent term "vernacular photography" encompassing the broadly understood 'oppositional' photographs, such as family albums, "authorless" photography, scientific, industrial or civic photography is one approach to this. But the analogy rests on the wish to consider them naïve or primitive or popular or folk art. Snapshot arbitrariness makes whatever intention there may have been mostly indistinguishable from accident. Pierre Bourdieu estimated photography as a technical aide for self-actualization and fulfillment of a skittish, unsettled bourgeoisie, and though it was written before the SLR boom of the 1970s, it remains a salient realization. Is it possible to photograph 'in the vernacular' with such parameters?

It's important to note that a photographer like Walker Evans didn't work for or with nostalgia, "merely noting that 'not-

newness' is what permits artistic access." In a similar way, 'foundness' the rubric of photograph and the eye that found it constituting the piece, whether seeing the photo-as-object or photo-to-be.

Consider, for a moment, a perfectly trivial occurrence of the day, such as a chance encounter on the street. I see a man, I do not recognize him, he meets my gaze momentarily before turning back to fumble with his keys at his car door. As I walk past him and reach the door to my home, a wash of realization strikes me; I realize in that instant I both recognize him and do not know him; he is my neighbor, he lives below me, we share a floor and ceiling. I only encounter him by passing silhouette. Such an instant expresses, in its disjointed way, the fractured quality of life, the damp, split villas crowded with too many people, the constant hum of the motorway, the undulating ripples of a dented car bonnet, the dreary meeting places of collective living, the bus stops, the train stations, the train you just missed, the dull throb of the doctor's office, the doors that do not quite shut and the windows that are loose in their frames.

Such perception, it seems to me, is by its very form insistent on chance and anonymity, the vague glance in passing; the figure, aloof, staring absently into the middle distance. In the snapshot, found or created, there is always the upshot of chance, of possibility, the story momentarily known and at once washed away in the great, teeming river of life.

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