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Snapshots: The Extraordinary Ordinary

"Time," as Susan Sontag put it in her erratic polemic, *On Photography*, "eventually positions all photographs at the level of art." The point she makes is that a sentimental fondness, a nostalgia, eventually accrues to any artifact once it becomes sufficiently time-displaced, and that this poignancy attaches inexorably to human-made things with little regard to the quality of thought/craft/art that originally went into their making. Certainly the snapshot as a form of photograph exemplifies this tendency, and it's particularly evident in our relationship to snapshots with which we have no personal connection.

Many snapshots do not transcend the closed network of private reference point for which they're made. Yet if their subjects are clearly stated, and if the equipment employed in their making is not so "hopelessly sophisticated" (Minor White's wonderful phrase) that it confounds the user, then images that articulate the commonness - the mutuality - of some fundamental human experiences sometimes result. Think of them as dandelions: nice, bright little things, easily propagated, hard to distinguish from each other, plentiful, growing everywhere.

Like dandelions, most of them don't last. They get privately consumed, tucked away in shoeboxes and Fotomat envelopes, taped to the sun visors of cars, timed down and hidden in wallets. Or they go to seed, as it were: unmoored by choice or accident from their original subjects and makers, they enter the vast sea of discarded photographic imagery, confronting the likelihood of oblivion and destruction and the remote possibility of rescue.

This gives them a symbolic relationship to dreams: vivid and important at the moment they're conceived, vanishing almost irretrievably unless immediate attention is paid to them. Like dreams, snapshots reflect aspects of what Jung called the collective unconscious, a deep reservoir of shared thoughts, feelings, impulses, symbols, behaviors. Both encode a great deal of what Jung called "shadow material," that to which the conscious mind does not have access; both are open to the presence of the revealing accident; both tell us things we need to know about ourselves and others, if we learn to pay attention to them.

It's no coincidence that the Dadaists and Surrealists found the snapshot fertile ground, because as a form it's rife with the anti-rational, charged with a distinctly anarchic energy, and wide open to chance. Shadows intrude themselves, strange perspectives distort spaces, motion dissipates matter, objects become unexpectedly truncated, and people duplicate themselves in double exposures. Perhaps this is all purely random. But perhaps we simply haven't looked at this material long enough to start to spot the patterns.

The concept conjured up for most people by the words "the history of photography" generally agrees on several assumptions. One of these is that this history can be tracked appropriately through individual images created by recognized stylists working in an arena which is analogous to - or even a direct offshoot of - what we think of as Art. Be that as it may, most of the world's output of photography certainly is produced outside the narrow confines of arena of fine-art activity.

Thoughtful attention to that imagery and the conditions of its creation - what might be termed the sociology of photography - is a comparatively recently penetrated and under explored terrain of inquiry in comparison to the art history of the medium. However, we are in a period of radical revisionism in regard to photography's history, and the time is proving to be ripe for challenges to these attitudes-especially since they embody a variety of prejudices and oversights. For if there is indeed one truth that must underlie any future unified field of theory of the histories of photography, it is that those histories include all the photographs ever made, as well as all these people who produced them, who are represented in them and who laid eyes on them.

Some percentage of the endless flood of photographs – 10 billion images per year in the U.S. alone – may share concerns with the creation of artists; aspects of its appearance are often imitated by artists; and sometimes examples of it are incorporated into artists' projects. But what we might call quotidian and/or vernacular photography has its own imperatives – and those have often been the driving forces behind the medium's evolution. Current interest in the snapshot, on the part of curators, critics, collectors, historians, and photographers, suggests that this form, born at the end of the nineteenth century, may find its first serious audience on the twenty-first

We speak often of the democratizing function of photography, but too often that comes as merely service. Now, perhaps, as photography enters its third century and its second millennium, we can turn our attention to the wealth of imagery we produce everyday, as a matter of course and in our role as average citizens. If we treat it as what it actually represents – an outpouring of visual play and visual communication, a visual stream-of-consciousness narrative of everyday experience in lens culture – then we may begin to understand it as a collective creative act and a significant component of the ongoing visual documentation of human life. After all, when employing such words as vernacular and quotidian, with their connotations of the folkloric and naïf, it's useful to keep in mind the wisdom of the great African-American composer and improviser Louis Armstrong: "All music is folk music. I never heard no horse sing no song."

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