

SNAPSHOTS

Photographs of Photographers
by
Bill Jay

This interview was conducted over several sessions, concluding in January 2003. The transcriptions were edited for sense and space. James Hajicek is Professor of Photography at Arizona State University and a specialist in early printing and photographic processes. James and Bill Jay have been friends and colleagues for over 25 years, beginning in their graduate school days when they both studied with Van Deren Coke and Beaumont Newhall at the University of New Mexico.

James Hajicek: For years you have been referring to these photographs as your snapshot project. Isn't that a slightly derogatory term, implying a casual, flippant attitude to your own images?

Bill Jay: I use the term to describe the subject matter: amateur photographers making snapshots of faces and places, as Ilford used to say in its advertisements, for inclusion in family albums. So this term is appropriate because it describes the theme of the pictures.

You are not implying, then, that your own photographs are snapshots?

Well, that is a more tricky issue. The snapshot has played an honorable role in the medium, has a fascinating history and suggests all sorts of cultural, social and moral implications which are not so evident in other areas of image making. I love the snapshot idea and approach to photography. Unfortunately, there is a temptation to place the word "mere" in front of "snapshot" and hence reduce its status within the broad field of photography. But, in fact, the snapshot is at the core of all that is best in the medium; it implies a quick reaction to a visual stimulus that evokes an emotional tug on the photographer. The snapshot is as simple as pointing: look at that! Only photography can capture the fleeting moment with such precision.

In that important respect my photographs are snapshots: they are quickly taken visual responses to a subject matter which fascinates me. I also tend to use the same type of equipment as the people I am photographing - fully automatic 35 mm cameras which are discreet and easy to operate.

On the other hand, my photographs differ from the average snapshots in significant ways, at least in intent. I am trying to make more carefully organized images that are not merely records of the scene but which stand alone as good pictures. I rarely succeed.

The irony is that this most mundane and ubiquitous of photographic approaches (the snapshot) is the most difficult to do well. The problem is that it relies so heavily on chance: the encountering of the subject matter, the environment and background, the flux of action in the surroundings, the ability to maneuver around the event, the lighting conditions, and a thousand and one incidentals, including the movements and appearances of the camera owner, any and all of which can abort an otherwise pregnant opportunity.

This type of photography demands a lot of shooting, with a very low success rate. To paraphrase Bernard Shaw, the photographer is like a cod which lays a million eggs in the hope that a few will survive.

I cannot let you get away with phrases such as "good pictures" without demanding a definition of what you mean!

I know...that is a lazy phrase but it does serve as a sort of shorthand for photographs which are intended to be more than just a straight record. It would need a book to define the term, and then no one else would agree with it! Suffice to say in this context that I am talking about choices in the design of the various elements within the picture, and their relationship to the edges of the frame, in which areas of mass, tone, shape and negative spaces are formally composed to the best of my ability given the flux of change in front of me. That's awkward to say and inevitably it sounds a bit pompous. Perhaps it is easier to say that the snap shooter is primarily interested in the subject matter whereas I am interested primarily in the photograph.

So this is what differentiates a snapshot from a “good picture”?

Perhaps. Whether or not you regard my photographs as snapshots depends on how you define the genre. If you define it as solely belonging to the untrained amateur taking pictures for a limited audience of family and friends, then, no, my pictures are not snapshots by virtue of the fact that I try to take more formally coherent pictures. If you define a snapshot as any photograph, by anyone, that was made quickly in a real-life situation containing people, then, yes, my images are snapshots.

You are obviously serious about your photographs, yet others know you as an educator, historian, writer and lecturer, not as a photographer.

That's fair enough. Although I have had quite a few exhibitions and one previous book published of my photographs, I am not primarily a photographer. This does not imply that I take the image making aspect my life any less seriously. In fact, it is the foundation of all my other activities and it is no less important for being hidden. As far as I'm concerned, being a photographer comes first, and the other roles, understanding the past and present, arise out of a desire to know more about the photographic act. If you love something, you want to know all about it. I love taking pictures, therefore I want to know all about its history, its impact on culture, its changing roles in society, its personalities and processes, its arcane and esoteric language, everything. And then I want to tell everyone what I have found. But all this head knowledge is built on the love of photography as a dynamic act, with all its pleasures and perils.

So, yes, I am serious about my photographs. I would not spend so much time taking them, let alone face the risk of publishing or exhibiting the results, if I did not intend them to be judged critically. I try very hard, and spend a lot of time practicing the craft, and failing more often than not, in order to produce the best pictures of which I am capable. But, I am well aware that, because all of all my other photographic activities, these pictures will not be taken all that seriously.

What do you mean by that?

Rightly or wrongly, the specialists who only do one thing receive more acclaim than the generalist, even if they do not have as much fun! The whole of our culture, and not just the tiny aspect called photography, is dividing into narrower and more tightly defined specialties. This is inevitable, but, in my opinion, regrettable.

I earn my living by teaching, writing and lecturing about the history and criticism of photography. I do not believe you can do those things with any relevance unless you also practice the craft of photography. Historians and critics, in my opinion, need to be practicing photographers in order to understand the very particular decisions that a photographer makes when making an image. It is no coincidence that the best curators and historians of the past - Beaumont Newhall, Van Deren Coke, John Szarkowski, Helmut Gernsheim, Nathan Lyons, Minor White - were all practicing photographers. Sadly, that is no longer true, much to the detriment of photographic criticism and curator ship.

That's why I insist that my own graduate students, who intend to be curators, critics and gallery directors, must produce an exhibition of their own images to a high standard even if they never again pick up a camera. In their professional careers they will be dealing with photographs and the people who make them, therefore they must know from firsthand experience how photographers think.

My own photography is important to me for the same reason.

Back to your photographs. You began by referring to this set of pictures as a project. What do you mean by that?

I have always worked on photographic themes as opposed to single pictures. To start a project I select from a list of possible topics, all of which are visual, accessible and interesting enough to me that I can sustain an enthusiasm for them over however long a period of time it takes to complete. Basically I asked myself: what do you like looking at? This has been the impetus for all my photographs. In this case, whenever I was out in public I was always and instantly aware of the very particular, and peculiar, stance which immediately signals that a person in my vicinity is about to take a photograph. The highly stylized ritual of photography is, to me, endlessly fascinating. I love to watch the fuss with the camera, the reaction of the subjects, the stance of the photographer. So this is a perfect theme for a photographic project of my own, especially as snap shooters congregate in public places.

As I am sure you have noticed, amateur photographers are not difficult to find, if you visit the right locations. Market researchers who conduct surveys for the photography industry estimate that amateurs make around 80 billion “traditional” (non-digital) exposures per year, and that American amateurs account for around 20 billion of those exposures. That’s a lot of photographic activity.

In fact it often seems that taking a picture is the purpose of the visit to a place, not being there for its own sake.

The most extreme example of this phenomenon occurred to me when I was in Hawaii. I had driven to a lookout spot which commanded one of the most beautiful views of the island and sea. I was disappointed that it was deserted. But then a coach arrived and disgorged a load of tourists. All the members quickly took their places in what seemed a carefully pre-planned grouping, with their backs to the scene, the front row holding up a large card on which was written the name of the location, while one designated photographer left the rest and took pictures with a lot of different cameras - then they all got back into the coach and it left. The visit was over in minutes. Not one person had lingered to actually look at the view. The picture was the only required proof that the location had been visited. As I followed the coach down the hillside in my own vehicle, I could not help feeling slightly condescending about the fact that the photographic experience had superseded the viewing experience - until I realized that I was guilty of the same neglect. I, too, had gone there to photograph, and had merely glanced at the scene without much interest.

You mentioned the word project which sounds rather pre-planned compared to a more casual or intuitive approach to looking for pictures.

Because I have never found that the casual approach is ever successful. The world is just too full of visual stimuli, with so many choices it becomes impossible to select. I need a purpose for the search, a way of zeroing in on what I need. This purpose or intent helps me to mentally edit out the extraneous stuff and makes me more aware of the important bits. So, yes, I do plan a project quite carefully before even making a single exposure. I like to know not only what I will be photographing, but what the final project will comprise in terms of the number of images, and how they will be presented. In my case it is usually a personal portfolio, although in this case it was planned to be a modest printed book, which has evolved into this CD book.

What do you mean by “planning” a project which is as seemingly self-explanatory as people taking pictures?

I'm not talking about planning in a professional sense: conducting research, making contacts, scouting locations, and so on.

If a professional was contemplating a commercial assignment on this theme, then one approach would be to find out which locations around the world attract the most tourist/snap shooters and at which times of the year. This would be the basis for a trip, or several, in order to specifically “cover” the idea. I do not have that sort of professional latitude. I am engaged in the profession of teaching which limits my options on where and when I can travel. As a photographer I am an amateur - taking pictures for the love of it - and I have to take advantages of opportunities as they present themselves, at family events, excursions with friends, vacations, lecture trips or visits to promising locations for other purposes.

Nevertheless certain considerations do have to be planned. For example, although the core images will be of a person taking a photograph of a friend or loved one, that does not provide much scope for visual variety, or pace, in the final group of images. I would end up with the same picture, essentially, but in different locations. So I would try to be alert to ways of increasing the variety, such as consciously altering camera distance - long shots, middle shots, close-ups. I would also be on the lookout for other variations, such as people with cameras who are not actually taking pictures, or still-life shots when, for example, the camera has been temporarily abandoned on a picnic bench.

I also needed to decide if I would include related public “furniture”, such as photo-booths, or picture studios at amusement parks. There are a lot of little offshoots to the main “snapshot” theme, such as confrontational portraits of amateurs with their cameras, commercial photographers in public, Santa photographers at the Mall, or street/beach professionals. This project could easily have occupied the rest of my life!

When it came to making a small selection, as for this book, then the number of images dictates just how many of these variations can be included - I would want the majority to be close to the main topic but with a lacing of others for a dash of visual variety.

So how long does a typical project take?

It depends on the subject and the purpose. A series on shotgun-blasted magazines took a weekend; a series on my favorite woodworking tools as sculpture took a few weeks; a series on dead animals around my forest cabin took two years; this project was for a book so therefore I needed more pictures and time, about 10 years; a project of photographers' portraits has taken 30 years, so far. Of course, these time periods are distorted in that I cannot work full time on the projects, much as I would like to do so, as other commitments have priority.

What was the genesis of the snapshot project?

Like most projects, the starting point was when several prior interests came together. One strand arose out of my decades-long project of taking portraits of the photographers whom I met during my life in the medium. Many of these portraits were snapshots taken during the times when we were out and about taking pictures together. It was fascinating to watch these photographers at work and to contrast their

attitudes, intents and body movements with those of snap shooters in the vicinity. I began to spend more and more time observing, and photographing, this group.

Another strand arose out of boredom. On my lecture trips, visits to acquaintances in various countries and on family jaunts, I was often dragged to beauty spots or places of scenic interest and entertainments in which I had little interest - until I realized that these are the very places in which amateur photographers congregate. I could turn boredom into enthusiasm by a photographic project. It is also true that events and excursions with friends and family were given an extra little fillip by the awareness that these might be opportunities for my own pictures. Without getting too philosophical about it, life does seem to pick up an added charge when small purposes and goals are constantly dangling in front of you.

Lastly, this project was a natural extension of historical research. One of my favorite topics in the history of photography, and one which is oddly neglected in the textbooks, is the massive changes that occurred in the medium, and in culture, due to the introduction of the hand camera, and to its ability for the first time to allow the photographing of people unawares. This is a very rich and misunderstood era of photography and one which continues to fascinate me.

Let's talk about several of these issues, starting with the idea that good photographers are identifiable from their body movements.

It might sound odd, but it is true. Of course, I am talking about a particular kind of good photographer, one who tends to photograph people in public. I have no doubt that I could sit and watch a situation in which many camera owners were congregated, at a seaside pier for example, and instantly pick out the single good photographer from the dozens of snap shooters, just by the way he/she moved. This is partly due to what was, and what was not, photographed but, more importantly, to how he/she photographed - with a quicker, defter, less conspicuous attitude than the stand-rigidly-to-attention-and-wait stance of the snap shooter. The good photographer seems always to be in motion, sliding into position and slightly altering distance, angle, height, taking pictures all the while, what is called streaming the exposures. In fact, I expect you could even rank the abilities of even the good photographers by their expertise at this graceful dance!

I remember sitting on the grass in the middle of Ascot race course in England and watching a photographer stalking people in the crowds. I pointed him out to my companion and said: there is a really good photographer! As he approached I recognized him as Josef Koudelka, of Gypsies fame, an old friend whom I had not seen for years.

I have been on many photographic trips with David Hurn, of Magnum Photos, and it is remarkable how he can photograph people from intimate distances without the subjects being aware of him. This chameleon-like characteristic becomes almost a common trait of fine photographers of this kind. For an extreme example, it was fun to watch Martin Parr, another Magnum photographer, work a holiday site with a bulky camera and ring flash, sometimes from a distance of inches from people, without the subjects being aware of, or concerned about, his proximity. Watching these photographers, and many more like them, in action has been the best lesson of all in surreptitious image making. Do you photograph these photographers while they are working?

Yes, occasionally, although my own project, snap shooters, takes precedence. I enjoy the contrast between the serious photographers and the amateurs. It is endlessly fascinating to watch the never-chang-

ing ritual of the camera owner preparing to take a picture of the view or person in front of the view. It is a distinctive ritual that is instantly recognizable even from a great distance. I also know that the ritual will be a lengthy one so usually I have time to move into position. Taking a picture has become a rite with its own special ceremonies, all performed in a careful sequence somehow communicated by several generations and shared among vastly different ethnic groups and cultures. It is a remarkably conformist ritual with, seemingly, one correct way to perform it. Certainly there is very little variation, which poses its own problems for me in that it is difficult to inject much visual variety into my own pictures.

Do you have any qualms about photographing strangers in public? There has been a lot of talk recently about invasion of privacy, the aggression of photographers, such as paparazzi, and a host of moral issues relating to the intrusive photographer.

Rightly so. These are very important issues which directly arise out of the invention of the hand camera and which have never been, and will never be, resolved. Even my own attitudes are far from clear. I would agree, for example, that taking a photograph of a stranger without permission is always an aggressive act. If, for example, you drew a line with its center point being indifference, then the act of taking a photograph would slide towards the aggression end rather than the love end; how far it slid down the scale would depend on the attitude and intent of the photographer. As my attitude is one of interest in the subject, with no intent to smirk, belittle or criticize, then I do not think my pictures are very far down the scale. In other words, I do not think the real issue is what you do as much as why you do it and how you do it.

This sounds like a bit of self justification if not defensiveness!

I think you are right. It is hard, if not impossible, to defend this approach to photography on any strict moral grounds. I know colleagues who state quite bluntly that a person's image belongs to him/her and taking a photograph without permission, therefore, is a clear violation. From an absolutist standpoint this argument is unassailable. But then so is the opposite viewpoint: that it is absurd to claim that you can own the light reflected from you. I think the British law is a reasonable one - it states that one of the risks of appearing in public is the likelihood of being photographed. If you do not want to be seen/photographed then stay indoors or wear a yashmak. On the other hand, again, would I feel slightly suspicious/annoyed/threatened if I was being photographed by strangers for an unknown purpose? Yes, I would. So I am sympathetic to the Susan Sontag syndrome, that photographers are aggressors. But then I think of all the great images which we would not have in our visual vocabulary if this view prevailed; the history of photography would be immeasurably depleted. And so the debate continues.

In my own case I do have a natural reluctance to intrude on someone else's ritual. I am always shy about approaching strangers with my camera. I think that is normal. But I will also confess that this reluctance, faced and overcome, adds a piquancy to the quest for a picture. It adds spice to the hunt for another image to add to my collection. I also claim, for what it is worth, that I am genuinely interested in what these people in my pictures are doing and why.

What happens when a person you are photographing becomes aware of you and your camera?

There is a range of responses when my presence is noticed. The most common is a look of inquiry: a nonverbal, what are you doing question from raised eyebrow

gws. So I smile back - not a smile of "Gotcha!" or one of guilt, but a smile of shared pleasure in the moment. More often than not, that is enough, and we both get back to photographing. Sometimes I will be asked what I am doing. Straightforwardly I say: I enjoy photographing people taking pictures. Often that is a good enough explanation, although some have said with genuine puzzlement: why on earth would you want to do that? In some instances this encounter has led to some interesting conversations, even acquaintances. For example, last summer I was photographing a woman taking pictures of her daughter at the dolphin pool at Sea World, which led to a conversation, which led to us spending the remainder of the day together with our daughters in pleasant companionship.

And no one has responded with anger?

No, never. The closest to a bad reaction occurred on Santa Monica pier when I was photographing kids playing around a photo booth. Suddenly a heavy hand was placed on my shoulder. It was a huge police officer asking me, politely, to move on. I explained I was photographing people with cameras or anything with a photographic theme, such as the photo booth. "I know," he said, "I have been watching and following you. We have had reports about a man photographing children. But," he went on, "in the present climate it is not a good idea to photograph kids. This is a sensitive subject and my advice to you is to photograph something else, just in case." He was charming and polite, but his words were chilling. It had not occurred to me that anyone could interpret my actions as threatening.

What were the strangest experiences which have arisen from photographing people in public?

A puzzling request, which occurred several times in places as diverse as Auckland, New Zealand, Trafalgar Square, London, and Universal Studios, Los Angeles, was to become a subject when I was photographing parties of Japanese schoolgirls. Invariably one of the girls saw me with a camera and insisted I joined a group picture and then I was photographed by each in turn with one or more of the other young ladies. God knows what their parents must have thought of this strange old man in the middle of the tourist snaps! Only later did I get an explanation from a photographer friend who was a frequent visitor to Asia. Facial hair was unusual in that culture so a man with a full white beard was an oddity. So I joined costumed movie characters, spiked headed punks, and other assorted weirdoes as curiosities of the schoolgirls' trips among Western exotica.

The most unusual request occurred in a fake Old West movie location in Arizona. I photographed a young couple hamming it up behind cardboard cut outs of gunfighters with the face areas left open for fun picture-taking. The guy was interested in my camera, asking if it could do close-ups. When I said it could, he asked if I would photograph his girlfriend's vaginal ring because his pictures of it always came out blurred. When I had recovered my poise, I took a quick glance at my watch and apologized that I had an urgent appointment. Silly me. I now regret my cowardice as it might have been an interesting picture with the boyfriend's camera in an unlikely location.

One of the great pleasures of this project has been the people I have met as a result of photographing them. I have scores of happy memories of these encounters. In fact, I would say that one of the great benefits of photographing strangers in public is that you tend to meet new and interesting people. These pleasant encounters often are more satisfying than the pictures themselves! The camera is, or can become, a wonderful icebreaker between strangers, a shared interest that brings out the best in everyone. The photographic act can be aggressive, agreed, but for the snap shooter it celebrates something, the pleasure of being there, and the good mood is sometimes shared with me. For this I am grateful.

Talking of cameras, have you noticed any changes in the types of cameras used by the snapshot enthusiast during the past ten years?

The most dramatic change has been in the use of digital cameras. Ten years ago, when I began this project, digital cameras were unknown or, at least, unavailable to the amateur photographer. Yet on my most recent trip to Bayside, in Miami, photographing the visitors embarking and disembarking on the tourist boats, I noticed that an astonishing high percentage of them, especially the young, used digital cameras. This came as something of a shock because I still thought that their use was marginal at best; the speed of the introduction and use of these new cameras has been phenomenal. I had recently bought one for my own use and had the mistaken hubris that I was something of a pioneer in this regard. It was a humbling realization that these amateurs to whom I chatted were far more savvy than me about this new technology.

A recent survey (2000) by InfoTrends found that digital camera owners expect to take all of their pictures digitally within four years. Meanwhile digital camera owners are growing in numbers at an astonishing rate. In January of the same year I counted at least 83 digital camera models on the market available specifically for amateurs. In the same month a British newspaper reported that nearly half a million digital cameras had been sold in the UK alone.

What about your own equipment for this project?

The quest for the ideal camera never ceases! Initially I used a whole range of inexpensive clamshell type 35 mm cameras. I wanted a camera that helped me fit in with the people I was photographing, and one that was concealable as well as quick and convenient to use. So I tried quite a few models, the best of which was the basic Olympus Stylus. Many of the earlier cameras which I tried were quickly discarded because the prime characteristic I desired was quietness, and most of the cameras made a hideous racket when winding on the film or zooming, immediately drawing attention to me. My favorite camera became, therefore, not an amateur snapshot camera but the Konica Lexar. Apart from being ultra silent in operation it is a tough camera and it has outlasted half a dozen of the cheaper cameras. But in terms of the image quality there is very little difference at the print sizes I require. Today I could not tell which camera, the \$60 clamshell to the \$600 Lexar, was used for any particular image. I also quickly realized that the assumption of using a cheap camera in order to fit in with my subjects was a false one. Snapshot photographers use an extremely wide range of equipment, often owning far more expensive cameras than mine.

Your total snapshot project includes a large number of black and white, as well as color images. Even the selection in this book includes both. Why are all the most recent pictures only in color?

Because I am somewhat conservative, at least when it comes to my own photography. For thirty years I had only photographed in black and white. You have to remember that when my photographic attitudes were being formed, practically all the better photographers only used black and white. Color was for commercialism. Inevitably, if I wanted to be a serious photographer, working on personal projects, there was no choice. I loaded up with black and white without thinking about it. It was the same when I began the snapshot series. It was a personal assignment, therefore black and white was the film type.

Half way through the project I realized two things: my old attitude had been superseded by many seri-

ous workers who were shooting exclusively in color on personal projects, and, secondly, so many of the locations in which I found my subjects seem to scream for color. So I switched, and was shocked at how difficult it was to adjust.

This was a very hard transition for me. It was like learning a whole new medium. I wasted hundreds of rolls of film, and about two years of hard shooting, before a few images which I liked began appearing on the processed films. I had completely misjudged how the addition of one extra factor, color, would vastly increase the complexity of the image. It was so frustrating. I might shoot an image which looked great in my (black and white) mind's-eye, all the tones and shapes in harmony, but then I would see the result after processing and there was, say, a red area in the background which completely dominated the picture out of all proportion to its size or worth. Thinking of color, even in tiny areas, as a design element was a tough learning process after so many decades of monochrome work.

Were there any other problems, or even assets, to working in color?

Well, there was, and still is, a mystery! Basically I had two choices of film type - chromes (slides) and negatives. For years I shot indiscriminately with both types. When I came to edit the results, I found that all the selections were from the chromes, and not one of the color negative images made the final cut. The puzzle is that I used the same camera, in the same type of situations, on the same subjects and often I was not even aware of the film type in the camera. So how can the results be better in one medium than another? It makes no sense. But there it is. Chromes work and negatives do not, at least for me. I have no idea of the reason so it remains one of the mysteries of my photographic life.

I know you have a computer dedicated to photographic images. How much manipulation do you conduct on the images?

The slides I select are stored on a Firewire hard drive and I make proof prints on an ink-jet printer. These images are stored in boxes as my project portfolio. I do play around with Photo Shop in order to try and improve contrast, and to do a bit of dodging and burning, just as I would with black and white negatives in the enlarger. But the truth is that I am not very good at it and always seem to make the image worse. I freely admit that this is due to my own lack of skill, and also to my lack of patience. All the color images in this book were made directly from the original slides with the minimum of manipulation and then only for density and contrast.

I wish I had on call someone who was an expert digital printer. I would have no qualms about manipulation in the computer to the same extent that I previously dodged/burned in the silver darkroom, that is, to make adjustments to tone, color, contrast. But I would have no interest in changing the reality of the subject in any way. The fun and the challenge, for me, is to take the image at the time, not create it later. I have no objection to others who wish to create art by digital manipulation but I have no interest in it myself. Reality itself is so complex, and trying to take a picture of it so difficult, that this is the challenge. Remove the challenge, i.e. move elements around to create the ideal image of the situation, and I would lose interest in the shooting, the direct physical contact with the subject. And that, for me, is the thrill. On the other hand, I do think that this is the last project I will shoot on film. Digital cameras have now reached a level of quality, and convenience, where I am seriously considering switching over completely to the new technology.

Now we know what you use, how do you use it? What is your working method when photographing strangers with their cameras?

It depends on the circumstances, but there are two main methods.

If I am at the location where photographers tend to take pictures from roughly the same spot - at the end of a pier, at a picturesque marker, at a zoo viewing area - then I first wander around in order to find a viewpoint that produces harmonious background shapes. Then I stand and wait, and wait, for a photographer to enter the frame and take a picture, hopefully from the exact location that I have planned. In this case, the background is chosen to be clean, well-organized and to isolate the photographer. Then, of course, I have to be aware of the other elements that move into the frame, such as additional figures. It gets complicated.

But nowhere near as complex as a wide open location, such as a beach or photo shoot or party. Then I watch for a person with a camera, move into the vicinity as soon as possible, move around to try and find a spot which isolates the camera, and keep moving, shooting all the time, looking for a distance, angle, height which not only reveals the subject but also places the other figures, objects and structures into a pleasing design. When so many elements of the picture are also in motion, this is rarely achieved. In fact, one reason that I love to shoot this type of picture is that it is next to impossible to get it exactly right. I feel certain that this approach to photography is the most difficult of all, and that is what makes it so challenging and exciting. If I can find one reasonably successful image to add to my collection out of a half a dozen rolls exposed, then I feel that little kick of achievement which makes all the effort worthwhile. And “effort” is the operative word. There is so much walking involved in this type of photography that a comfortable pair of shoes is the most important piece of equipment after the camera and film.

But, you know, even if I do not achieve a single “keeper” from a day of photographing I still feel a satisfaction in having tried, of having experienced the thrill of the hunt, of the pleasure in the experience itself. This is the type of photography which demands that you are out in the real world, interacting with fresh new people. There is the expectation of the unexpected. This is an importance in being there, just as there is for the snapshot tourist, and bringing home confirmation of that experience.

You mentioned the “thrill of the hunt” which harks back to our earlier remarks about photographic aggression. Has the snapshot always been associated with the sort of intrusion and infamy that editorial writers have leveled against the paparazzi?

Yes and no. We have to make a distinction between the amateur snapshot enthusiast and the professional photojournalist. When the hand camera was first introduced it was the amateur who was despised for his/her aggression with a camera. Now, the snapshot enthusiast is seen as a benign being. It was a long, long time before the professional photojournalist took over the role as the callous, uncaring, unfeeling invader of privacy. In fact the word *paparazzi* only entered the photographic vocabulary through its use in Federico Fellini’s film, *La Dolce Vita*, 1960. It was a disparaging term for tabloid journalists with big flash equipment, not little snapshot cameras. So there has been an important shift in attitude and one that is not mentioned in most histories of photography, let alone editorial columns about invasion of privacy.

Are you saying that it was the now harmless snap shooter who first received the harshest criticism?

Exactly. And it is important to understand why. Up to about 1880, with a few special exceptions, it was very evident that you were being photographed. The photographer of the period had to personally coat

the glass plate in a dark room or tent with a sticky, malodorous concoction called collodion, containing the light sensitive chemicals, place the dripping plate in a dark slide, carry it to the prearranged camera on a sturdy tripod, make a long exposure, and then return immediately to the darkroom and develop the plate before it dried out. This was called the wet plate technique, for obvious reasons. Faced with a massive camera, tripod, a darkroom tent, and long exposure times, the subject had to give the photographer full cooperation.

Then, suddenly, around 1880, manufactured dry plates, using gelatin instead of collodion, appeared on the market. From this point on, everything changed. The revolution occurred with astounding rapidity and nothing in photography would ever be the same again. The traveling darkroom tent was obsolete; hordes of untrained amateurs entered the field without any knowledge of the arcane practices of the professional; the gelatin process meant that the plate speeds increased dramatically, obviating the necessity for a tripod now that hand-held snapshots could be made. Because unplanned, unposed pictures of people could be taken, then this became the new rage, which led to a plethora of small, concealed cameras. The cameras became even lighter with the introduction of flexible roll film as opposed to glass plates, and more convenient with the introduction of a complete systems of picture-taking, such as the Kodak of 1888, with its famous slogan: "You press the button, we do the rest." The mania of the new breed of amateurs was to take surreptitious pictures of people preferably in embarrassing moments. The public was not amused. A popular music-hall ditty of the period had the following verse:

"When you least expect it, you may hear the dreadful click which is driving the world mad...Wherever you be, on land and sea, you hear that awful click of the amateur photographer, Click! Click! Click!"

For the first time in the history of photography, issues of privacy and morality were hot topics of concern.

Of concern to whom?

To everyone, apart from the amateurs themselves who delighted in this newfound photographic freedom. Photographers of the "old school", who had assiduously mastered an arcane craft, hated the upstart amateur who knew nothing of chemistry or art and who produced the "execrable productions" and in their disregard for common decency plunged the medium into disrepute. Amateurs were also hated by all right-minded citizens whose every indiscretion in public might be captured by the snapshot scavengers. Newspaper editorials lambasted the "snapshot pest" and "camera fiend" and likened their antisocial acts to lunacy or an outbreak of cholera. They demanded a stop to their activities, by law if necessary. There was public outrage at the antics of the amateur. Major periodicals published cartoons which fueled the fires of outrage against the snap shooter. So much so that vigilante groups were formed to patrol beaches and physically assault the unwary snapshot enthusiast and to smash his equipment; groups of amateurs retaliated and articles in the newly formed magazines advocated carrying weapons for self-defense. It was an ugly, bitter battle between the snapshot enthusiast verses the average citizen. The antagonism generated in the first decades of the hand camera cannot be exaggerated in that they set the agenda for discussions of aggression and privacy up to the present day.

I think it would be useful to give an example of this antagonism between the public and the amateur photographer in light of the fact that, today, it is rare indeed for the amateur to be seen as an aggressor.

One of the most instructive incidents occurred at a beach in Broadstairs, England, in the summer of 1881. A group of young women were enjoying themselves in the sea when a young man "with the in-

evitable camera “ came along. A big wave struck the bathers and spun one of them around until breathless but laughing she was flung on the sand. The force of the wave had pushed the strap of her costume off her shoulder. Just as she noticed it and hurriedly replaced the strap she heard the click of the camera and saw the man grin . The woman jumped up from the water, and, without a word, grabbed the camera and flung it out to sea.

This is an interesting report for several reasons. In 1881 the hand the camera had only been available for a year or so but already it was common enough to be termed “inevitable”, which reveals just how quickly it had invaded public life. Also, it reveals what type of subject was sought by the new amateur: strangers in embarrassing circumstances. The arrogant aggression of the early amateur is on display with his grin as he captured the young lady’s discomfort. If he had felt any sort of shame or even common decency he would have apologized in which case he would still have a camera. But no, the fun of photography was to record her discomfort for his own gain, and the lady retaliated with anger. And that sets the pattern of the public’s reaction to the snap shooter for decades to come.

This story also has elements of sexual belligerency about it. I presume that then, as now, attractive young women bore the brunt of the amateur’s aggression, especially at the beach.

That’s true. Sneaky male amateurs were forever attempting to snatch unposed pictures of young women. I mentioned the determination of some men to protect women from such outrage. In 1895 a Vigilance Association was formed by “decent young men”, that is, not amateur photographers, for the purpose of “thrashing the cads with cameras who go about at seaside places taking snapshots at ladies emerging from the deep.” The editorial writer of *The Amateur Photographer*, itself the organ and champion of the snap shooter, wished the new society “stout cudgels and much success.”

Later, in 1906, an editorial in the *American Amateur Photographer* wrote that “a jury would not convict a man who violently destroyed the camera of an impudent photographer guilty of a constructive assault [taking a picture] upon modest women.”

I could fill the pages of this book with similar verbal outrages against male photographers who pictured women in public.

But, to be fair, women photographers will also be bitten by the same camera bug and they, too, were similarly guilty of aggressive behavior and acting like modern-day paparazzi.

In 1891, for example, Prince George of Greece had completed a visit to New York and was en route back to Europe while “pursued by 150 ladies, all armed with cameras, who persisted in photographing him, despite his protests and his attempts to cover his face.” “This is really a social nuisance”, said an editorial, “which ought to be sternly repressed.”

Punch, the British humor periodical, published many cartoons during this period, lampooning the bad manners of the snap shooter, many of which were female. In one, four women photographers with their cameras are stationed at intervals down a steep and rutted track, waiting for a male bicyclist to make his descent and, hopefully, take a spill. The caption runs: “Caution! This hill is dangerous!” In another, an elderly gentleman is precariously hanging from a tree branch over a stream, while three ladies with their snapshot cameras are hoping to capture the fall for their camera club assignment: “A Study in Action.”

The rudeness and belligerency of the snapshot photographer applied to both sexes. It seemed, at the

time, to be inherent in the use of the hand camera and not the gender of the photographer. As one photographer confessed in 1910: "Our moral character dwindles as our instruments get smaller."

You have made the point that the amateur photographer was a social leper in the first decades of the hand camera but now the snapshot amateur is a perfectly respectable and benign being. When did the change occur and why?

As soon as the press began to publish photographs, in the early years of the 20th century, the outrage against photographing people in public, especially celebrities, began to shift from the amateur to a new breed of professional: the press photographers employed by the "Yellow Journals". Under the heading, "The Camera Fiend," The Chicago Tribune as early as 1906 make no distinction between the aggressive amateur and the tabloid photojournalist - it argued for a law "to protect citizens against insult and annoyance" caused by amateur and professional photographers. On a couple of points, however, it was wrong. "Something must be done, and will be done, soon," it said. It wasn't. More glaringly, the editorial stated that "It is a mistake to imagine that the public is clamoring for a pictorial representation of all the events of the daily life of even prominent citizens." It was not a mistake. In subsequent decades, and up to the present, it is obvious that the public is indeed clamoring for pictures of even the most trivial episodes in the lives of celebrities. The point is that newspapers, by creating tabloid images, shifted the aggression away from the amateur towards the professional photographer.

That's not to say that amateurs suddenly began to act with sensitivity, although their attempts at embarrassing pictures were more likely to be aimed at consenting friends than at strangers. In 1907 The Independent, New York, made the point: "The pictures taken by strangers without our knowledge are. . . not so apt to annoy us as those taken by our friends with our consent." This was a new attitude showing that the craze for taking surreptitious snapshots of strangers was on the wane. Silly pictures of friends was the new rage: "picnic pictures are particularly dangerous," the magazine continued. "Few ladies look their best when eating a banana, and borrowed hats are not often becoming to gentlemen. It is all right for the judge and the bishop to do stunts on the limb of a tree when they are camping out, but the photographs are not so attractive when they appear in a magazine. It is useless for the law to attempt to protect us from strangers when we cannot protect us from our friends."

The snapshot was turning inwards, towards family and friends; its social nuisance, and approbation, was lessening.

Perhaps the single most important event which turned the tide in favor of the snapshot was when the vast numbers of enthusiastic camera owners were coopted into the war effort of 1914-18. The London YMCA organized a nationwide "Snapshots from Home" campaign in the summer of 1915. The idea was to systematically recruit amateur photographers to picture everyday life in every area of Britain. These snapshots would be sent to soldiers and sailors in foreign countries who could request snapshots of their homes, neighbors and local sites. (Incidentally, A.L.Coburn, one of the most prominent art photographers of the period, was a staunch supporter of the "Snapshots from Home" project.) Hundreds of thousands of snapshots were sent abroad as part of this project and "although this may not seem very heroic work these grim times," as The Amateur Photographer said, "but. . . at least it is satisfactory to think we are making our camera do some patriotic work. . ."

Of course it is impossible to determine just how much effect the "Snapshots from Home" project had on the public relations problems of the amateur photographer. But, perhaps significantly, there are very few major diatribes against the snapshot after the first World War years.

But the amateur photographer, merely filling the family album, is no longer the focus of this hostility?

No. The interesting point here is that all the issues set by the early amateurs are now in the province of the professional, especially those producing visual fodder for tabloids. However, the early aggressive terminology still persists. The term “snapshot”, for example, was adopted by a hand camera users from the hunting term for a quick shot at a moving bird or animal; photographers still “load” and “aim” their cameras, and “fire” the shutter. Even I talk about “hunting” for pictures and “stalking” the subjects and achieving “hits”. This aggressive mentality is a legacy of the early decades. Meanwhile, the amateur snapshot taker is now an innocent and he/she is now part of the disgust with the tabloid professional. Photographers who enjoy taking pictures of strangers in public are inevitably slightly tainted with the same issues of aggression and invasion of privacy.

Although this does not seem to concern you.

It does concern me. It is hard to justify on any moral grounds my delight in sneaking pictures of people just doing their own thing. I salve my conscience by saying that I am sympathetic to the subjects and not in any way trying to demean or embarrass them, and I think this is confirmed by the responses of the people who do become aware of me. Still, it is likely that such pictures will not be possible in the future. For a variety of reasons, including the ubiquitous nature of surveillance cameras, the furor over the paparazzi involved in the death of Princess Diana, as well as issues of privacy raised against aspects of the Internet and the use of strangers in advertisements without payment or permission, and many other contemporary social phenomena, the old issue of legally curbing surreptitious pictures of people is relevant again. Just recently, for example, the Magnum photographer, Luc Delahaye, could not publish his pictures of people in the Metro in his native France due to new French invasion-of-privacy laws and his book, *L'Autre*, had to be published in London. I expect this trend to escalate until all street images which include recognizable people will be impossible. Fear of litigation will be a more powerful inhibitor than fear of confronting strangers.

But these strictures against photography in public will not affect or concern the amateur snap shooter.

Not at all. All the snapshot subjects to whom I spoke would have no interest in photographing strangers. In fact, their obvious desire was to exclude passersby from the frame and they invariably thought my own project was so bizarre as to be incomprehensible!

Can you make it comprehensible?

I can't. I squirm when I hear photographers justify their images by laying on them thick coverings of verbal messages. Photographs are pictures and usually that's all they are, with no heavy meanings of social significance. I find most of that kind of blather both pretentious and irrelevant. All I can say is that I enjoy watching the snapshot ritual take place. It is an eerily similar ritual no matter how vastly different are the people who engage in it. I would watch it take place even if I did not have a camera with me. But photography does allow me to take part in these rituals in a more active way than merely looking, and it exercises my desire to attempt a creative act under very difficult conditions. I take home with me, if successful, tangible as well as mental memories of these encounters.

A distant, and perhaps forlorn, hope is that perhaps one day the pictures may have some interest to others as historical documents, in the same way that I value images of, say, the collodion photographer with his equipment.

for
Juliet, Louise and Hannah my daughters who enrich my life
beyond the ability of words or images to express

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