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How the Truth Gets Framed by the Camera

By LOUIS P. MASUR

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Think about the photographs in our lives, the ones we keep on our desks, load on Facebook, take with cellphones and digital cameras, and attach to e-mail messages. Although the word may now be out of fashion, for nearly 100 years these images were known as snapshots. That term, however, covers some very different kinds of photographs — and some very different meanings they have for us. Indeed, in recent years, scholars and curators have been drawn to unpacking those meanings in a thriving study and display of images.

It should not surprise us that this subject has become a growing focus of interest. There has been a revolution in the past decade in digital imaging and visual technology. We live in a world of pixels — picture elements — not only on our monitors but also in our everyday lives. Ours is as much a visual culture as a written or oral one, and of late, images, more than print and speech, have had the greatest impact: Visualize Katrina, Abu Ghraib, 9/11.

All such images are, in effect, snapshots. The word is derived from shooting quickly with little or no aim. The catalog that accompanies a new exhibition, "The Art of the American Snapshot," which runs through the end of the year at the National Gallery of American Art, in Washington, explains that snapshots became popular in the 1890s, with the invention of the Kodak camera and new technologies for the reproduction of images in newspapers and books.

The National Gallery's story is thus in part the story of Kodak and technical improvements in camera and film, from the Brownie, in 1900, to the "modern Kodak," in 1927, to the introduction of Kodacolor, in 1942, and the Instamatic camera, in 1963. Competing with Kodak was the Leica, a mass-market 35-mm camera introduced in 1925, and the Polaroid Land Camera, released in 1948.

But, as the catalog also tells us, snapshots "exert an undeniable power," and the exhibition, which surveys the genre from the 1880s to the 1970s, makes clear why. It is not merely the sheer number of the mainly private, everyday pictures that makes them compelling. (According to Sarah Greenough, one of the curators, as of 1977 nearly nine billion snapshots were taken each year, more than double the rate of 10 years earlier.) Rather it is the way the snapshots of each era capture particular moments and yet also transcend time.

Gazing at the images gathered here, which come from the collection of Robert E. Jackson, an art historian and businessman, I was struck by the recurrence of

themes: domesticity, laughter, clowning, leisure activities. Through the decades, Americans hide their faces, cavort at the beach, take portraits of their children, and are caught unawares, asleep, or sometimes in acts of intimacy. Comparisons across the century become suggestive of larger cultural changes: Three swimming pictures, from the 1920s, 1940s, and 1960s, provide an opportunity to think about shifts from companionship to solitude, from self-reliance to consumption. One portrays two naked friends with their dog; one shows a swimmer in the water from the neck down; one displays a red-headed woman lying on a float in her backyard pool.

I am also struck by how our memories and vision of the past are inseparable from the form of the prints. I stare at the sepia-toned, fading images from the 1920s and see my parents and grandparents; I look at the serrated-edge prints of the 1950s, with month and date stenciled in the margin, and see my brother and me. Each photograph is personal, and yet for each era, every photograph is also in some essential way the same.

Very different, less private snapshots are the pictures taken by photojournalists, which can reach millions of viewers. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, professors of communication, are interested in the transmission of social knowledge. They argue in *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* that iconic images like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" and Joe Rosenthal's "Flag Raising on Mt. Suribachi" are essential to a "liberal-democratic citizenship" that demonstrates "the relationship of the abstract individual to the impersonal state." Thus "Migrant Mother" becomes a brief for social welfare, and "Flag Raising" a testament to the American character.

Such images, however, are not fixed in meaning. Iconic photographs become so for a variety of reasons — their composition, the way they evoke other images in our visual memory, their impact at the moment — and they are also put to various purposes, become clichés, or are drained of original understandings. An icon of poverty like the stark, bleak portrait of Lange's migrant mother is enlisted in a television campaign for the good life in California when a woman in a red convertible drives down Rodeo Drive and we see the image among the palm trees, a relic clearly from the past; a flag-raising mutates from civic piety to slapstick humor in an episode of *The Simpsons* when Bart plants the flag at a beach party.

Much as we want to contextualize images — who took them, where, when, and how they circulated and were received — snapshots can also exist in conversation not so much with society as with each other, not as documents, but as art. In *The Ongoing Moment*, Geoff Dyer, a critic and novelist, unpacks recurring visual details and themes: for example, blind people, picket fences, and

highways. Images of accordion players by Walker Evans (1938), Ed Clark (1945), André Kertész (1970), and Bruce Davidson (1980-81) seem to speak to one another. Chronology falls away. There is only, says Dyer, "that moment and now there's this moment and in between there is nothing."

What is in between, of course, is an opportunity to think about deep chronology and context. No one has done that more provocatively than Lawrence Weschler, a former staff writer for *The New Yorker*, now at New York University. *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences* is a beautifully produced book of more than two dozen essays on a range of topics. The opening piece, "Echoes at Ground Zero," is a conversation with the photographer Joel Meyerowitz, in which the two talk about the uncanny visual parallels between Meyerowitz's stunning photographs at the site of the World Trade Center and such works as Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" (1642), Millet's "The Gleaners" (1857), the Civil War photograph "Amateurs of 1861," and Albert Bierstadt's "Among the Sierra Nevada" (1868).

"None of us are free of references," Meyerowitz says. "I'm covered with imagery that has meant something to me, that has caught my attention over time." But those references are not so much conscious as part of a subconscious visual memory that is triggered when we come across a scene or are jolted by an image. Meyerowitz calls that a kind of "randomness." He goes on, "For a street photographer like myself, randomness is everything, because that is one thing the world has in abundance, and I am just passing through it with my snare." What he means is that randomness is structure, and the best photographs capture something immediate and yet also timeless, unique and yet seen before.

David Friend, editor of creative development at *Vanity Fair*, also talked to Meyerowitz. In his insightful and moving book *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11*, Friend points out that "September 11, simply put, was the most widely observed and photographed breaking-news event in human history." Friend scrutinizes, day by day for the week following the attack, the images that circulated publicly and privately, those published and those censored, and he contemplates the power of photographic memory. "September 11," he observes, "was enacted for the audience — an audience that would remember every nuance." Most snapshots of everyday occasions leave little impression, but the instant images of extraordinary moments like 9/11 become part of the event itself and are inseparable from our experience of the tragedy.

Meyerowitz's images were included in a traveling exhibition, "After 9/11," sponsored by the U.S. State Department, and then were published in *Aftermath: World Trade Center Archive*. He had created a systematic record in still photographs of what took place at Ground Zero between Sunday, September 16, when he first tried to enter the site, and eight and a half months later, when he

finished his project. But he was almost prevented from shooting any of the 5,000 images, which were enlarged and titled as if they were works of art in a museum: "Five More Found," or "Smoke and Steel," or "A Bugler Plays Taps." At first the police stopped him, saying the site was a crime scene, off limits to journalists. Fortunately, he refused to obey and came to understand that his job was to "go in there as a New Yorker and a photographer and as someone who had just been told that history was going to be denied Americans."

We look at the images of 9/11, Meyerowitz's and thousands of others, and think we have a record of what happened. Do we? Yes, but only in the sense that images capture an instant of a continuing narrative. Those moments, however, do not speak for themselves. As with all photographs, how they speak to us — what we hear them saying — is crucial to our understanding. The problem is whether the frozen moment tricks the eye, leading the viewer to one interpretation, while another or opposite interpretation would be closer to the truth of an event. Consider the controversy over one photograph taken on 9/11 but not published until Friend included it in his book.



Young people on the Brooklyn waterfront on Sept. 11

On the morning of September 11, Thomas Hoepker, an experienced photojournalist, crossed from Manhattan into Queens and then Brooklyn in an attempt to get closer to the scene of the catastrophe. He stopped his car in Williamsburg to shoot a group of young people sitting by the waterfront with the

plume of smoke rising across the river. He did not publish the shot at the time, feeling it was "ambiguous and confusing," a pastoral scene of five youths chatting amicably as the towers burned.

In Friend's book, Hoepker expressed concern that they "didn't seem to care." Reading the interview and seizing upon the comment, Frank Rich, in a column in The New York Times, published as the fifth anniversary of 9/11 approached, saw the photograph as a prescient symbol of indifference and amnesia. "This is a country that likes to move on, and fast," Rich wrote. "The young people in Mr. Hoepker's photo aren't necessarily callous. They're just American."

David Plotz, deputy editor of the online magazine Slate, would have none of that. "Those New Yorkers Weren't Relaxing!," according to the headline. The subjects, he observed, "have looked away from the towers for a moment not because they're bored with 9/11, but because they're citizens participating in the most important act in a democracy — civic debate." Plotz argued that Rich took a "cheap shot," and he called for a response from any of the subjects.

Shortly thereafter, Walter Sipser wrote to Slate. "It's Me in That 9/11 Photo," the magazine said in the headline posting Sipser's e-mail message, which explained that "we were in a profound state of shock and disbelief, like everyone else we encountered that day," and denounced Hoepker for not trying to ascertain the state of mind of the photograph's subjects and for misinterpreting the moment.

Hoepker responded on Slate that "the image has touched many people exactly because it remains fuzzy and ambiguous in all its sun-drenched sharpness," especially five years after the event. He wondered, was the picture "just the devious lie of a snapshot, which ignored the seconds before and after I had clicked the shutter?"

"The devious lie of a snapshot" is a marvelous phrase. It is not the photographer who is devious, but the nature of the snapshot itself, which isolates and freezes action, disconnecting it from context and sequence. Photographs seduce us into believing that they are objective records, but, in fact, all images are interpretations, texts that must be read.

What every photographer captures is of the moment and beyond it, random and in odd ways determined, fixed yet always changing. Amateurs and professionals alike bring to the camera a life immersed in images. When one of their pictures becomes a cultural icon, it is because it is original but also commonplace, unique and yet somehow familiar. The best photographs inform and move us. They allow us to enter a frozen instant of time and somehow make it our own.

Louis P. Masur is director of the American-studies program at Trinity College in Connecticut and author of The Soiling of Old Glory: The Story of a Photograph That Shocked America, forthcoming next spring from Bloomsbury Press.

BOOKS CITED IN THIS ESSAY

- *Aftermath: World Trade Center Archive*, by Joel Meyerowitz (Phaidon Press, 2006)
- *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978*, by Sarah Greenough and Diane Waggoner, with Sarah Kennel and Matthew S. Witkovsky (National Gallery of Art, 2007)
- *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, by Lawrence Weschler (McSweeney's, 2006; paperback edition, 2007)
- *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites (University of Chicago Press, 2007)
- *The Ongoing Moment*, by Geoff Dyer (Pantheon Books, 2005)
- *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11*, by David Friend (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006)

BONUS READING

February 14, 2008

The Art of Instant Gratification

<http://chronicle.com/blogPost/the-art-of-instant-gratification/5703>

Since its debut in 1839, photography has possessed a magical quality. While the 19th-century “mirror with a memory” intrigued and enthralled most of the general public, a minority of people was somewhat less enthusiastic, more concerned about what they perceived to be *outer body experiences*, to use modern terms. They believed that each time a person had a portrait made, a piece of that individual’s soul was captured. The camera was a vessel for memory, holding a precious sliver of life’s history within its frame and the printed image became a quasi icon, an item suitable for contemplation and remembrance.

There was something almost biblical about the early process of creating an image. Needing a source of illumination, pictures were seemingly carried on rays of light, traveling from the subject and momentarily transferred or hidden inside the camera, adhering itself onto a negative. Then, from a place deep inside the photographer’s darkroom, the printed image arose, miraculously appearing on a previously blank piece of paper soaked in a bath of chemicals.

Around 1900, the small hand-held Brownie camera, a relatively inexpensive point-and-shoot device made by Kodak, made its way to market, enabling the average Joe and Jane to collect and protect their memories, to become visual chroniclers of all aspects of daily life, from the important to the mundane, from the exciting to the ordinary. Great moments of history and bits of nothingness, frozen in emulsion, were inserted in albums, hinged on the pages of scrapbooks, hung on walls, and stored away in boxes. All around the world, concrete bits of paper held pieces of lives, tangible evidence of deeds and events.

Over the years, steps of technological progress gave the photographer — whether amateur or professional — more control. In order for Kodak's early pictures to be developed, the entire camera, not just the film, had to be sent back to the company, which then returned the printed pictures along with a new roll of film inside the camera. Later on, rolls of film could easily be taken out of the camera. Up to the late 1940s, however, there were still two stages to producing a final image: first, shooting the picture and making a negative, and then developing the printed picture. Lots of variables contributed to the product: light, lenses, paper, chemicals and, obviously and most importantly, the photographer's eye.

But in the late 1940s, another advance in technology was introduced to the public — instant picture making. Sixty years ago, Polaroid provided to pop culture a device that provided instant gratification — finished images developed within seconds, a printed picture that came out of the camera. Hit the button and, seconds later, the image appears.

Until the end of the 20th century almost all photographs were tangible — that is to say, the memory was something that could be held in your hand, felt, touched, as well as seen. Most families considered their personal treasure troves of photographs to be sacred collections, something worth saving at almost all costs; photographs were physical assets.

Today, the gratification is faster than instant. Take out your phone or digital camera, aim, press, and before you can say, "cheese," the image is electronically placed on a server, distributed all over the world to be shared with friends and strangers.

Polaroid is no longer making film; Kodak has restructured its product line. Cameras have changed in both size and structure. What hasn't changed, however, is the public's thirst for mementos. But now pictures are commonly viewed on screens, preserved in formats that make them more fleeting, less hand-held, and easy prey to the delete button. Endless collections of photos are placed in cyberspace each day, posted to the likes of flickr, facebook, shutterfly,

ning, snapfish, picassa, smugmug, ringo, and others — part of global social networks. This gives a whole new meaning to the expression *collective memory*.

While printed pictures still can be made, doing so is rare; the intimacy of the touch is gone. What was once a keepsake is now but a glimmer, making Andy Warhol's concept of "fifteen minutes of fame" seem like an eternity. Snap your fingers once and the digital camera captures the image. Snap twice and the image is on your screen. With three snaps, the picture is off into cyberspace, perhaps to be shared, perhaps gone forever. What was once a religious mystery is now a technological wonder. What, I wonder, do those images say to each other when they pass through the night?