

NATHAN LYONS ON THE SNAPSHOT  
 BY ROBERT HIRSCH

The following is a distillation of comments Nathan Lyons made on the snapshot during our two discussions on September 9 and 23, 1992, in his office at the Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) in Rochester, NY. These talks were in conjunction with *The Point and Shoot Exhibition* at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, NY, curated by David Harrod and me. Additional sections from these discussions will be printed in the next CEPA Quarterly.

RH: How would you define the snapshot?

NL: It is not a question of defining the snapshot, but attempting to understand some of the essential circumstances which existed when people made snapshots. Generally, they were visually untrained and probably not interested in photography but in photography's ability to create needed mementoes. The snapshot reveals a vision that was not overly influenced by other models of representation. The snapshot's lack of knowledge about photography contributed to a picture that was considered flawed because it did not conform to the accepted notions about what a picture should look like.

RH: How did you get interested in the snapshot?

NL: It came from research that I was doing to understand how one valued the photograph historically. I spent extensive amounts of time studying the early literature with the intention of trying to understand how photographs fulfilled certain expectations. Rightly or wrongly, the connotations of veracity were associated with how the photographic image rendered its subjects. Much of the literature utilizes painting as a model and painting became the archetype. The ideas and thinking about photographic picture-making stem from a series of classic works, one in particular by John Burnet, published prior to the invention of photography (1822), called *A Treatise On Painting: In Four Parts...* became the dominant text photographers used to gain understanding about picture structure.

RH: How long did Burnet's ideas continue to influence photographers' thinking?

NL: The last published edition of Burnet's book I found was in 1917. There isn't a major transition until just prior to the turn of the century. Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work* enhanced the literature of the field, positioning photography in a more challenging arena than the literature had been doing. I was interested in discovering other traditions that had influenced the medium. This was stimulated shortly after I arrived at the George Eastman House [GEH, 1957—1969], and I tried to understand something about decisions that had been made with regard to collecting and housing photographs. At that time there was an "A," "B," and "C" collection.

RH: What were the differences?

NL: The "A" collection was fine photographs by fine photographers. The "B" collection was not-so-fine photographs by lesser known photographers and generally referred to topographic or documentary photography. And the "C" collection was anonymous photographs. I found there were many more puzzling and challenging images in the "C" collection, which included snapshots and vernacular images. This triggered my interest to try and understand issues related to the trained and untrained eye.



RH: How did this research relate to your statement that the snapshot is the most authentic picture form that photography has produced?

NL: My observations revealed the basis for the snapshot's authenticity, the fact it was not rooted in traditional imagemaking values of other media. They were in a sense uniquely photographic. In a series of lectures in 1960 and 1961 called "Photography and the Picture Experience," I stated all graphic media have been influenced by the snapshot since prior to the turn of the century.

RH: What was the response to these lectures on the snapshot?

NL: They infuriated many photographers. Obviously one of the questions I was interested in was why Alfred Stieglitz embraced the hand camera and captioned some of his photographs "snapshots." It was as if I had violated a sacred figure by associating the term snapshot with Stieglitz. From my point of view, he was challenging the accepted notions about what a photograph was supposed to look like and began to reveal a syntax that was less influenced by prior pictorial traditions.

RH: Was it the act of looking at the "C" collection that touched off your thinking?

NL: For me it's always been looking at the pictures. It's a question of what they evoke or provoke, seeing them in context and then attempting to formulate something out of that direct observational experience.

Later there was an intersection with [John A.] Kouwenhoven's discussions of vernacular imagery [Made In America, 1948]. It was called to my attention by John Szarkowski, who had been very interested in Kouwenhoven's work. At the first history conference at GEH [November 27-28, 1964] Szarkowski did a presentation on vernacular imagery, and I did a presentation on the influence of the snapshot on contemporary imagemaking. There were some parallels, but I don't think we were necessarily talking about the same thing.

RH: Can you cite a specific example that sets up the snapshot as a 19th-century experience?

NL: Julia Margaret Cameron's images, which I would not call snapshots, do reveal a range of less traditional values. They are the work of an "amateur" photographer, one



**Dyptych from the series: Riding First Class on the Titanic**

who is less skilled in the tradition of photography. Her portraits represented a radical departure in thinking about photographic portraiture. There were things in her pictures that did not conform to the standard set of photographic values. The work possessed movement, a type of direct confrontation, and a scale of the head within the frame that had nothing to do with other works being made photographically at that time. Her excitement about what she saw on the ground-glass did not depend upon the subject she was photographing, but on her subjective response to the image she saw on the ground-glass, producing arresting images that were very different from her contemporaries. You can find images that reveal qualities subsequently associated with the snapshot in the early work of D.O. Hill and Robert Adamson.

RH: How did this interest in the snapshot lead to the exhibition *Toward A Social Landscape* you did at GEH in 1966?

NL: What got me interested in doing *Toward A Social Landscape* was that in the early 1960s a number of photographers started rejecting the modernist canons. They were trying to find something besides a formalist strategy for making a picture. People like Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander were beginning to toy with certain notions about the picture. They may have been influenced by a Robert Frank or Walker Evans. They talked about how they did not want to make a picture but a photograph. This manifested itself in the printing of the black borders around the 35mm film frame and a range of other issues that started to attack certain expectations about how photographs were supposed to look.

RH: What was a visual example of this attack?

NL: Winogrand's tilted frame infuriated people who wondered: "Can't he even hold the camera straight?" Rather than trying to get some sense of what he was trying to stress about structure within a frame and how it might relate to vision, people got angry. I don't think it would be far fetched to form an equation between the jazz tradition and the snapshot. In jazz you have traditions within the form which grow. Daniel Boornstin said America was a country that was essentially settled before it was explored. I've always felt that about photography, that it is a medium that has been applied endlessly with very little understanding of its relevance.

RH: How did your background studies in literature affect your approach to photography?

NL: The study of literature can enhance one's analytical sense. It also stimulated an interest in research. It taught me to formulate my ideas, to check things out before you leap and start saying things you can't defend from a position of argument, and I mean that in the best sense of the word. You are looking at things, comparing things, trying to deal with both the myths and the reality of what you think you understand. The early research I did was not predicated on a series of assumptions, but was a direct investigation involving reading, looking, and not accepting how any of my predecessors saw certain things. I had the advantage of not being conditioned by traditional assumptions about photography. My analytical sense came from literature and my passion for this marvelous media came from my interest in poetry.

RH: How did this influence the way you looked at photographs?

NL: The early literature of the medium was devoted to a series of assumptions and preconceptions about what a photograph should look like and what it should be about. These are the two central ideas I have always felt it was important not to succumb to. The photograph can look very differently, one from the next.

RH: What did you hope to do with *Toward A Social Landscape*?

NL: I wanted to deal with photographers who were questioning the issue of picture content and how pictures were formulated. It was an early investigation into the work of Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Danny Lyon, Duane Michals, and Bruce Davidson to show that the vocabulary of the medium was shifting, if not expanding.

RH: What were some of the immediate effects of the show?

NL: It upset a lot of people, which is not necessary bad. It started to get people to think more about the interrelation between form and content and how there were other possibilities. It was not my intention to create or reinforce a stylistic notion about photography. However, people started to talk about the snapshot aesthetic.

RH: What do you think of the snapshot aesthetic?

NL: I'm not sure I agree with the notion of a snapshot aesthetic, even though it has become that in the minds of many people. I saw the snapshot as an expansion of the imagemaker's vocabulary.

RH: How do you see your own role, even unintentionally, in creating a snapshot aesthetic?

NL: We have aestheticized the snapshot and this was not what I wanted to accomplish, but it certainly resulted in some interesting pictures. The problem is that any time you call attention to something there is a tendency for people to work it to death. All you can try and do is to share some observations. This investigation was critically important to my understanding about the medium, and it helped me more than reading any of the existing histories at that time.

RH: What were some of the long term effects of the show?

NL: Many issues became belabored and did not come from the same kind of sensibility that generated the original works (snapshots). This raises the question whether or not a trained photographer can make a snapshot?

RH: Can a trained photographer do more than make a stylized snapshot?

NL: A challenging imagemaker can make most anything work. It may work for different reasons than the snapshot did in an original sense. The genesis of the whole notion of snapshotting had to do with hunting. The terminology extends from the idea of a spontaneous reaction to circumstance without any pre-thought or preconsideration. A number of people embraced some of the characteristics, issues, and attitudes and incorporated them into their work. It was not an emulation of style, but something that fit their needs of expression.



RH: How has the snapshot affected photographic practice today?

NL: Today there is less of a preconceived notion of what a photograph should look like. There is more going on that is not defined by fixed ideas about the medium. It has more to do with signature rather than style. We're in a period where there is a much stronger content based outlook.

RH: How would you define the difference between signature and style?

NL: Style is the imprint, and that ultimately is the problem. Signature is the integration of the components of form and content. The issue has nothing to do with style, but with synthesis of form and content.

RH: Are the concerns of a snapshot photographer different from those who previsualize their images?

NL: The snapshot does not come from the same kind of sensibility as the previsualized image. Snapshooters are more concerned with a spontaneous relationship with the subject they are photographing, not formalizing it. They are caught up with making mementoes that will enhance their memory of things. If you look indexically at snapshots, there are the dominant subject categories like the girlfriend, the boyfriend, the car, and with travel it's usually a question of letting people know you were there by positioning yourself in front of some artifact to verify you were there. Sometimes when people were asked how their trip was they were known to reply: "I'm not sure, I haven't gotten the prints back yet."

RH: How has this impacted on what photographers are doing with the idea of snapshot today?

NL: Your current exhibition seems to have some relationship to what we've been talking about. There is now an historical relationship, be it conscious, less conscious, or totally unconscious, to values in another recognizable tradition, that of the snapshot. We have defused certain mystiques only to have new mystiques surface. You can ask questions about what is it a certain generation of photographers let go of and what they ultimately embrace. It is not surprising that they embrace a number of things they rejected earlier.

RH: What do you see as some of those things?

NL: The whole attitude towards the print. In the early 1960s everyone was obsessed with getting every tone possible out of that sheet of paper with crisp delineation which made the world look like a laser scanned experience. There was a real attempt to depart from the values of the fine print. People got very excited about Mario Giacomelli whose prints often had only three tones and did not substantiate the west coast aesthetic of the photographic print.

RH: How has the hand camera format affected the mind-set of the photographer?

NL: There is a curious cycle of camera formats. The portability of the 35mm had a liberating quality that favored spontaneity, and everyone was turning away from large-format cameras. Today many photographers are reembracing large-format cameras. Part of it has to do with accommodation and the notion of what the eye gets used to, accepts, rejects, gets bored by, or is indifferent to. I don't think there is any one set of criteria that universally satisfies everyone.

RH: What is the result in terms of photographic vision?

NL: It is a question of change. When we are over saturated with highly rendered landscape images we want to see something else and so something else appears. That doesn't mean we rejected everything. I can't tell you how many pseudo Point Lobos photographs I had to look at in a period of 20 or 30 years, but you say: "My God, enough is enough." The work was removed from the inherent concerns Edward Weston had when he originally developed his body of work. What they are really saying is: "Oh if that is the kind of picture people are responding to, I'll make that kind of picture." This has been one of the problematic things about the amateur sensibility, not the advanced amateur as Stieglitz would call himself, but the amateur who wants to make acceptable looking pictures. It is amazing how belabored and cliché-ridden this medium can become so quickly. These days you almost get the feeling photography redefines itself every six months.

RH: How has the recent "point and shoot" phenomenon influenced contemporary picturemaking?

A N I N T E R V I E W  
W I T H N A T H A N L Y O N S



**Dyptych from the series: Riding First Class on the Titanic**

NL: It may be limiting in some areas. There are things we learned about focus and out-of-focus that are now being more prescribed by something like auto-focus. The level of human interaction with the tool has changed and you can be less constrained by the technology. It limits the prospect of accident within the system. Ultimately "point and shoot" relieves a person from any of the historic conditions of making a photograph.

RH: A number of photographers who sent work for the Point and Shoot Exhibition seemed to be intrigued with how emancipating using a "toy" camera could be.

NL: Yes, liberating, freeing, they could let go of all the assumptions they had about how they were supposed to work. The fact you make this observation doesn't surprise me. I think there is confusion and indecision out there because there are so many hovering possibilities. When you said "point and shoot" does that include disk camera? Did you get disk camera work because that has a "point and shoot" aspect to it?

RH: We didn't, but we did have work in the show derived from Super 8mm. Part of what we wanted to do with this exhibition was to see what was out there right now. We would certainly consider it for our next show.

NL: I haven't seen the show, but I think I understand what you were trying to do. Are you looking at what is being generated by cheap disposable cameras? [Examples of this type of work are included in the Point and Shoot Exhibition.] Is it getting us back to the basics of how people started to make photographs who had no background in making photographs? Much of the "point and shoot" work enhances certain new qualities and some is not that different.

RH: What is the relationship between the camera, the operator, and the photograph?

NL: It has to do with the response of the individual using the camera and not the camera. Do various camera systems affect how people see? That was a question that I was interested in when I was doing earlier research. What shifts or changes might have occurred with the advent of stereo imagery or the banquet format (panorama camera)? Did it affect how someone saw something, or did it conform to a series of set prescriptions? With The Extended Frame exhibition I tried to address the notion of how we relied on or violated the prescription of the frame. We are not unique in our recent

efforts here because a lot of work done during the 1920s was toying with the issue of formatting. From the mid-1960s forward there was a great deal of work about violating the frame including multiple frames, grids, and setting up different kinds of options. With the current Point and Shoot Exhibition, are we still dealing with the same subjects? Is there any pattern here?

RH: Based on what I have seen thus far, I would say yes. There seem to be traditional choices made in terms of subject categories like family, kids, pets, social events, and travel.

NL: Then the question would be, by the very nature of you doing the exhibition, did that eliminate certain kinds of work?

RH: Yes. We specifically wanted to see how artists were deriving work from the "point and shoot" cameras.

NL: You could go down a whole list of possible questions—from what the pictures look like to what they were about—and then try to understand

if there is any correlation between those two issues. Or whether or not they are a series of arbitrary and unrelated factors. But then you could say are there exceptions to the rule and to what degree do they seem to appear? In general, if you go back to an old snapshot album you may see a higher percentage of outdoor views than interior views. Due to the sophistication of the built-in exposure systems of the high-end "point and shoot" cameras are we seeing more of an interior view in people's lives, rather than the more traditional exterior view?

RH: There are domestic interior scenes in the Point and Shoot Exhibition which seem to be extemporaneous in nature.

RH: Polaroid work was included in the exhibition. How do you think instant photography has affected what people are picturing?

NL: What happened with Polaroid cameras was the fact you didn't have to go through any processing lab. The pictures could be of a highly personal nature. Nobody would be monitoring them except you. Did that change something? There are some people who think there is a whole range of imagery out there that is less of a public vision of self and more of a private vision of self.

To be continued...

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