

Anonymous American Photography

**Anonymous
American
Photography
1950s & 1960s**

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HEFTN Edition



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Dedicated to the disregarded or forgotten artists

CONTENTS

1	Anonymous Photography . . .	1
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1

ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHY

Anonymous photography need not be created anonymously to count as anonymous. Anonymous photography is photography created by individuals, often professional photographers, whose name is forgotten, lost or, if known, ignored. Pictures and negatives of these photographers have not found their ways into archives of cultural institutions but are found among rummage, next to other bric-a-brac — like old china, furniture, used watches, stamps, antiquarian books, silverware, or discarded camera equipment. The photographs are junked after the photographer had given up the business or died: an oeuvre, a document of work as well as a record of an era finds its way onto flea markets or ends up on the trash heap.

Quality has become a social concept, replacing quality standards as such a concept. Qual-

ity standards once defined quality, and they still do to some extent, particularly in musical performance. But in the visual arts — in painting, sculpture, installations, typography, photography, et cetera — there are few standards any longer by which to judge quality: quality as such does not exist anymore, by its own criterion, but is ascribed and socially defined¹.

Art and beauty feed on appreciation, on interpretation by the connoisseur, by the viewer, the curator, the reviewer, the collector; and if this appreciation is lacking, for whatever reason, art is literarily lost: it is far easier to reassess a once glowing reception than to recover an oeuvre that has been neglected or even destroyed. We know the successful, but do not notice the ineffective, quite irrespective of their respective talent.

Anonymity is not necessarily associated with

a lack of art appreciation, because authorship was normally confined to a restricted set of objects, that is, to texts or musical scores. Outside this confinement, authorship is a relatively recent phenomenon, but it appears now to assume an inordinate role in defining quality, driven by media cultures, digitalization, and the new performance rewards².

Photography, analog photography, appears to fall prey to that focus on trend and hype, even though it is — historically speaking — a relatively young mode of expression. Photography is not only endangered by a lack of practitioners who still practice that arcane craft, it is primarily imperiled because of the societal neglect towards the contributions, accomplishments, interpretations and pictorial commentaries of entire generations of professionals³.

While amateurs were once instrumental in the formation of that new form of portraying and documentation, a professional guild of photographers evolved, offering specialized avenues to photography to cater to the various foci that presented themselves: artistic expression, journalistic or family oriented documentation, fashion, advertising, portraiture. Many photographers catered to the citizen, to the people living in their town or neighborhood, and focused on the portraiture of couples and children, the documentation of the golden anniversary, the reunion of high-school classes, BAR-MITSWAH, confirmation and weddings, business meetings or photographs to serve annual reports, sporting

events, or the covering of local events such as floods, crimes or car accidents, et cetera.

The collection herein assembles work samples of professional photographers whose production ended up on the digital flea market and did not make it into the archives of cultural associations. From a technical point of view, they are all finely crafted and well composed; the waste inherent in any photography is limited, is within reasonable bounds: one in ten photographs taken appears noteworthy⁴. A particular — common — aesthetic appears to be inherent in these pictures, a time-dependent visual syntax it appears which seemed to have been guided by the demands of 4×5 inch photography⁵ and an interplay, a tacit understanding, between photographer and photographed. Symmetry abounds, composition, few snapshots.

What distinguishes these pictures from those of the better-known artists is their humble — mundane — aim. They are not pretentious, suggestive. The images are not meant to accompany texts of Mary McCarthy, V. S. Pritchett or Evelyn Barish, do not portray Joseph Brodsky, Alec Guinness, Roy Lichtenstein, Artur Rubinstein, Saul Steinberg, the shoes of Lee Krasner, the death mask of James Joyce, works one finds in the oeuvre of Evelyn Hofer; they do not portray nudes as Lee Friedlander does, or stylized torsos like Robert Mapplethorpe, or the ‘other’, as we find them in the pictures of Diane Arbus or Martin Parr; they do not serve as ‘art’ as in the case of Paul Strand. Shown in the images of the any-

mous is that what matters to the rendered, or the reader of the daily newspaper.

That is not to say that these images do not require interpretation, analysis, that they speak for themselves. First, they are documents of their time and, as such, they tell stories about the subject matter as well as the photographer. Times change, and we may look at pictures today differently than originally intended, i.e., during the era when they were created, calling for commentary; or, to mention a deeper reason for the possible non-coherence between image and viewer, there might be a mismatch of the photographer's intentions and the viewer's worldview. MOMA's "Family of Man" exhibit (1955) that included uncommented Nazi photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto (contained originally in the Stroop report)⁶ prompted — rightfully so — critique. Some photographs may challenge or provoke, and in doing so may shake a viewer's position, in the form of an artistic confrontation; other photographs may be interpreted ahistorically (reinterpreting them in a way the photographer had not intended them); and still other photos clearly cross a line of abuse and require narration.

In the case of the anonymous photographs assembled here, there is a certain symbiosis between the photographed and the photographer, an empathic embracement of the portrayed by the portrayer, and we view both, today, with sympathy. The harmony that extrudes from these images is not the product of naiveté: it is

more a realistic — but also a compassionate — assessment of daily life as it presented itself to diverse photographers living during the same age, in similar places, and guided by a somehow common aesthetic code.

Look at the pictures of the damaged cars taken, presumably, on the assignment of newspapers or insurance companies (shot by three photographers). They are straightforward, but also wonderfully crafted and iconic (particularly the image of the Buick on page ??). Take the pictures taken of couples: no condescension on the part of the photographer is visible, no picturing of the 'other'. In some of the portraits, we can observe an active role of the portrayed, a humorous glance occasionally directed at the viewer (page ??), or a proud assertion, even radiance in the images of the younger generation (page ??), or a neutral, contemplative inward-looking gaze of the mature person. Most photographs are composed, the way my former class photos were, taken at the end of a school year in the 1950s, but some shots to accompany a police deployment (pages ?? and ??), or those that were to portray a friend (page ??)⁷, followed a freer hand.

The base for the selection presented here (ordered by the batches of acquired negatives) has not been a proper population or sampling of pictures and, hence, we cannot conclude anything from the frequencies of topics that we encounter, from the lack of images referring to social unrests or labor disputes, for instance. But they appear to document Americana in a similar way,

and an analogous quality, as the famous photos contained in the Farm Security Collection of the Library of Congress — provided somebody had mined that vast treasure of anonymous photography in the first place; and, from a sociological point of view, that collective picture, would it exist, appears as telling as the view of single, prominent photographers whose work we exhibit in shows and museums.

The preference on the part of the public for the celebrated does not attest to the art of judgment, to connoisseurship: it is more a sign of following suit, of conformity, of jumping onto the bandwagon. The negatives which I had acquired from dealers in Wilmette (IL), or Dixon (IL), or St. Louis (MO), or Lancaster (PA) originate, presumably, from the regions where I had found the dealers, the provinces of the US, and it is entirely possible that it is there where cultures originate, as in the Lower East Side (NY) of Henry Roth, Harlem (NY) of James Baldwin, Paterson (NJ) of William Carlos Williams, or Kansas City (MI) of Edward Dahlberg:

Kansas City was my Tarsus; the Kaw and Missouri Rivers were the washpots of joyous Dianas from St. Joseph and Joplin. It was a young, seminal town and the seed of its men was strong. Homer sang of many sacred towns in Hellas which were no better than Kansas City, as hilly as Eteonus and as stony as Aulis. The city wore a coat of rocks and grass. The bosom of this town nursed men, mules and horses as famous as the asses or Arcadia and the steeds of Diomedes. The cicadas sang in the valleys beneath Cliff Drive.

Who could grow weary of the lively stables off McGee Street or the ewes of Laban in the stockyards?⁸

Notes

¹Quality defined in terms of criteria (that in turn are socially defined) is a meta-argument; quality defined directly (socially) lacks this meta-argument — and, hence, becomes arbitrary.

²Performance rewards have penetrated every corner of our societies, embracing a Stachanovian-type form of merit allocation that was once shunned in Western countries; see Marcel Herbst, *Financing Public Universities: The Case of Performance Funding*, Springer Science & Business Media 2007, p. 131. It propels self-feeding processes which benefit the successful, making merit, in all likelihood, highly dependent on chance; see e.g. Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, Virgin Books 1995.

³Societal neglect is profound, guided, I presume, by sheer ignorance, by a categorization error which denies common photography the status of a cultural legacy.

⁴Among the roughly 70,000 pictures that Henri Cartier-Bresson had shot during his lifetime, perhaps less than 0.5 percent are known.

⁵To follow a notion of Joel Meyerowitz (who was speaking of 8×10 inch photography): “An 8×10 camera isn’t for horse races. You do what it tells you to do” (interview with Joel Meyerowitz by Constance Sullivan, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).

⁶The report, *Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!* (The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw is No More!), commissioned by Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger, commander of the SS and police in Krakow, was prepared by Jürgen Stroop (in charge of the liquidation of the Ghetto 1943) and addressed to Heinrich Himmler.

⁷“Friend”, as noted on the sleeve of the negative.

⁸Edward Dahlberg, *Because I Was Flesh*, New Directions 1950, pages 1f.

