JANE HAMMOND



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I have a very diverse practice of collecting found information and transforming it, so I've become a collector of snapshots. There's extreme particularity to each picture in Peter Cohen's collection of snapshots and vernacular photographs. We don't know the photographers, when they lived, or the reasons they took the pictures. One of the reasons why people pull out their cameras is to capture something ephemeral: a flight of locusts, a heavy snow. It's like, "I built this snowman. He'll never look better than he looks right now—let me get the camera."

I have a theory that photography is the poor man's taxidermy. In other words, a person might take a picture to show you the deer they shot. The photo becomes a kind of trophy. Or it might be that people are hyperaware that the photo is a record similar to reality TV. It's unscripted behavior, but it's behavior that wouldn't be happening if a camera weren't there.

The art of these photographs is somewhat in the eye of the beholder. The people who created these images are so unprofessional, there's something kind of moving about it. There are some really wonderful mistakes. Where the accident ends and the self-reflexivity we associate with modern art begins in this genre, one never knows.

We all are familiar with the Duchampian idea that you can take something that wasn't intended to be art, and you, the artist, with your big deal artistic intentions, can recontextualize it and call it art. We accept that. But what happens if no one calls it art, ever? What if they die and go to their grave, and they've never said, "This is art"?

This collection of photographs is stimulating creatively. I mine the images for specific things I want: I want this guy's boots, or I want this head in the sand. So there's a forensic quality to these snapshots. They're filled with information, with what I call the thinginess of things: curtains, cardboard, cornfields, agave plants. Here's the man wearing a hula skirt. I know exactly what it feels like to have that skirt on: it's our skirt. It's cultural shared information.

People are coming to have greater and greater regard for vernacular snapshots. I think it's this combination of the ubiquity of amateur photography—everyone's taking pictures—oddly coupled with the decline of analog photography and the fact that it is vanishing. The people that made these photographs weren't artists, and nobody inside the pictures—the subjects—thought they were part of a work of art either. We have no reason to think they imagined their images would end up at the Metropolitan Museum, but you can learn more about photography after you've looked at these pictures.



JANE HAMMOND, UNTITLED (41,231,85,56,200,35), 1991

243 AMATEUR SNAPSHOTS, 1900s-1970s

Vernacular photographs in The Met's collection reveal the unexpected visions of anonymous amateurs. Cut loose from their original context but charged with the aesthetic spirit of their time, these fresh, accidental artworks were created as the camera emerged as a nearly ubiquitous, easy-to-use accessory of modern life. Although never intended for public display—most of the photographs in the collection were discovered at flea markets, in shoeboxes, or in family albums—these found images often bring to mind the work of such master photographers as Walker Evans, Man Ray, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Diane Arbus.



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