

ONLY THE GOOD ONES:

THE SNAPSHOT AESTHETIC REVISITED

Press release

Galerie Rudolfinum
January 24 – April 6, 2014

Exhibition curator: Michal Nanoru

Galerie Rudolfinum presents *Only The Good Ones*, an exhibition tracing the snapshot – the unpremeditated, spur-of-the-moment amateur photograph – as a source of inspiration for art photography. The exhibition presents the work of forty photographers, primarily Americans, plus German photographer of Czech descent Jürgen Teller and British photographer Corinne Day, who introduced the world to Kate Moss.

The snapshot, spontaneously capturing a commonplace moment, with minimal direction and little appreciation for artistic or journalistic convention, full of red eyes, severed heads, leaky shutters, and drugstore hyper-saturation, has formed a fundamental part of photographic production throughout the 20th century and remains the default choice for inexperienced owners of compact cameras and phones. But over the years, the snapshot has often inspired artistic endeavors not limited by the family photo album lying in a box up in the attic. *“Their potential was used by artists who were already involved in the gallery scene, or whose snapshots helped them into the gallery scene,”* curator Michal Nanoru explains. *“This is why the exhibition is named after the usual series of questions the photo lab used to ask – Glossy or matte? Three and a half by fives? All the pictures or only the good ones? ‘The good ones’ usually meant the ones in which the main object was in focus, ones that even managed to feature some sort of main object that wasn’t the photographer’s huge pink thumb on the lens, or that weren’t just the blank first frames from loading the camera. Every time I wanted all of the pictures, because I always wondered about the negatives and contemplated how the person working at the photo lab decided which photos were good enough and which ones weren’t. This exhibition is essentially the continuation of this contemplation. ‘Only the good ones’ are in it, ones selected for the context of the gallery, not by someone at a photo lab. It doesn’t come as much surprise that they often feature unexpected effects – in terms of formality and especially content.”*

When one speaks of the aesthetics of the snapshot, today we speak about a style that developed primarily in the United States between the 1960s and 80s, significantly defining the appearance of the 90s in both the artistic and the magazine and commercial environments on both sides of the Atlantic, and now proliferates globally on social media. The small snapshot format has transformed into a tool that in various contexts has performed various tasks over the past fifty years – paradoxically, primarily in cases where it was necessary to work with an impression of random chance and naturalness. *Only the Good Ones* tells the history of the snapshot aesthetic as the story of diary intimacy, the poetry of the everyday and the catchy undercurrent of the street, occasionally breathing fresh air into stiff artistic and commercial convention. *“It follows the punk premise that you don’t need special technology, money or education to make compelling art. On the contrary, it’s possible to express yourself with just a minimum of tools. All you need is three chords and the truth,”* says Nanoru. Just like punk rock, the snapshot transpired through a basic understanding of

how to operate an instrument, and it uses its obsolescence as a guarantee that its values are based in experience. It derives authenticity from its definition in relation to the world, which uses all available technology and means of power to manipulate. This opposition of the small, personal and instant against the grand, aloof and overproduced formed the basis for expanding the snapshot aesthetic in culture.

The influence of the snapshot is broad and diverse, from Robert Frank and William Klein, who resonated with the bebop chaos of modern America and did very well without the compositional and emotional organization of professional photography in the 1950s, to the irreproducible adroitness of the new street photography of Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand in the 60s, to the first incursions of color into art photography in Stephen Shore and William Eggleston, William Christenberry, Joel Sternfeld and Joel Meyerowitz. Pop Art was fascinated by the banality of amateur photography as a part of post-war consumer culture, the flash reflected against the well-oiled surface of America, and Andy Warhol's obsessive Polaroids should be at the foundation of any serious thought about the intersection between the snapshot and art. The immediacy of the moment was also strongly expressed in experiments depicting the fringes of society, whether through Larry Clarke's artistic testimony or the socially committed documentary of Jacob Holdt. Both of these inspired photographers and stylists, who in reaction to the affected, industrialized pictures of the 1980s, sought a more direct relationship with reality. Within a few years, the emerging Generation X spread the autobiographic intimacy primarily represented by Nan Goldin (an perhaps by other Boston School photographers or Walter Pfeiffer and Nobuyoshi Araki) to all corners of culture – from various forms of documentary (Richard Billingham, Ari Marcopoulos) to the grey areas between fashion and art photography (Jürgen Teller, Corinne Day) and independent film (Harmony Korine, Gus Van Sant), until it stopped being clear whether advertisements were trying to look like snapshots or snapshots like advertisements.

The decline of analog photography at the beginning of the new millennium produced instant nostalgia and sparked interest among collectors and museums. Under the management of photographers Ryan McGinley and later Tim Barber, the appearance of *Vice* was dictated by recognition of the history of the genre and the need to document as a natural part of parties and adolescent experiments of the latest generation of New York artists (Dash Snow and others). Young people's desire for authenticity in the face of digital media and technology's increasing capability to create ever more perfect artificial worlds has passed on a small package to future generations, which includes, in addition to snapshots, an unprecedented interest in small print runs, self-publishing and the retro "movements" of compact and plastic cameras. The hipster style, originally limited to a small enclave of independent music and design fans, subsequently transformed into a standard that permeates throughout the photography spectrum and flows back into the broad wave of humanity. *"Social networks, led by Instagram, let the user adapt digital photos using simple features and then share the photos, immediately repackage the unbearably high resolution of our present reality into gentle, fuzzy, warm tones, rounded corners and Polaroid square formats, further shifting the role of ephemeral pictures and life as a performance into the center of the creation of our identities,"* Nanoru writes in the exhibition catalogue. The symbol of the snapshot has become the selfie, a genre perfectly mastered by Lee Friedlander, but it is one that is moving into the position of the dominant form only now, when Western men and women need to regularly fill several channels dedicated to their various roles. The snapshot is transforming from a means of capturing the speed of life in the city to a symbol thereof, an aid in creating the impression of a romanticized lifestyle, with all the characteristics of a diary – stylization, awkwardness, monotony, repetition and

revealing straightforwardness.

The exhibition views snapshot aesthetic as the product of a continuous exchange between professionals and amateurs, between intention and ingenuousness, between subcultures and the media, and charts the fluctuating dividing line between the massive amount everyday visual production and pictures worthy of note. It shows how the style has developed in several relatively closed groups and highlights authors who are characteristic for individual periods and stances of the snapshot. *“The snapshot is a family photograph and the exhibition presents an album of interlinked communities, in which everyone meets in colophons, invitations and mutual photographic portraits,”* adds the curator. *“Soon you’ll start to recognize friends and lovers in those photos.”* At times when no one is looking through the viewfinder, taking pictures becomes an activity in and of itself, a joint endeavor, a reason to be together. Mark Borthwick often gets his family involved in custom portrait photographs because he is concerned with a sense of solidarity. Nan Goldin’s photographs helped provide structure for her chaotic world and create an alternative family out of a circle of friends. McGinley, one of eight children, holds photography expeditions as if they were summer camps lasting several weeks; a new snapshot generation is growing up under his wing.

“The original concept for the exhibition only envisaged contemporary photographers. The idea of snapshots at the Rudolfinum amused me and it seemed easy, because I knew a number of them in person. But then I realized that it would be good to show the roots of the current wave, show what’s been around for many years. It was a good opportunity to present major names in U.S. photography in Prague, photographers whose photos usually aren’t seen here – many consider William Eggleston to be one of the most important photographers of the 20th century. This is how we got all the way back to 1911 and loans from the most prestigious American galleries. But there are also current stars like Ryan McGinley and Alec Soth and photos from books by Mike Brodie and JH Engström, which to my great joy were on various top ten lists at the end of 2013,” says the curator, who prepared the exhibition while he was living in New York City. This five-year stay represents another reason why American photographs form the focus of the exhibition. *“It’s always about the artist, whose leisure is an expression of something more universal, even if the whole time they never got out of bed. They tell stories about crossing the threshold from the street into the gallery, from the private to the public, from the mass to the individual and from the unfettered to the controlled. No one has ever hung photographs from entire history of the snapshot aesthetic next to one another like this before.”* As a result, lesser known photography series will come together at the exhibition: *Sentimental Journey* from Nobuyoshi Araki’s honeymoon, Larry Clark’s *Teenage Lust*, photographs from the set of early films by Oscar-winning director Gus Van Sant, Warhol’s Polaroid of Arnold Schwarzenegger, photographs taken by automechanic Mike Brodie while he was criss-crossing the United States on freight trains for four years, photos by Corinne Day, who introduced pop culture to the 14-year-old Kate Moss, or the iconic works of Lee Friedlander, Joel Meyerowitz, Nan Goldin, Jürgen Teller and more.

The exhibition presents over 250 works by the following artists:

Nobuyoshi Araki, Tim Barber, Richard Billingham, Mark Borthwick, Mike Brodie, William Christenberry, Larry Clark, Barbara Crane, Bill Dane, Corinne Day, William Eggleston, JH Engström, Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Luigi Ghirri, Nan Goldin, Jacob Holdt, Jerry Hsu, William Klein, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Ari Marcopoulos, Ryan McGinley, Joel Meyerowitz, Slava Mogutin, Daido Moriyama, Mark Morrisroe, Ed Panar, Tod Papageorge, Walter

Pfeiffer, Jack Pierson, Stephen Shore, Dash Snow, Alec Soth, Joel Sternfeld, Gus Van Sant, Jürgen Teller, Andy Warhol, Henry Wessel, Garry Winogrand.

The Galerie Rudolfinum's lecture department has prepared a **series of accompanying programs** to the exhibition, including lectures and guided tours.

Contact for information:

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Only The Good Ones: The Snapshot Aesthetic Revisited
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Admission

Only The Good Ones: The Snapshot Aesthetic Revisited

Full: CZK 130

Discounted: CZK 80

Your ticket is good for one admission and a selected accompanying program.

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Opening hours:

Tue – Wed, Fri – Sun: 10am–6pm

Thu: 10am–8pm

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