

# Multifaceted exhibition explores our obsession with sharing photos

By Charles Desmarais

The ubiquity of photographs and the practice of sending them to wide circles of friends and beyond is a relative thing. And not something confined to our Age of the Internet.

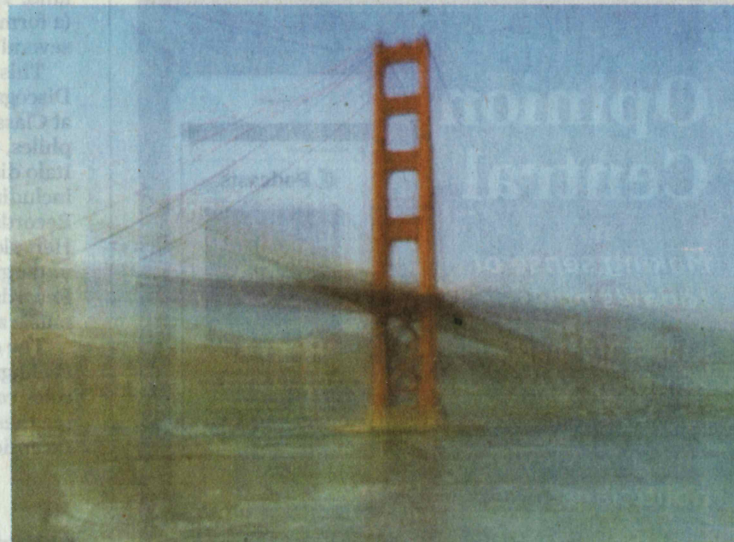
According to one estimate, in the early 20th century before the beginning of World War I as many as 300 billion postcards, most of them bearing photographic images, were delivered around the world. Well before that period, the 1860s saw a practice of trading pho-

**"Snap + Share: Transmitting Photographs from Mail Art to Social Networks":** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Saturday, March 30-Aug. 4. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org)

tographic cartes de visite (literally, "visiting cards") depicting oneself, one's family or a favorite celebrity. The fad was so popular it had a nickname, "cartomania."

In 1888, George Eastman invented a camera and a slogan, "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest," that encouraged the most conspicuous of amateurs to record their daily lives, the better to share their stories with others. In 1903, Eastman began selling a Kodak camera that used postcard-format film, which could be exposed on paper preprinted with the words "Post Card" and a rectangle where the postage stamp should go.

Curator Clément Chéroux  
*Photographs continues on E3*



© Corinne Vionnet

Swiss artist Corinne Vionnet combined thousands of similar images scoured from the internet to make "San Francisco."

# Urge to share photos is nothing new

Photographs from page E1

gives a nod to such antecedents in the catalog and texts accompanying his exhibition "Snap + Share: Transmitting Photographs from Mail Art to Social Networks," opening Saturday, March 30, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. But they get curiously short shrift in a show that otherwise pings intriguingly between popular forms, like the snapshot self-portrait and the news wire photo, and more deliberate projects of conceptual art.

A picture that has been used to promote the exhibition, now buried on a wall in the show among other technical "firsts," could carry all the symbolic weight of the most significant change wrought by popular access to digital transmission of photographs. It's a colorfully pixelated image of a newborn child — Sophie Lee Kahn, the caption tells us.

Exhibited alongside a wired-together digital camera, mobile phone and laptop computer, it is said to be the first cell phone photograph shared instantly. It was sent simultaneously to 2,000 people in 1997. A mere 22 years separates us, we realize, from a time when the instantaneous broadcast of images — most likely via television — was not a personal action but a corporate decision.

Displayed nearby is a small collection of amateur photos, put together by Peter J. Cohen around a single organizing principle: each is marked, "Me," "ME," "me," or "My Self." All, clearly, were meant to be shared with another person. All are testaments to the human need to be recognized, to leave in our wake some evidence of our existence, to live on.

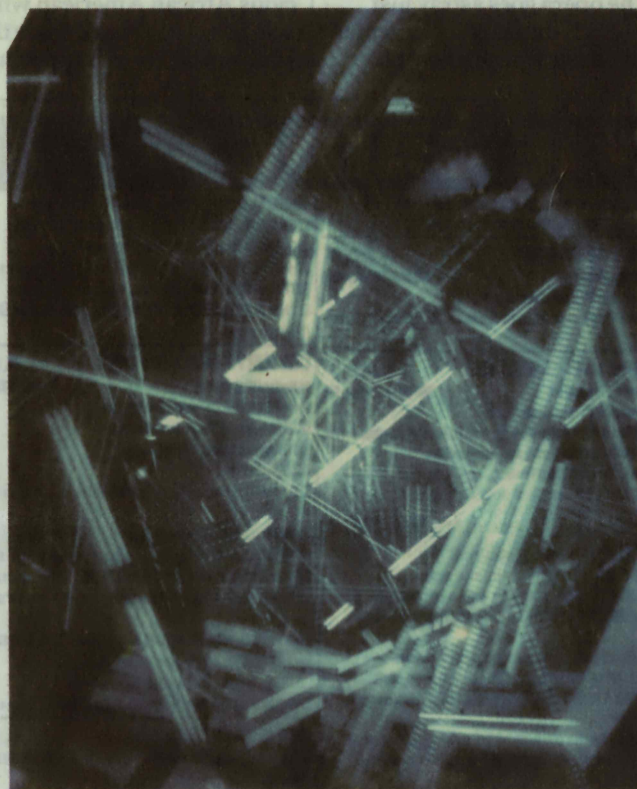
The exhibition attempts a rapid turn from its melancholy core as it moves to more considered projects. Selections from an archive maintained by John Held of so-called "mail art" are prominently displayed, each striving for attention on its own terms, all marked by frantic endeavor, if not always by invention.

Note is taken of postcard-as-art projects by such prominent artists as Walker Evans, On Kawara, Jan Dibbets and Stephen Shore. For those who know and respect the form, the inclusions are satisfying reminders. How, though, could one of the most famous such series of all, Eleanor Antin's "100 Boots" (1971-73), be left out of a show in which barely 20 percent of the artists are women?



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

**Peter J. Cohen has compiled a collection of amateur photos that subjects have marked to identify themselves.**



© Thomas Bachler

**Thomas Bachler, "Untitled, from the series Reiseerinnerungen (Souvenirs)" (1985)**

for the exhibition relies upon that staple of the internet visual diet, the cat meme. "Ceiling Cat" was said to be watching us, and was sometimes compared to a god. The phrase peaked as an internet search term in 2008, according to the website knowyourmeme.com. Years later, artists A. Eva and Franco Mattes brought the animal into a kind of empty-but-IRL existence by installing a taxidermy cat in a gallery ceiling.

An equally pitiable image is presented as a work encouraging visitor participation. David Horvitz's "241543903" is an action, an instruction and a series of photographs, in the alternative art tradition that was called Fluxus in its 1960s and '70s heyday. It consists of a picture matching the directive, "Take a photograph of your head inside a freezer. Upload this photograph somewhere on the Internet using the tag #241543903."

Key to the work's inclusion in the exhibition is its wild popularity throughout the internet — enter the numerical title in a Google image search to see for yourself. A plugged-in, top-freezer refrigerator (the artist's own?) is provided in the gallery for those who feel an immediate imperative to join in the sad spectacle.

If it sounds as though the exhibition is all over the place, it is, but in the best possible way. It offers multiple perspectives on its expansive theme, is accompanied by a catalog full of thoughtful insights, and it's of a scale that gives a lot and suggests that there is more for viewers to discover on their own.

One needn't turn to the internet for that. Collectors of vernacular photography (we are many) regularly come across astounding examples of artful expression waiting to be mined from the baskets of images offered, for a dollar or so, in every antique store and junk shop.

But if each such discovery carries a galvanic charge, every new pile of images is freighted with pathos. The recognition that each face represents an individual brings with it, too, the realization that all those faces are individually alike, that each stands for the whole, yet each will be supplanted.

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All the same, there are many surprises that make the exhibition well worth a visit. A work by Jeff Guess relies upon custom software to disassemble images down to the pixel level, then piece them together again in a demonstration of what we might think of as "digital seeing."

Perhaps the work most appropriate to the exhibition's clear, if unstated, emphasis on transmission and sharing in the digital age is that of the Swiss artist Corinne Vionnet. For her series "Photo Opportunities" she scoured the internet for pictures of famous world monuments. She combined thousands of images made from slightly different vantage points focused on, for example, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal and the Golden Gate Bridge, gathering them into ghostly composites of an iconic world.

It is disturbing, if sadly appropriate, that the picture ultimately chosen as the cover of the show's catalog and the billboard-size introductory image