

The snapshot

The Snapshot

edited by Jonathan Green

Aperture/126 pp./\$12 (hb); \$7.50 (sb).

This latest offering from Aperture is a collection of portfolios by a dozen photographers who (in the opinion of the editor, Jonathan Green) belong to one of two groups making pictures derived from the snapshot: that is, those who pursue "the plastic controls and visual richness hinted at in the work of the casual amateur," and those exploring "familial subject matter."

These categories, of course, are extremely arbitrary; the number of groups could easily have been expanded to include "those who consider the subject of paramount importance," "photographers who have no concern for print quality," etc. It is interesting that Tod Papageorge, in his essay for the book, says that, for him, "men like Walker Evans and even Edward Weston have been closer to the direct celebrating spirit of our anonymous box camera photographers than Kertesz, Cartier-Bresson and later masters of 35 mm photography." In fact, to suggest that any contemporary photographer has avoided the influence of snapshots would be absurd.

But Green's ground rules allow him to do such incongruous things as following Emmet Gowin with Henry Wessel, Jr., and that, it appears is exactly the point: Green has used his "theme" only to loosely tie together a number of fine images for us to enjoy and save on our shelves. On this level, the book is a success. This is the first widely-available selection of work by Bill Zulpo-Dane, Wessel, Tod Papageorge, Joel Meyerowitz, et al. It also marks the first publication of a good amount of new work by the better-known contributors (Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Gowin, Garry Winogrand.) Included are essays by a number of major figures in the medium and an interesting book review by Judith Wechsler. As an Aperture book, it goes without saying that the reproductions are excellent. All in all, it is a book that most will want for their library. But what is so disappointing is that an extraordinary opportunity was ignored in favor of a (more or less) safely appealing book.

What were the alternatives? Lisette Model makes her proposition explicit in the first of seven guest essays: "If I were to print a book of snapshots, I would do it in its own spirit ... without introduction, ... without explanations, ... so that for once people would be free to discover for themselves."

Another possibility can be seen in the pieces by Steven Halpern and John A. Kouwenhoven. Halpern's



Henry Wessel, Jr., from **The Snapshot**.

“Souvenirs of Experience: The Victorian Studio Portrait and the Twentieth-Century Snapshot” compares these two genres and describes the current form as being as much a product of our speeding, informal and subjective period as of technological advances. He then points out that the snapshot is in the process of degenerating into as worn a stereotype as the Victorian portrait finally became, and concludes that we should expect it to soon go the way of the nineteenth-century portrait.

Kouwenhoven examines the subject from the opposite direction: What effect has the snapshot had upon the society of which it is a part? In excerpts from his Metropolitan Museum lecture, “Living in a Snapshot World,” he reminds us that “The cumulative effect of one hundred and thirty years of man’s participation in the process of running amuck with

cameras was the discovery that there was an amazing amount of significance, historical and otherwise, in a great many things that no one had ever seen until snapshots began forcing people to see them.” While this may not be a unique or entirely original thesis, it at least stimulates thought and (perhaps) discussion.

The Book That Might Have Been could probably have incorporated both of the above alternatives, first presenting examples of work by untrained photographers in an unencumbered way, then studying this class of picture as either cause or effect of a number of social phenomena, inquiring into its influence on all the arts, and, most important, trying to come to some understanding of it **for itself**, as the folk art of our age and more — as the first art which every member of a society has interacted with, been the subject of,

and practiced. At a time when there is such widespread general interest in the older forms of vernacular expression and intense interest among people in photography in the naive photo, it is regrettable that

Green and Aperture were unaware of, or unresponsive to, our needs. Not that we aren’t elated to see that Friedlander and Winogrand have been “discovered.” But in recent years Aperture has been becoming less and less responsible to its oft-avowed purpose: “to communicate with serious photographers and creative people everywhere.” Much of what the publisher is sending through the Rapoport presses these days is communicative only insofar as the artist has made it so; there seems to be too little effort to explicate, interpret, or put into perspective. What we get instead are shelf books and coffee-table books, gorgeous and useful, to be sure, but providing only part of what we require. This, of course, is in sharp contrast to the policy of the magazine in its early years, when it helped to fill the gap in the literature of the medium (the most obvious case in point is the series of experiments by Henry Holmes Smith, Minor White, et al., in reading images). Given the resources available to Aperture and its non profit, medium-service position, we have a right to expect more from this publisher than from others. Let’s hope that they can re-route some of the energy from the success they seem finally to be enjoying to some projects which, while perhaps not entirely secure as investments, might be even more substantial contributions to the field than they are already making.

— Charles Desmarais

Whoosh!



Mary Jones Lloyd, from the Windy City Open Photography Contest.

Wendy Snyder MacNeil, from **The Snapshot**.



The Windy City Open Photography Contest, Exchange National Bank/Chicago, Dec. 17 - Jan. 24.

The photographic event of the Chicago season is the Windy City Open Photography Contest. The contest, open to both amateurs and professionals (as defined by per cent income from photography), was sponsored jointly by the Exchange National Bank and the **Chicago Guide** magazine, a first for both institutions. The winners were featured in a handsome 11-page spread in **Chicago Guide**, along with a transcript of a conversation of the judges David Travis, Harry Bouras and Jack Lund. The work of the finalists was shown Dec. 17 through Jan. 24 on the first two floors at the Exchange Bank.

There were 113 prints by 82 photographers displayed in small groups in the bank’s slant-top cases. About one-third of the prints were color and two-thirds black and white. Slightly more than half the work was designated with a (P), meaning professional, while the rest was (A), or amateur work.

Though there was no theme to the show the problem of grouping the

prints in multiple mounts was addressed thematically by curator Joel Snyder. That is, whenever possible pictures were grouped together by what I’ll call “mini-themes.” Some of these themes were amusing, and some groups of pictures really strengthened each other, but some groups were fairly dull. My favorites were a group of animals (including a “recent turtle” in a museum display, a horse’s nose, and a cow with part of a man’s elbow), a group of bodies or parts of bodies lying down (here Debby Schaub’s black legs by a swimming pool is a striking image), and people with dogs (Bob Mader’s picture in this group is unusual in technique and point-of-view). Other groups were united around concepts like couples, people in enclosures, stripes, children, old people, walls and windows, multiple images, etc. You get the idea, I’m sure.

Prize money of \$2,000 went to eighteen photographers, nine in the amateur and nine in the professional category. Top professional winners were John Butsch with a bird’s-eye view of a park-district boxing match; Michael Marienthal with a photo of a lone black man in an official looking

