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# Necessary Fiction and the Quiet Victory of Sheer Persistence

by Sophie Hackett

"When I was a boy, my family took great care with our snapshots. We really planned them. We made compositions. We dressed up. We posed in front of expensive cars, homes that weren't ours. We borrowed dogs. Almost every family picture taken of us when I was young had a different borrowed dog in it ... It seemed a necessary fiction that the Avedons owned dogs. Looking

through our snapshots recently, I found eleven different dogs in one year in our family album. There we were in front of canopies and Packards with borrowed dogs, and always, forever, smiling. All of the photographs in our family album were built on some kind of lie about who we were, and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be."

- Richard Avedon<sup>1</sup>

Ubiquitous, candid and freighted with the weight of human experience, snapshots persist where many other photographic trends and technologies have come and gone. They appear on our fridges, walls, in our wallets and purses. We shrink-wrap and frame them, or shove them in shoeboxes under the bed. They are never far, and most importantly, they never cease to draw us in with their familiar emotional undertow. Necessary fictions indeed.

In the past decade or so, snapshots have become a visual shorthand of sorts. Browse the fiction shelves in any bookstore and you will find several book covers adorned with blurry, scalloped edged snapshots. Simple and familiar these informal poses and set-ups instantly evoke wider notions of human history, memory, nostalgia, loss, family, childhood, innocence, relationships. Rich terrain for novelists and artists alike.

The artists in *The Found and the Familiar: Snapshots in Contemporary Canadian Art* - Sara Angelucci, Barbara Astman, Dean Baldwin, Chris Curreri, Max Dean, Nancy Friedland, Clint Griffin, Vid Ingelevics, Germaine Koh, Adrienne Lai and Nina Levitt - use what at first seems like a postmodern strategy. They borrow and steal raw photographic imagery from family albums or garbage bins. But the work they create from these newly discovered images builds on, rather than takes apart, the visual and cultural codes of snapshots and the rituals and candid moments they capture.

As the example of the Avedon family reveals, snapshots are more than simply a record of what happened. Certainly, the camera records what we put before the lens, but what goes unacknowledged is that we are highly selective about what we deem worthy of a snapshot.

In his study of family snapshot albums, visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen notes that the camera does (and does not) come out at remarkably consistent times. Milestones (eg. first steps, first day of school, first car), birthdays, vacations and family get-togethers provide prime opportunities for snapshot-making, whereas funerals, sex and the workplace do not. There is a general absence of dirt, blood, disarray (with the exception of the chaos of Christmas morning), tears, anger and illness.<sup>2</sup>

Chalfen writes: "The snapshot rendition is best characterized as an expression of conspicuous success, personal progress, and general happiness."<sup>3</sup> In fact, he has calculated what portion of a person's life snapshots represent. He writes: "... if we estimate that an average snapshot collection consists of 3000 pictures (an estimate based on the total accumulation in albums, drawers, boxes, wallets, etc.), and the average shutter speed of cameras used to make these images was 1/100th of a second, we find that the total collection represents thirty seconds of accumulated life."<sup>4</sup> We photograph the lives we want, and the lives we want to be remembered having.

Dean Baldwin's mimicry in *Stolen Photograph Composites* (2002) indicates that the visual language of snapshots is something we all understand. His images are seamless digital recombinations of disparate elements from many found snapshots. Taken as compositions, they are plausible, familiar. Haven't we all seen snaps of children playing in a kiddie pool or of a relative sitting in a park with people milling in the background? Only the large scale of Baldwin's images and their presentation leave us to suspect that they may not have been pulled directly from a family album.

What is this visual language? What is it about these images that we already seem to know? And how is it that we readily build stories from their visual cues?

Snapshots are, on one level, a visual record of "the good life," how to "do it right." They document the moments that we, as a culture, agree are worthy of documentation and display. Chalfen explains: "Children witness patterns of success, the accumulation of significant material culture, and an array of appropriate role behaviours. Children internalize views of past moments of achievement and happiness, with the unspoken expectation that this pattern should be repeated. This agenda-setting function provides a model of life with moments to strive toward, to brag about, and, in turn, to display in a conspicuous pattern of home mode representation. In these ways, home mode imagery contributes to the formation of a world view and ideology."<sup>5</sup>

Postmodern theory would also have us believe that all forms of photographic representation are suspect, being based entirely on interpretation and subjectivity and relative truths. "Photography is never innocent, but framed by ways of representing that are always ideologically loaded," writes Tony Godfrey.<sup>6</sup> And yet, something about snapshots keeps pulling us into the picture; we grapple with their haunting familiarity and layered truths.

For the purposes of this exhibition, co-curator Jennifer Long and I have included artists who use found images, often anonymous, and/or images culled from their personal archives. We have widened our definition

of the snapshot to include not only the spontaneous images that aim to document the successes of life, but also other official images found in the family record, such as school portraits or passport photos. As viewers, our relationship to these other photographs is the same. We search them too for clues to character, events, emotion.

Snapshots are also generally made with hand-held cameras on 35mm film. We have again expanded our parameters to include works made from older source images, produced in the same spirit as contemporary snaps, like Max Dean's Babbitt daguerreotype and Nina Levitt's Alice Austen image from a glass-plate negative.

Max Dean is perhaps the artist that has best understood and exploited our relationship to snapshots. His mechanized installation *As Yet Untitled* (1992-95) is the definitive example of our attachment to snapshots. Due to prior exhibition commitments, we were not able to include the work here.

The work is composed of several clunky mechanical components: a robotic arm, shredder and conveyor belt, two small tables and a pair of metal hands, mounted on waist-high rods. The arm delicately selects one snapshot from a pile and pivots slowly to show it to you. There is a short pause and you must make a decision. Press on the hands and the snapshot will be placed in a stack with other photos, saved. Do nothing and the arm will feed the snapshot to the shredder, and the shreds will fall onto the conveyor belt that carries them off to a pile, to oblivion with the other unlucky snaps. The arm moves inexorably back to the first pile of snapshots and repeats the process.

Snapshots mean so much to us that it seems inconceivable to destroy them.

Lisa Gabrielle Mark writes: "Dean's work asks you to make a conscious choice to engage (or not), then watch the consequences unfold."<sup>7</sup> Watching Dean's machine shred snapshots can cause a physical reaction, flinching, turning away.

For *Avery Stranded (after Babbitt)* (2000), Dean bases the work on an 1853 daguerreotype made by Babbitt in which a man is stranded on a rock in the rapids above Niagara Falls for 20 hours. A rescue boat was finally able to reach the rock, and as Avery was climbing into the boat, he slipped and was carried over the falls. This outcome, however, is unknowable from the image itself. Dean reinstates the narrative of which the image is but one moment. As you step forward to view the piece, a motion detector built into the frame registers your presence and Avery appears on the rock. Once you step away, however, Avery disappears. We become not only witnesses, but responsible for his death, for his being forgotten. There is no way to avoid Avery's death. It must take place because we cannot stand forever in front of the image to keep him "alive."

For Dean Baldwin, the voyeurism involved in making *Stolen Photograph Composites* left him feeling guilty. In his next project, he took some of his own snapshots, left them in various public places, and documented the location. He hoped that people would stumble across them and take them home, giving back some of what he felt he had taken.

Germaine Koh certainly would have taken Baldwin up on his offer. Since 1992, she has been collecting snapshots that she finds on the street. In *Sightings* (1992-98), she turns these found snaps into postcards and sells them. On the back of each one, she has noted where and when she found it. It would seem controversial to profit from someone else's loss. At the same time, it seems a logical solution for these images unmoored from their contexts: put them back into circulation.

Joel Smith writes about *Sightings*: "To trace in imagination, a snapshot's progress through the stages of Koh's project ... is to witness an inanimate object's full life-cycle of possibilities, as it bears the brunt of desire, hope, clumsiness, indifference, wit, industry, curiosity and forgetfulness. No doubt a browser and a digital image archive can do many things to keep the past on life support, but they will never succeed in looking quite so human as a boot-scraped scrap of paper does, drifting across the windswept surface of the dustbin of history toward the quiet victory of sheer persistence." <sup>8</sup>

The practice of snapshot-making has persisted since the dawn of photography, a tendency aided in part by camera company advertising and social expectations that certain family events and rituals will be photographed. But it may also be due, in part, to how we as viewers look at snapshots.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides interesting clues for the snapshot's persistence as a medium. She writes: "Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."<sup>9</sup> Postmemory is the way, for example, a son could participate in and assume the memories of his parents and of events that occurred before his birth. These memories are "delayed, indirect, secondary" and snapshots play a large role in their creation and sustenance.<sup>10</sup>

The "imaginative investment and creation" Hirsch refers to is certainly at work in Vid Ingelevics's work *Places of Repose: Stories of Displacement* (1990) and later in his related installation *Alltagsgeschichten (some histories of everyday life)* (1996). For *Places of Repose*, Ingelevics papered second-hand bureaus manufactured in the postwar period with snapshots, portraits and documents from 1944-45, a time in which his mother and two aunts, refugees from Latvia, were interned in displaced persons camps in Southern Germany. The bureaus, denied their function as a place for clothes, now become places to file memories for safekeeping and for preservation. Ingelevics's attempt to visually represent this time in the women's lives is, and could only ever be, a partial account, his own version. In fact, he emphasizes this aspect. Blake Fitzpatrick writes: "In *Places of Repose*, images and texts are montaged, projected, cut and taped to the point that the process of reconstruction threatens the very intelligibility of the reconstructed text."<sup>11</sup>

While Hirsch deploys postmemory to describe memory transmission between a family's generations, her concept could be applied to how we look at any snapshot. When we look at a snapshot, whether we know the specifics of its inception or not, we draw from a well of our own experience of photographing and being photographed. We can imagine the circumstances in which a snapshot was made, place ourselves there even. We identify with the process; we know our own snapshots, have looked at those of others and made them ourselves.

Nancy Friedland digitally isolates arms, legs, and torsos from her class photos against colour-block backgrounds in her series *the pity of lost things* (2001-2002). From the gestures, the poses of the fragments she chose, we can deduce that the source photograph is one of those group shots taken of each class at the beginning of the school year. We can imagine the general composition and make-up of the photograph: thirty or so students, placed in rows, first row seated, the others standing, teacher at one side, a plaque propped in the front to identify the class. We can imagine being photographed in such a group. From this entry point into Friedland's images, we can see she is employing abstraction to relay the imperfect nature of memory. She highlights what gets lost, from pieces of clothing we grew out of to classmates we lost track of.

Adrienne Lai gives eloquent form to the idea of remembering. Her piece *Preserves* (1997) is a series of Mason jars filled with small stones, each with the fragment of a snapshot, her mother's face for instance, transferred onto it, and pickled with thyme. The stones grow mossy over time, the faces and memories associated with them slowly obscured. Lai's jars counter the idea that memories are hermetically sealed, to remain unchanged until we recall them next.

Sara Angelucci, in her series *Stillness* (2002), pairs details from black and white photographs from her family's archive with colour images from a recent trip to Italy, her ancestral land. The colour shots are of plants and flowers (her living, flourishing roots), market produce, trees, buildings. They are vivid, lush, in contrast to the old, black and white photographs. The visual reality of Angelucci's diptychs is a middle ground, a still point, a resonance across generations and geography, where her past and her present coexist.

In the series *Bicycle Race* (2002), Chris Curreri stitches over a face in a crowd watching a bicycle race in the early 1930s, an image he found in the Glenbow Museum archives. The stitches are a veil of history, a veneer, only lightly obscuring the features, representing what we could never know from the subjects: what that moment meant for them. The meticulous stitching also draws our attention to the act of viewing, and gives the image materiality, lifting it from two-dimensionality. To think of Curreri's needle repeatedly piercing the surface of the images is to wince a little. It is slowly, deliberately violent, like a spider trapping a fly, embalming it in its thread.

Barbara Astman's works in the exhibition, made at the beginning of her career in the early 1970s, are quirky, crafty representations. She put together materials that were decidedly not fine art to create books and wall, firmly declaring that anything can be put to art's purposes. In *Carol Preparing for Bed* (1973), Astman uses a series of snapshots to cinematic effect. The subject, her sister going to bed, stands in contrast to the momentous, significant occasions that usually make the cut as snapshot worthy. This is consistent with the feminism of the time, whereby the personal, the everyday, the vernacular were all being reexamined, and new versions were actively being concocted. Astman's *Family Photo Album* (1974) is just that, a collection of family snaps, but it feels more like a zine than an album. She has included a narrow selection of images to photocopy, colour in, laminate and bind together, her idiosyncratic take on a family "bible."

In Clint Griffin's work, he does what most of us would find unthinkable. Working with actual found snapshots, he cuts them, draws on them, peels away their emulsion to create new compositions. Rather than draw figures or other objects, he uses the photographic representations instead, representations we more easily relate to. The gestural, raw quality of his mixed media works disturbs the calm reflecting pool of photographs made to document the good times. They now represent a less certain, more troubled existence, one filled with striving, mistakes, longing and stasis.

While the works described above build on what we know of snapshots, there is one exception: Nina Levitt's work *Submerged (for Alice Austen)* (1991-92). Levitt has appropriated an image and broken it apart to uncover what it is we think we know about looking at photographs. Employing a clear postmodern strategy, she deconstructs the image and brings to the surface another meaning and another possible history. The source image was made by Staten Island resident, Alice Austen, an avid photographer who documented her family and friends. However, because these were her main subjects, she was relegated to the status of amateur.

Levitt found the image in a book and became enthralled with it as a symbol of what has been forgotten, overlooked. Her impulses are akin to those of the other ten artists as she reinvests the found with new

significance, reclaims and recontextualizes history to show us something about the world at large, in this case, proof of lesbian lives lived. Levitt recasts so-called amateur photography by questioning the status of one such amateur and declares the amateur/professional distinction irrelevant.

Joel Smith declares early on in his article "The Snapshot's Museum Afterlife": "Not unlike the skipping, popping, long-playing vinyl record, an object of fetishistic nostalgia among listeners raised on compact discs, the snapshot with its blurs and thumbprints is taking shape as the most potent emblem of a dying medium's historicity."<sup>12</sup> Many have forecast the snapshot's demise, assuming that our taste for the new, digital technologies will overtake our love of the analog. Smith doesn't buy it (see his description of Koh's work above).

What these doomsdayers miss is that it is not the snapshot itself that we love, but what we hope it can tell us. To go back to Avedon: some kind of lie about who we are, some kind of truth about who we want to be. It turns out, we need fiction. Snapshots are our most accessible and reliable delivery mechanism.

Art is also fiction; it also presents versions of our worlds, our realities, lies and truths. Where snapshots are concerned, photography, in the contemporary fine art context, has an advantage over other media for this reconsideration of the snapshot's role in our lives. The parallels in their production, if not their intentions, make for an easy "conversation." While artists are the interpreters of this visual material, the fact remains that amateur photographers have made and continue to make millions of photographs. Because of them, this exhibition exists. And, well, it seemed to us as curators that it only made sense to keep it all in the family.

end notes:

<sup>1</sup> Richard Avedon, "Borrowed Dogs," in Ben Sonnenberg, ed., *Performance and Reality: Essays from Grand Street* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989): p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987): pp. 74-92.

<sup>3</sup> Chalfen: p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Chalfen: p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Chalfen: p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998): p. 301.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Gabrielle Mark, "Button pusher," *Canadian Art*, spring 2001, vol. 18, no.1, pp. 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Joel Smith, "The Snapshot's Museum Afterlife," *Afterimage*, September 2001, at <[www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com)>: p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: photography, narrative and postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997): p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch: p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Blake Fitzpatrick, "An Artist's Archive," in *Alltagsgeschichten (some histories of everyday life)* (Toronto: Toronto Photographers Workshop and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1996): p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Smith: pp. 1-2.

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curators:

Sophie Hackett is a writer, independent curator and arts administrator. She holds a BFA in photography from the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design. Her writing has been published in *Lola*, *Saturday Night* magazine, *Xtra!*, *C* magazine, *Canadian Art* and *Prefix Photo*.

Jennifer Long is a photographer and curator who studied photographic arts at Ryerson University. In November 2002, her most recent work, *Doubt*, is on exhibit at Luft Gallery in Toronto. She is the Education Coordinator at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography.

participating artists:

Sara Angelucci, born in Hamilton, Ontario, is a photo and video artist living in Toronto. She completed her BFA at the University of Guelph and her MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design. She has exhibited her photography across Canada including exhibitions at *Le Mois de la Photo* in Montreal and solo shows at *Ace Art* in Winnipeg, *Gallery TPW* and the *Macdonald Stewart Art Centre*. Angelucci's videos have been screened across Canada and have been included in festivals in Europe and Hong Kong. She is currently the Director of *Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography* in Toronto and is represented by the *Wynick/Tuck Gallery*.

Barbara Astman has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in Canada and internationally since the early 1970s, and has work in public collections in Canada, the United States and Europe. She has been on faculty at the *Ontario College of Art & Design* since 1975 where she is a Professor in the Faculty of Art. She is represented by the *Jane Corkin Gallery* in Toronto, where her most recent body of work, *Paris Postcards*, was exhibited in the fall of 2002.

Dean Baldwin, raised in Shelburne, Ontario, currently lives and works in Toronto where he completed his BFA at York University in 1997. Currently, he is completing his Master's Degree at Concordia University in Montreal, and working for the *Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation* in Toronto. He has exhibited in Canada since 1996 with international stints in both Japan and the former Yugoslavia. He prefers his eggs over easy with brown toast.

Chris Curreri is a recent graduate of the Image Arts Program at Ryerson University who also obtained a Foundation Studies Diploma from the Ontario College of Art & Design. At OCAD, he was awarded the Christopher and Mary Pratt Tuition Scholarship and while at Ryerson he won the Robert Gooblar Memorial Award. He works and lives in Toronto and is currently represented by the Peak Gallery, Toronto.

Max Dean was born in Leeds, England and immigrated to Canada in 1952. He is known for his performance/sculpture/installation-based works, which often invite the active participation of the viewer. His work has been included in *dAPERTutto* at the Venice Biennale in 1999 and *Platea dell'umanita* at the Venice Biennale in 2001. Recent museum exhibitions include *Quality Control*, Site Gallery, Sheffield, England; *Canadian Stories*, Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto; *Voici, 100 years of contemporary art*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; *The Fifth Element*, Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, and *Iconoclash* at ZKM, Karlsruhe. He is represented by Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto.

Nancy Friedland is a photo-based artist who lives and works in Toronto. After studying photography at the Ontario College of Art & Design, she completed her MFA at the Rochester Institute of Technology as a Sir Edmund Walker Scholar. Her most recent solo show entitled *Sixes and Sevens* (2001) focused on the family photograph and how it becomes invested with narrative and meaning. She is represented by the Katharine Mulherin Gallery in Toronto.

Clint Griffin is known for trolling through the discards of photo developing labs. His fused photo stacks have developed into large-scale mixed media tableaux that incorporate fragments of snapshots.

**Vid Ingelevics's** work as an artist (and as a curator and writer) could be said to be concerned with the exploration of two broad areas that, at times, have overlapped for him -- photography's mediating role in our understanding of the past and in the nature of the built form we experience as urban dwellers. His projects have thus moved from exploring the relationship between commercial studio photography and the work of museum photographers in one case to studying a Toronto apartment building as an accumulation of views from its own balconies in another. His artwork has been presented in exhibitions across Canada and in Europe including The Power Plant, Toronto; Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa; the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England; and the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland. My curatorial projects have specifically focused on considering the relationship between photography, the archive and public museums and have been presented at such institutions as the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg; Musée d'art de Joliette, Joliette; Presentation House, Vancouver; the Photographer's Gallery, London, England; and the Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden. Reviews and photography-related essays he has written have appeared in *Blackflash*; *Canadian Art*; *C*; *Alphabet City* and *Visual Resources: The Journal of Visual Documentation*.

Germaine Koh is a visual artist and curator of no fixed address. She has recently had solo exhibitions at McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, the Contemporary Art Gallery and Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver, Plug In ICA in Winnipeg and the British Museum in London. This past year, her work was included in programs at The Power Plant in Toronto, MUCA-Roma in Mexico City and Kunstradio in Vienna.

Adrienne Lai is a writer and photographer based in Vancouver. She received her Master's Degree in Fine Arts from the University of California, Irvine in

2001 and currently teaches at the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design.

Nina Levitt is an artist whose work primarily appropriates images of transgressive women from photographs, films and television. In particular, she is interested in examining how lesbians have been imaged and imagined in popular culture. Her recent work includes the video installation *Gravity* (part of the travelling exhibition *The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2001-2003) and a collaborative new media installation *Little Breeze* about women spys (part of *Finding Camp X: Contemporary Considerations of an Enigma*, at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, 2002). Since 1997, she has been teaching in the School of Image Arts New Media program at Ryerson University.