THE SNAPSHOT,

UNDER THE INTERVENTION OF FLIES ON THE WALL

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Fig. 1. Ryan McGinley, *Dakota Hair*, 2004**.**

Following the mass-marketed introduction of the first hand-held Kodak camera to popular culture in the late 19th century—and the subsequent birth of the "amateur" aesthetic—photography became synonymous with *immediacy*. Significant exhibitions such as the Museum of Modern Art's, *The American Snapshot* (1944), *The Family of Man* (1955), and *New Documents* (1967) featured and, in effect, canonized images created by amateurs and others using hand-held cameras. Art historians such as Geoffrey Batchen, Michel Frizot, and Mary Warner Marien have recognized problematic assumptions of an essentially "fine-art" history of photography, and have argued for an expanded canon that includes a diverse field of practices, including the "snapshot" and the "snapshot aesthetic." As James Elkins's recent text *Photography Theory* reflects, art history scholars are divided about the merits of maintaining boundaries between "high art" and vernacular practices.[1] Through investigation of the influence of the "snapshot aesthetic" upon "fine-art" practice, the snapshot's position within photography's history has been secured – but on the merits of the snapshot's aesthetic influence only.[2]

A group of contemporary photographers, including Ryan McGinley, have begun to examine assumptions of the snapshot's immediacy and conventions of its aesthetic.

[1] See James Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[2] The snapshot and its aesthetic are at the center of current photography-history discourses. These discussions aim to satisfy objections to the master-narrative of the history of art by directing attention to the rich visual culture and social history that thrives within popular culture and often directly inspires the traditionally described "high arts." Recent exhibitions of vernacular photography which appeared at the Newark Museum in New Jersey (2008), the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (2007), the International Center for Photography in New York City (2005), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art **(**1998) have highlighted the social and cultural dimensions of the snapshot, and have lobbied for its inclusion in our historical narratives. For a range of arguments about the value and merits of adding the vernacular snapshot to our photo histories, please see: Geoffrey Batchen, ed., *Afterimage* [special issue on vernacular photography] 29, no. 6 (2002).

McGinley's work in particular deconstructs the conventions of the snapshot, and of the medium itself, while readjusting these codes conceptually. This paper will examine McGinley's evaluations of the snapshot's relationship to "the real," after first providing an historical trajectory of the snapshot's relation to "fine-art" practice.

* * *

> *It is not clear why, once it had been 'liberated,' the image would not be entitled to lie. No doubt this may even be seen as one of its vital functions, and it is naïve to think it was going to liberate itself to bring about truth.... The truth is that the liberation of the image inclines it quite naturally to simulation, and that is where it finds its true freedom. Though we may not wish to acknowledge this, we have nonetheless to accept the evidence: the image…is not attached to any principle of truth or reality.*
>
> Jean Baudrillard[3]

The Founding of the Snapshot Aesthetic

"You press the button—we do the rest," was not only the Eastman Kodak Company's slogan, but also a defining signifier of Kodak's invention of a hybrid mixture of mass production, distribution, and marketing. By replacing the cumbersome glass plate negatives of antiquarian photographic practices with prepackaged roll film, and appealing to America's growing desire for self-made images, the Eastman Kodak Company became an internationally recognized brand after the announcement of the Kodak #1 in 1888.[4]

As a small hand-held box camera, the Kodak #1 featured a large depth of field, a

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 60.

[4] Dan Meinwald, "Picture Perfect: The Selling of the Kodak Image," *Frame/Work* 1, no. 2 (1987): 15.

Illustrations

Fig 2.
Photographer Unknown,
Unititled, c. 1888.

Fig 3.
Photographer Unknown,
Unititled, c. 1950.

Fig 4.
Lisette Model,
Broadway Singer, Metropolitan Café, New York, c. 1940.

Fig 5.
Diane Arbus,
A young man in curlers at home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C., 1966.

short exposure time of about 1/25 of a second, 100 sequential exposures, and the opportunity to mail the camera back to Kodak and receive in return one's set of 2 ½"-diameter prints [Fig. 2].[5] By separating the picture-taking from the processing, printing, and reloading procedures, the Eastman Kodak Company freed their consumers from learning tedious chemical techniques and provided them with more time to enjoy button-release picture-taking—the new American hobby. Moreover, Kodak's cameras institutionalized the fraction-of-a-second exposure, and helped establish it as a normative expectation of the medium.

The growing democratization of the camera, following the release of the Brownie in 1900, resulted in the expanding photographic literacy of mass culture that spread across America. As Kodak's innovative marketing matured from the selling of a product to the promotion of a lifestyle, the camera served not only as a tool for the untrained draftsman, but as a cure to counteract the imperfections of memory, and a new means of self-definition within the emergent culture of the commodity. By the 1930s, American women were cast as the wardens of family records and memories, and owning and using a Kodak became a familial obligation.[6] Amateur photographers created a flood of casual and spontaneous photographs of their lives during the early 20th century. Their images of family holidays, significant others, and vacations were coined as "snap shots"—a reference to the impulsive method of photographing without aim. These images documented immediate slices of life and were made—frequently without artistic intentions—as personal documents to store and save memories. They were heralded for their ability to capture immediate slices of life which were perceived as more realistic

[5] For a technical history of the camera's evolution, please see: Brian Cole and Paul Gates, *The Snapshot Photograph: The Rise of Popular Photography 1888-1939* (London: Ash and Grant, 1977).

[6] Meinwald, 16.

then the type of formal portraits which were often created by professional studio photographers. Due to the amount of control that was exchanged for convenience, an amateur "accidental aesthetic" emerged. Due to the difficulty of planning compositions through the small viewfinder, subjects were frequently directly centered or else they had "amputated" limbs; as a result of Kodak's advice to shoot photographs outside on sunny days—with the photographer standing between the sun and his subject, images bore photographers' cast shadows; and the heightened sensitivity of the film and the spring-loaded aperture resulted in abnormally arrested motions. As photography gained popularity, so did the preference for immediate, candid, and raw glimpses of time: signature qualities of the "snapshot aesthetic."

The snapshot's ability to represent minute slices of time in the early 20th century "deepened the association between informality and photographic truth,"[7] and photojournalists in the 1930s frequently appropriated the look of the amateur photographers' snapshots in response to the popular trend to imitate the spontaneous appearance made prevalent by hand-held camera users. This style of images was widely accepted as being private, truthful, and "beyond artifice"[8]—observations which imply that stilled images of time represent a truthful representation of the appearance objects in a split second of time.[9]

[7] Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2002), 170.

[8] Marien, 241.

[9] Scholars, such as Thierry de Duve, have disputed this assumption. See Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 113-25.

Unable to restrain the changes in visual language that the snapshot was creating in 1944 the Museum of Modern Art displayed a range of amateur photographs dating from 1888 to 1944 in *The American Snapshot: An Exhibition of the Folk Art of the Camera*. This exhibition consisted of 200 enlargements of award-wining photographs drawn from the Eastman Kodak's collection.[10] This event marks the inauguration of the snapshot into the fine-art institution, yet *The American Snapshot's* exhibition catalog sustained misguided presumptions regarding the "truthful" nature of snapshot photography. Photography department Director William D. Morgan, argued that:

> "The snapshot has become, in truth, a folk art, spontaneous, almost effortless, yet deeply expressive. It is an honest art, partly because it doesn't occur to the average snapshooter to look beyond reality, partly because the natural domain of the camera is in the world of things as they are, and partly because it is simply more trouble to make an untrue picture than a true picture."[11]

This statement by Morgan completely overlooked three critical implications with which the photographic medium and the snapshot genre have been burdened.

First of all, the categorical valuation presumed by defining the photographs as belonging to "a folk art"—or popular art—are prompted by differentiating the untrained

[10] Eastman Kodak's collection was heavily fueled by submissions calls for its popular consumer-based competitions.

[11] Morgan, William D., *The American Snapshot: An Exhibition of the Folk Art of the Camera* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944).

amateur from the skill of the fine-art photographer.[12] This implication is itself the result of the avant-garde's agenda to define itself through negation. Throughout the history of the avant-garde viewers are reaffirmed: Art is an elevated form of culture; Art is not a product of popular culture; popular culture creates a different form of art due to its bedding of the folk. This distinction is contradictory, since the MoMA exhibition marks the snapshots' canonization and acceptance by a Modern fine-art institution.

As well, the desire to distinguish between an oppositional set of fine-art and amateur photographic practices is implied by Morgan's statement that the images included are "almost effortless," and that "it doesn't occur to the snap shooter to look beyond reality." By making the claim that the photographers who made the snapshots in this exhibition were naïve to the artistic and social world, as well as to their own ability to look beyond mimetic aspirations, denies the snapshot traditional artistic qualities: personal expression, social/aesthetic intent, and authorship by a self-conscious individual. Such a statement also ignores the amateur and self-trained status of the majority of 19th century photographic practitioners and 20th century photographers, while contradicting MoMA's later canonization of figures such as the self-trained French photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue. In actuality, since the turn of the century, America has been saturated with media presence; the rapid success of Kodak—a product itself of mass consumer culture—is proof of the awareness of a consumer consciousness. As the

[12] For example, fine-art photographers at the turn of the century were convinced that the increase of camera usage within popular culture would threaten their hard-won and delicate foothold within the fine-arts. Alfred Stieglitz one of the forefront antagonists of photographs made with the hand-held camera, allowed this popular photography to be the scapegoat for the lag of photography's acceptance in the avant-garde art societies. To distinguish the images of avant-garde photographers from "every Tom, Dick, and Harry [who could] without trouble, learn how to get something or other on a sensitive plate," Stieglitz founded the Photo-Secession in 1902—in the name of *artistic progress*. See Alfred Steiglitz, "The Hand Camera–Its Present Importance," in *Steiglitz on Photography: His selected Essays and Notes*, edited by Richard Whelan. (New York: Aperture Foundation Inc., 2000).

contemporary curator Douglas R. Nickel observes:

> "With the resulting wholesale commodification of daily life […] the means by which people regarded their own histories also changed; the way lives were lived became entangled in the way lives were now represented. A modern society of the spectacle was taking shape."[13]

For instance, *Untitled* [Fig. 3] from the 1950s recalls Situationist Guy Debord's turn of phrase: "society of spectacle,"[14] the subject of the photograph displays an understanding of American culture's ideals of feminine beauty. Informed by representations in popular media, the young woman depicted has chosen to pose in emulation and enjoyment her simulated appearance to the presence of the popular movie star.[15]

Encompassing both of these misconceptions is the third striking implication by Morgan: the assumption that photographs innately tell the *truth*. Through his inaccurate determination that snapshots depict "an honest reality," and that "the domain of the camera is in the world of things as they are," Morgan postulates that since the photographers in this exhibition are not professionals they would be unfamiliar with the creation of photographic fallacies of reality. This erroneous belief supports the most popular misconception in the entire history of photography—that of the "objective retina." In spite of identifying the special type of communication working behind the snapshot image—and in some cases in *response* to these cultural myths—it is frequently assumed that the photographic image *is* the world instead of its *representation*. (I will return to this problem in the second part of this paper.)

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[13] Douglas R., Nickel, *Snapshots: the Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998, 11.

[14] For more insights regarding the social consciousness changes that occur under the influence of popular media, see Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle* (Oakland: AKPress, 2006).

[15] Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Series* (1980-1990) captures a similar emulation, but uses it to critique the sexual stereotypes that mass media presents.

Responding to *The American Snapshot*, a generation of artists—including Alexey Brodovitch, Sid Grossman, and Lisette Model—broke traditional rules of fine-art photography with their preferences for ambient light, out-of-focus forms, subjective perspective, off kilter compositions, and tilted horizons—thus accepting the key qualities that once defined "bad photographs."[16]

In one of her well-known photographs, *Broadway Singer, Metropolitan Café, New York* [Fig. 4], Model extemporarily captured an unposed female performer. Here, the singer's mouth hangs widely in mid-note, the harsh lighting of the café appears to distort her face, and the low perspective represents the background wall as a harsh diagonal. Lisette Model asserts:

> "I am a passionate lover of the snapshot, because of all photographic images it comes closest to truth…. A snapshot is not a *performance.* It has no pretence or ambition. It is something that happens to the taker rather than his performing it. Innocence is the quintessence of the snapshot." [17]

In 1955, the Museum of Modern Art featured another important exhibition, *The Family of Man,* curated by Edward Steichen. This display of social realism included iconic American images and showed a temporary abandonment of the avant-garde in order to pronounce a social message of human unity. This exhibition also implied that the photographic medium had reached a state of universal accessibly. [18]

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[16] Sarah Greenough et al., *The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978* (Princeton: National Gallery of Art, 2007), 175.

[17] Green, 6.

[18] See Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," in *Mythologies*, ed. Annette Lavens (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) for a critique of the photographic presumptions of "universality" that this exhibition takes.

That same year, Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank (a student of Brodovitch's) began a series of road trips across the United States, using his hand-held camera to capture a portrait of American society and culture. Frank's series of spontaneous, candid snapshots portrayed an improvisational documentary of a disillusioned post-World War II America. Due to his employment of the "snapshot aesthetic," his photographs were widely regarded as authentic. Serving as a brutal contradiction to the optimism of Steichen's *Family of Man*, this series was historically contextualized by the anti-authoritarian Beatnik artistic movement and was published in book form as *The Americans* in 1958, with a preface by Jack Kerouac—an author whose own writings portrayed a similar interest in the authenticity of the improvisational and spontaneous.[19]

An increasing interest in street photography during the subsequent decade was canonized by curator John Szarkowski in the *New Documents* exhibition at MoMA in 1967. This influential exhibition featured the "social landscape" documentary photographs of Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, which defined the marginalized, anti-establishment aesthetic of the snapshot as qualities of a new avant-garde.

Making use of the non-evasive nature of the hand-held camera, Diane Arbus (a student of Lisette Model) documented the private lives of her socially peculiar subjects. Commenting on her technique's perceived sincerity and revelationary capacity, Arbus stated:

> "It's important to take bad pictures. It's the bad ones that have to

[19] See Robert Frank, *The Americans*, (New York: Grossman, 1969).

> do with what you've never done before. They can make you recognize something you hadn't seen in a way that will make you recognize it when you see it again."[20]

Arbus's images, such as *A young man in curlers at home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C.* [Fig. 5], were not intended to be works of fine-art, but documentation of lives previously unseen. Her use of the "snapshot aesthetic" lent a quality of genuineness to her psychologically loaded images, and conveyed a humanistic sensitivity to the vulnerable condition of being photographed.

In the 1970s, Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, and Wolfgang Tillmans used the aesthetics of the vernacular as both a method to communicate authenticity and as a technique to convey emotional discretion. They turned to the private lives of themselves and their friends to expose their lifestyles within homosexual and punk subcultures through explicit photographs of violence, drug use, and sex. Nan Goldin argues that the accidental thrust of the "snapshot aesthetic" allows her to capture a "truth": "I've tried to maintain a naïveté all these years, so that I don't become too conscious of the elements that work, so that I don't lose the emotional connection."[21]

A Contemporary Interrogation of the Snapshot: The Work of Ryan McGinley

Overturning the sensibilities of their previous generations, artists at the turn of the 21st century—including Phillip Lorca diCorcia, Ryan McGinley, and Jeff Wall—have effectively *staged* the "snapshot aesthetic" to evoke viewers' faith in the type of authenticity associated with vernacular imagery. In particular, McGinley's management

[20] Doon Arbus, ed., *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*, [Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition] (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1997), 10.
[21] Nan Goldin, ed., *Nan Goldin: I'll Be Your Mirror* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 453.

of the aesthetic of the snapshot allows him to nourish the belief that truth is an essential quality of the instantaneous-exposure "snapshot" photograph.

McGinley's photographic oeuvre depicts the myth surrounding a group of sexy, habitually naked, 20-somethings who are seen adeptly traveling through life in pursuit of pleasure and the new bohemian lifestyle. His series "I Know Where the Summer Goes" appears as a Kerouac-ian *On the Road* narrative, where an intimate group of friends is portrayed traveling across America in cars—pausing only to enjoy partying with fireworks, roller skating, and tumbling down hills of sand. By blissfully editing out all the complicated and dour aspects of his characters' lives, the series documents surreal existences that have been freed from all worries and constraints. In discussing his photographic mythos, McGinley offers: "They are a world that doesn't exist. A fantasy. Freedom is real. There are no rules. The life I wish I was living."[22]

Citing the influence of Clark's 1995 film *Kids,* McGinley describes his own work as *pseudo*-documentary. "It has documentary qualities," McGinley tells the *New York Times,* "but at the same time it's scripted and people have their lines."[23] At the Whitney Museum of American Art—where McGinley had a solo exhibition in early 2003—he described the transition he took from the snapshot to the *constructed snapshot aesthetic*:

> "When I first started making images […] it was all documentary. It was completely what was going on. Nothing was set up. It was like that idea of a fly on the wall. But then I got to this point where I

[22] Peter Gefter, "A Young Man With an Eye and Friends Up a Tree," *New York Times,* May 6, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html.

[23] Ibid.

> couldn't wait for the pictures to happen anymore. I was wasting time, and so I started making pictures happen."[24]

Surpassing the type of staging accomplished by 19th century photographer Alexander Gardner, McGinley's working method has developed towards a nearly cinematographic level in the amount of control that he extorts through his careful selection of models, lighting, and setting.[25]

After providing his models with directions, McGinley releases his subjects to improvise within a designed situation and proceeds to photograph them interacting with each other according to the "script." Shooting continuously, McGinley records the performance in a process that directly opposes Henri Cartier-Bresson's theory of "the decisive moment," obtaining results that are closer in relation to the spontaneously captured images of the amateur photographer.[26] Rather then relying on intuition alone and capturing only a few images, McGinley shoots 20-30 rolls of film a day. Before his large-scale prints are ready to display, he undertakes an extensive editing process to skillfully select only the images that portray his myth correctly. Guiding his viewer's projections

[24] Ryan McGinley, "Conversations on Art" (discussion at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a with Larry Clark and Sylvia Wolf on March 25, 2003) in Ryan McGinley, *Ryan McGinley* (New York: Flasher Factory, 2004), 4.

[25] In *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter* (1863), Alexander Gardner notoriously accepted artistic license to move a dead body to create a more emotionally potent image. (see Library of Congress, "Case of the Moved Body," *American Memory*, www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwpcam/cwcam3.html and William A. Frassinito, *Gettysburg; A Journey in Time*, (New York: New York, 1975)).

[26] Henri Cartier-Bresson's theory of "the decisive moment" was conceptualized to further contra-distinct the process of the skilled photographer from that of the trigger-happy photographer. The concept of "the decisive moment" emphasized the photographer's disciplined patience and heightened awareness of his intentions by introducing the prospect that one can develop an instinct to simultaneously identify—in a fraction of a second—not only the significance of an event, but also the precise organization of expressive formal qualities that are required to effectively communicate one's ideas. See Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The World of Henri Cartier-Bresson* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1968).

of a temporal narrative, his exhibitions construct an enveloping documentary of experiences.

Dakota Hair (2004) [Fig. 1] is one image from such myth. Photographed during one of McGinley's cross-country road trips, this image is an instantaneous depiction of a young woman sipping out of a styrofoam cup with her hair lashing out in front of her as she sits in the bed of a truck. The background is represented briefly by a smear of motion behind her.

Like any snapshot created since 1888, *Dakota Hair* invites its viewers to imagine a narrative surrounding the image, and to place the picture in an imaginative continuum of time. This image seems to be shot during a pleasurable road trip with friends. The glimpse of mountains among the flat and sparse landscape suggests the romantic wanderings of the Southwest. The young woman had perhaps recently convinced her friends in the cab to stop for a pit-stop at an anonymous countryside fuel station where she bought a soda and some snacks. Back on the road, she drinks the cold soda down after jumping into the back of the truck and striping off her shirt to allow the warm sun—implied by the bright, saturated colors which fill the frame—to soak into her young skin. Riding backwards down the open road, her eyes nearly closed, she appears filled with a great sense of abandon.

Relying upon his viewer's familiarity with snapshots, McGinley's appropriations of the spontaneous aesthetics of the untrained, amateur photographer are presented in this careful simulation of the diarist image. Intently, he accesses this vernacular vocabulary—informed by nearly 120 years of amateur photography—to create a quality

of the personal, the intimate, the object of human consideration. In *Dakota Hair,* his subject is seemingly unaware of the camera. Her body and eyes are focused elsewhere, preoccupied in the informal act of drinking—the antithesis of a traditional formal studio portrait. The unconventional setting of the back of a truck and the encompassing out-of-focus background build onto the aura of informality that gives the overall image an unintentional appearance. By inviting the historical faith of the spontaneous snapshot these images appear authentic and ingenuous. Patrons of his work are able to buy into the carefree, hipster-without-strings icon that *exists* out there—for his photographs present evidence.

In an interview at the opening of the exhibition *Celebrate Life*, in Amsterdam, McGinley's gallery dealer Agnès Troublé declared, "I think he is taking pictures of his own life; his own friends. It is not theater. *It's real things that happen in their life.* I love how he is talking about young people; about the beauty of youth."[27] This response by Troublé exemplifies the pervasive nature of the snapshot aesthetic's perceived authenticity. Troublé also reveals the sophistication of McGinley's appropriation of this aesthetic, and the level at which his viewers desire to believe in the version of reality he has created.

Since its discovery, photography has satisfied the desire for a "neutral" representation due to the fact that the camera's images seem to be extracted directly from the world. Identified by post-structuralist philosopher Roland Barthes as "*that-has-been,*" the photographic image requires that whatever has been photographed—its

[27] Wesselhaaxman. "Ryan McGinley - Celebrate life – FOAM Amsterdam," *Youtube* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xXw5m9ow7Y&feature=related [emphasis added].

referent—has at one time found itself in front of the lens, and thereby has existed.[28] Yet, the history of photography is stippled with examples of photographers who have responded to the assumption of an objective photographic reality, and who have chosen to activate this quality to modify truths.[29] This ability occurs in the paradox Barthes describes that results from the combination of the *denoted* message (the thing represented) and the *connoted* message (the additional meaning which communicates through the style of reproduction).[30] Due to the belief that the photograph is "professing to be a mechanical analogue of reality," it has, for too long, been received as a special type of image that functions as "a message without a code."[31] Thus, the photographic image appears as an automatic/unmediated *graphos* authored by reality itself. This concept is frequently married to the photograph, and many viewers have rarely approached photographic images with an awareness of this paradox.

Aptly aware of the implications of reality that he creates, McGinley's photographs offer a response to Barthes's identification of the duality of messages by activating the codes that exist beneath the photographic image and providing an answer to

[28] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrer, Staus and Giroux, 1982): 76-77.

[29] Examples of this interest include: William Talbot's *Lace* (c. 1840), one of the earliest examples of an intentional photographic lie which represents a swatch of black lace as white; Hippolyte Bayard's *Le Noye [Self-portrait as a Drowned Man]* (1840), which distorts truth by claiming that the photographic document proves the photographer's suicide (see Geoffrey Batchen, "Le Noye," in *Burning With Desire* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999]: 157-173); Alexander Gardner's *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter* (1863), (see footnote 23); and Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), which constructs a fictional story (emphasized by its caption) for a posed image produced for the political interests of the Farm Security Administration (see Roger Sprague, "Migrant Mother: the Picture," *Migrant Mother: The story as told by her grandson*, http://www.migrantgrandson.com).

[30] Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrer, Straus, and Giroux, 1982), 197.

[31] Ibid.

Barthes's inquiry of how "the photographic can be at once 'objective' and 'invested,' natural and cultural."[32] Whereas many previous photographers merely *modified* reality, McGinley's images create a "real," and challenge the cultural systems of connotations that exist in the "snapshot aesthetic." Through his playful awareness of the implications drawn by the appropriation of this aesthetic, McGinley's work examines, interrogates, subverts, and up-ends the snapshot aesthetic—taking with it the most fundamental ideas regarding the photographic medium. By rendering discernible the imperceptible messages behind the cultural understanding of the photograph, McGinley's intervention onto the documentary image and the snapshot aesthetic provides an opportunity to discuss the hidden—yet active— structures that lay behind the photographic image as part of his artistic concept.

McGinley's direct response and careful construction of photographic simulations illustrate the statement by philosopher Jean Baudrillard which opened this paper: "though we may not wish to acknowledge this, we have nonetheless to accept the evidence: the image...is not attached to any principle of truth or reality."[33] Both artist and philosopher are concerned with revealing the simulated reality beneath the image—but whereas Baudrillard is troubled that the imitation has replaced reality, McGinley is enchanted by the possibility of creating alternative versions of the "real." Existing in the age of Webcam documentaries, reality tv, and virtual reality video games, McGinley's photographs express our contemporary era's fascination with replicated realities depicted

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[32] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 199.

[33] Baudrillard, 60.

in recent films such as *American Splendor* and *The Blair Witch Project*, and television shows like *American Idol* and *The Bachelor*. As James Caryn states in an article on new cinematic realism: "They don't create the illusion of living in the real world but of watching 'The Real World.' Constantly reminding viewers they're watching something as it's being taped can, in our camera-saturated culture, seem the most realistic approach of all."[34]

In the early 21st century, the technological progressions that have transpired between the introduction of the Brownie camera and the digital Iphone camera have prompted a greater consciousness of the plasticity of photographic "objectivity." As McGinley's oeuvre displays, the snapshot's aesthetic is no longer an exclusive language of the vernacular, but a communicative typology and set of expectations that has found interrogation in fine-art practice as a means to explore current fascinations with simulated realities.

[34] Caryn James, "FILM; The New Cinematic Realism," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2003 http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/05/movies/05JAME.html.

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