That Kodak Moment
Picturing the New York Fairs
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That Kodak Moment: Picturing the New York Fairs has been organized by Louise Weinberg, Registrar, Archives Manager and Curator, Queens Museum. This exhibition is supported in part by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

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PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE FAIRS

From Weegee to Margaret Bourke-White, professional photographers have long been entranced with the spectacle and allure of World’s Fairs and expositions. The Eastman Kodak Pavilion figured prominently in both the 1939 and 1964 New York fairs, making the science of picture-taking accessible and relatively inexpensive to the typical fairgoer through new technologies in film and camera design. Inspired by a recent donation of more than 1,200 medium format images of the 1964-65 World’s Fair, That Kodak Moment: Picturing the New York Fairs presents never-before-revealed works from the Queens Museum’s collection, ranging from documentation by professionals to snapshots, albums and scrapbooks created by amateur fair visitors, as well as loans from private lenders. Photographers include Julien Levy, Luis Marquez, Stephen Levine, Bob Golby, Jerry Kean, Van Williams, Cosmo D. Gadaleta, Fred R. Tannery and Alex Siodmak, as well as a host of anonymous enthusiastic shutterbugs.

EASTMAN AND KODAK

George Eastman (1854-1932), founder of the Eastman Kodak Company in 1881, invented roll paper film in 1885 and celluloid film in 1889. Eastman fully recognized the need to seamlessly take a picture, and then have the print to carry, or to mount in a black-paged album. In 1888, Kodak’s slogan, “You take the shot, we do the rest,” helped introduce to the US public the simple Kodak #1 box camera loaded with a 100-exposure roll of film. Once the entire roll was exposed, the owner mailed it back to Kodak in the camera, where it was developed, reloaded with film and returned. Marketed to
women and children (and later the $1.00 Brownie camera designed solely for children in 1900), this first “point and shoot” camera system represented freedom from the confines of the home and the restrictions of studio photography by suggesting informality and play to an entire generation of enthusiasts. By 1898, ten years after their introduction, more than 1.5 million roll-film cameras are estimated to have been sold to satisfy the burgeoning DIY spirit of the American public. And by 1905, seven years later, over 10 million people had become photography buffs.

PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE FAIRS

The role of the snapshot in the history of World’s Fairs is a long one. In 1939, the 100th anniversary of the discovery of photography was celebrated at the Fair. The “Bullet” and “Brownie” cameras, complete with Trylon and Perisphere faceplates, were available for sale at the 50 information/souvenir stands located on the Fair grounds for $2.25 and $2.75 respectively. These special edition cameras were a staple of George Eastman’s marketing arsenal. Just nine years earlier, he celebrated the 50th anniversary of his company by offering a free box camera and a roll of film to any child celebrating their 12th birthday in 1930. 500,000 of these birthday gifts were distributed to future shutterbugs in the first three days alone.

A popular stop in both fairs was the Eastman Kodak Pavilion. In 1939-40, the Arte Moderne-styled pavilion designed by C. Stowe Myers (1906-1995) and Walter Dorwin Teague (1883-1960), was fronted with a 68-foot tower that supported 11-foot tall photo murals. Teague’s firm was no stranger to Kodak, having designed six different camera models for the company including the elegant “Art Deco Gift Camera” (1928) and the “Art Deco Beau Brownie Camera” (1936). They were also quite familiar with the Fair, responsible for memorable exhibit designs for A. B. Dick, Consolidated Edison, DuPont, the Federal Building, Ford, and the United States Steel Corporation. The National Cash Register Building, also a Teague design, featured a miraculous seven-story tall cash register on the building’s rooftop that tallied each day’s attendance for all to see.

At the Kodak Pavilion, visitors could pose in the Kodak Photo-Garden where a series of unusual tableaux provided unrivaled souvenir picture taking opportunities — in front of a painted backdrop of the fairgrounds complete with a miniature child-sized Trylon and Perisphere, or a panoramic view that simulated the “Life Savers Candy Parachute Jump” giving the impression that one was floating high above the fair in a balloon. White-coated attendants gave advice on capturing the perfect shot and abundant displays such as “The Cavalcade of Color” introduced the virtues and simplicity of Kodachrome film while others described all aspects of photography in the modern world.

In 1964-65, Kodak’s unusual building design by Will Burtin, Inc. featured the “Moondeck,” an undulating rooftop floating 30 feet above the fair distinctive for its highly dramatic vantage points for both the professional and aspiring photographer. Strangely articulated mounds and peaks presented photographers with distinctive shadows and angles compelling both as backdrops or subjects in and of themselves. One of the ten largest buildings in the fair, Kodak’s Tower of Photography was crowned by the world’s largest photographs, each measuring 30’ x 36’, shot with an 8” x 10” camera with Ektacolor film. Magazines such as LIFE, LOOK, Harper’s
PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE FAIRS

Bazaar and Vogue all took advantage of this otherworldly attraction as a setting for photo opportunities. Inside, fifteen animated exhibits demonstrated the uses of Kodak products; advice was given on still and moving image cameras and film; and an award-winning film by Saul Bass, “The Searching Eye,” gave a child’s perspective on the mysteries of the unseen universe and was shown in one of the pavilion’s two theaters.

Circus clown Emmett Kelly, Jr., as the face of Kodak’s ad campaigns, was chosen as the representative for the pavilion and after two hugely successful years of being one of the most popular attractions, at the fair’s close, Kelly continued with Kodak as a touring Goodwill Ambassador.

HIGH AND LOW ART

In 1939-40, Kodak’s Hall of Light featured exhibitions of works by commercial, portrait and amateur photographers but the medium was still viewed as a tool for historical or commercial use or a way for amateurs to capture informal occasions. In response to this sentiment, in 1965, Photography in the Fine Arts: Museum Directors’ Selections for the 1965 New York World’s Fair Exhibition was presented in the Kodak Pavilion. A committee of 11 noted museum directors selected a collection of 139 photographs by 106 photographers to take “a first hesitant step in the direction of a serious and sustained effort for the widest possible acceptance of photography as fine art,” alongside sculpture and painting in galleries and museums, and in the curriculum of art educators worldwide. Ivan Dmitri, artist and director of the Institute for Photography in the Fine Arts, was instrumental in bringing this to fruition. Today, this exhibition of photographs in their original traveling plywood crates is in the collection of the Queens Museum.

THE SNAPSHOT URGE

Yet another Eastman invention, the term snapshot is a hunting term which signifies a shot taken by a hunter quickly and in most cases, not carefully aimed. Snapshots are truly the work of the amateur. Often shot from the hip, they spontaneously record the prosaic and the profound—anniversaries, birthdays, weddings, holidays, school plays, deaths, vacations and other family occasions—for the album or scrapbook. At once personal and unexceptional, snapshots were long considered the purview of the tourist or maiden aunt armed with a simple point and shoot camera at the Empire State Building or the graduation party, and not taken very seriously. Marked by crooked edges, cut-off figures, informal poses and blurred subjects, these populist folk art prints mirror the complexities of the human condition. The seductive images of often anonymous subjects taken by mostly anonymous photographers in this exhibition are part of what remains from the New York Fairs.

A professional photographer takes the photograph at the correct instant, hence Henri Cartier-Bresson’s “definitive moment,” implying a process of observation, selection and timing. Early in the 20th century, Walker Evans (1903-1975), and later, Robert Frank (born 1924) and William Klein (born 1928) made vernacular photography popular and raised awareness of a typically American pastime. Andy Warhol’s (1928-1987) photo booth shots and Polaroids reflect the contemporary, almost instantaneous satisfaction of having the picture in hand. Today, photography aficionados specialize in vintage snapshots as pure Americana worthy of collecting.
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