

The Accidental Masterpieces of Henrik Saxgren

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Like all photographers, Henrik Saxgren is a difficult one to pin down. Is he a documentary photographer, a photojournalist, or an artist? Is he all three or none of the above? The language of photography, even more than the language of art, is very slippery. Indeed, for the first half of its life, the new medium was viewed either as an invention of mechanics and alchemists or as a threat to art itself—"From this day, painting is dead" (Paul Delaroche, 1839). Photography in all its forms labored under this burden for at least fifty years until Alfred Stieglitz fought to establish it as an art form with his 291 Gallery in New York (1905-29) and his influential journal *Camera Work* (1902-17). Even then it took another seventy-some years for the medium to be established as an art form in the minds of many.

Part of the problem, of course, is that photography has been considered "the most democratic art form" from the time of Louis Daguerre's public patent (1839), which, more than William Henry Fox Talbot's simultaneous efforts, helped promote photography as an accessible medium. George Eastman's breakthrough Kodak box

cameras (1887) further aided this process and made photography all but universal. The legions of shutterbugs and snapshooters who followed appeared to demean photography as a viable medium for art. After all, anybody could make a picture once the Kodak box camera got established—"You press the button, we do the rest," as the legendary marketing phrase goes. It would seem that anyone can become an artist, but only the exceptions, like Henrik Saxgren, prove that rule.

Despite the fact that noted artists had taken up the little box or made use of larger devices, the revolutionary leap that transformed photography had less to do with the radical transformations of technology than the embrace of it by radical artists like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray in the 1920s and 1930s, not for its aesthetic abilities, however, but because photography could produce at whim the ultimate *readymade* or *objet trouvé*. When Duchamp selected a porcelain urinal back in 1917, and installed it in the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, his *Fountain* revolutionized art by virtue of his declaring by personal fiat, in his role as artist-curator, that this object was indeed art. Essentially this revolutionary gesture changed the role of the artist from that of *homo faber*, the maker of things, to that of the curator, the determiner of what was art. In other words, everything in the world became available as a potential *objet d'art*. This was scandalous because, among other things, it changed the impetus of art from creating art, to stating something