

The New York Times

Unearthing Photography's Time Capsule

Two pages from the preliminary layout of Robert Frank's artist's book, which would have been reproduced in the catalog "Four Photographers: Robert Frank, David Heath, Robert Heinecken, John Wood," had that exhibition come to fruition. The artist's book maquette is part of a cache of archival materials acquired by the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin. Credit Robert Frank; Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin



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By Meredith Mendelsohn

Jan. 11, 2019

In March of 1985, the photographer Robert Frank arrived with a paper sack at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to use Polaroid's 20-by-24-inch camera. It was a hulking beast of an apparatus, worlds away from the diminutive 35-millimeter Leica that had freed him to roam the country while shooting "The Americans," the 1959 book of photos that crowned him a king of counterculture and the most imitated photographer alive today.

He emptied the bag of salvaged miscellany he'd brought to shoot, jotted a few cryptic words on bits of paper, and then pinned them together with old photos and other ephemera onto timeworn corkboards. In the resulting six-paneled work — "Boston, March 20, 1985" we see the corkboards arranged in grids like signs at an old grocer's.

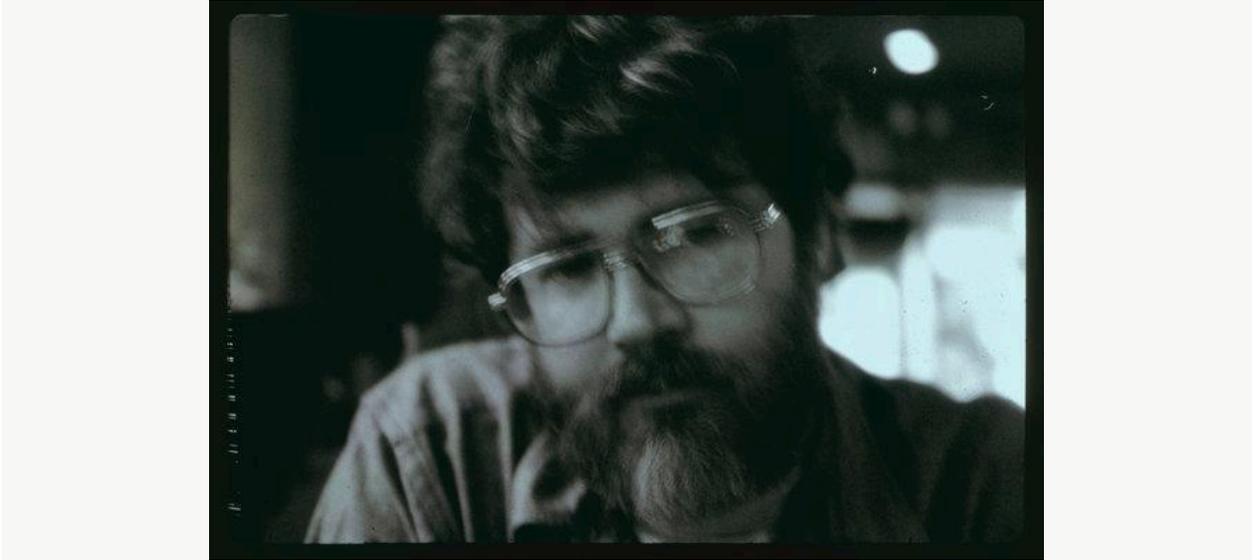
Few clues reveal Frank's intentions, but we know that his fellow trailblazing photographers, Robert Heinecken, Dave Heath and John Wood, were somehow involved: The images show scrawled dedications to them.

The four renowned artists were brought together by two photographic historians, Susan E. Cohen and William S. Johnson, who pulled off a curatorial feat that would be unimaginable today. They persuaded [Mr. Frank](#), [Mr. Heinecken](#), [Mr. Heath](#) and [Mr. Wood](#) to collaborate with them on a project whose contours were hazy at best. And then they persuaded the Polaroid Corporation to finance it.

Susan E. Cohen, photographed by her husband and fellow photography historian, William S. Johnson, in Robert Frank's kitchen in 1983. Credit William S. Johnson; Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin



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William S. Johnson, photographed by Susan E. Cohen in 1983 at Bubba's Restaurant on Eighth Street in Manhattan. Credit Susan E. Cohen; Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

They saw that creative photography could require just as many painstaking decisions as painting a blank canvas might, and they wanted to explore that idea.

“These were our heroes, and we could watch them work, watch them interact,” Mr. Johnson said. “It was an amazing time for us.” He and Ms. Cohen, who were (and still are) married, entered the lives of the unlikely collaborators, and for two and a half years documented every step, videotaping their prickly, coffee-fueled meetings in Rochester, N.Y., and elsewhere; interviewing them in their homes; observing them in the studio; and writing extensively on their findings.

[It is through these accounts](#) and recordings that we know anything about Mr. Frank's use of the giant Polaroid camera, or why Mr. Heinecken transported salami sandwiches from the art school's cafeteria and fettuccine primavera from the museum's cafe during his turn with the machine. (He was conducting a food-based social-class analysis.)

The group eventually determined that the project would culminate in an exhibition at the Visual Studies Workshop, a hotbed of experimental activity in Rochester, founded and run by the powerhouse photographer and thinker Nathan Lyons. The artist Joan Lyons, his wife, would design the catalog.

Dave Heath frequently photographed the group's gatherings with his Polaroid SX-70. In his artist's book — the maquette is pictured here — he juxtaposed those images with photos taken when he was away from the group. On the left are his portraits of Robert Frank (top), John Wood (middle) and Robert Heinecken (bottom). Credit Dave Heath, via Michael Schreier, Ottawa; Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin



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But nearly three years in, with the exhibition just months away, budgets tightened at Polaroid and the funding stopped. The project was shelved, and an untold chapter of photographic history closed. That chapter is now being reopened along with the dozen-odd bankers boxes of archival materials that Ms. Cohen and Mr. Johnson stored in a closet in their Belmont, Mass., home more than 30 years ago. Those materials will soon be made available to the public for the first time at the Harry Ransom Center, a humanities research library and museum at the University of Texas at Austin, which just announced the acquisition of the archive from Ms. Cohen and Mr. Johnson.

The cache, now known as the Susan E. Cohen and William S. Johnson Creativity Project archive, includes dozens of photos; 50 hours of interviews and conversations on videotapes and audiocassettes; artworks given to the couple; essay drafts; correspondence; and research materials on each artist. (Mr. Johnson, a Harvard art librarian early in his career, is known in the field as an intensely thorough bibliographer and archivist.) Also included are the 16-page maquettes of artist's books that Mr. Frank, Mr. Heath, and Mr. Wood created for the catalog, as well as a published copy of the one Mr. Heinecken published himself.

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Jessica McDonald, the Ransom Center's curator of photography, a specialist in Nathan Lyons and the buzzing photography scene in mid-20th-century Rochester that sprang up around Kodak and the George Eastman House, first discovered the archive through talks with Ms. Cohen and Mr. Johnson about the possibility of one day publishing the unfinished catalog and artist's book maquettes.



Jessica McDonald, curator of photography at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. "The project is not very well known but it's not exactly a secret either," she said. "It exists in footnotes, essentially." Credit Joan Lyons; the John C. Wood Estate Trust; Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin; Chad Wadsworth for The New York Times



Susan E. Cohen and William S. Johnson recorded and videotaped dozens of hours of meetings, interviews and studio visits with Robert Frank, Robert Heinecken, Dave Heath and John Wood in the 1980s. The little-known tapes are currently being cataloged at the Harry Ransom Center. Credit Chad Wadsworth for The New York Times

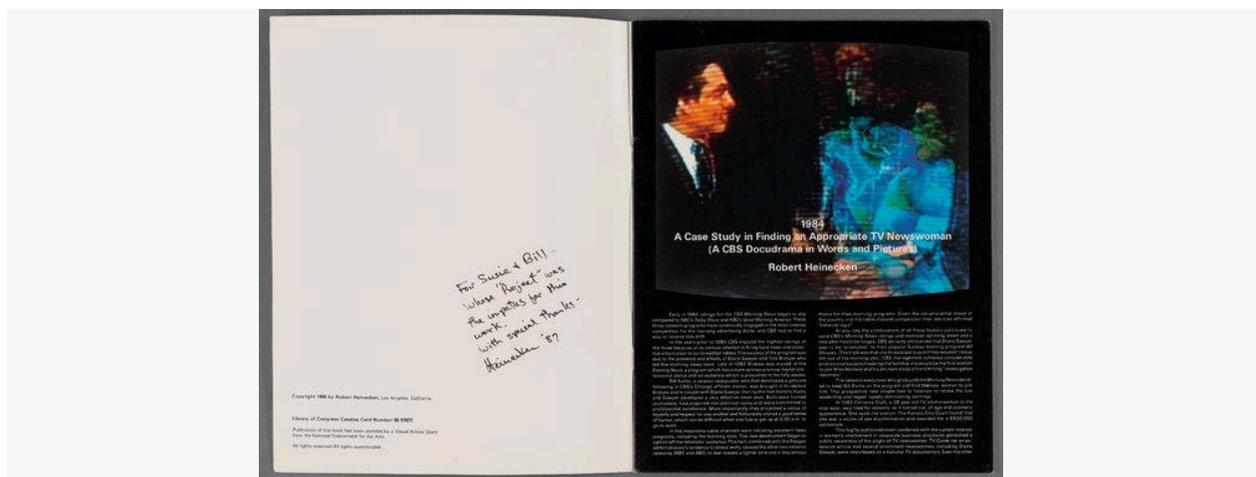
It was the pair's invitation that enticed the artists to participate in the first place, Mr. Johnson said, explaining that, at the time, most established photographers were under pressure to stand out in the crowd, not collaborate with it.

The only surviving participant of the four, Mr. Frank, might be the most surprising addition to the group, given his reputation for keeping to himself. (He declined to be interviewed for this article.) He stopped making photographs shortly after the publication of "The Americans," turning instead to filmmaking. But he returned to the medium in the 1970s.

“We were the first guys to get him to talk about his art. He had absolutely refused to do so before. We were just lucky. I think it was that his mother was dying, and he was in a reflective mode,” Mr. Johnson recalled. “We walked into Robert’s studio in New York and there were piles of prints on the floor of his living room. And they were magnificent. He’d been using Polaroids and he was writing on them, and that was very exciting to me. I said, ‘Here’s a guy who has reinvented himself.’”



Robert Frank pictured in Polaroid’s 20x24 studio in Boston in 1985. Credit William S. Johnson; Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin



The archive includes a copy of Robert Heinecken’s artist’s book “1984: A Case Study in Determining an Appropriate Newswoman (A CBS Docudrama in Words and Pictures),” 1985. Credit The Robert Heinecken Trust; Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

The others had also moved squarely beyond the conventional single-image shot and photo essay. Mr. Wood had quietly innovated ways of combining different types of photographic and printing processes. Mr. Heath, who first gained attention in 1965 with his photo essay “A Dialogue With Solitude,” was experimenting with Polaroid cameras as well as with carousel slide installations. Mr. Heineken, meanwhile, was known for his cutting-edge manipulations of media imagery from sources including magazines and catalogs. The most widely circulated work to come out of the project was probably his 1985 artist’s book “1984: A Case Study in Finding an Appropriate TV Newswoman (A CBS Docudrama in Words and Pictures),” which he made by holding photographic paper up to a television.

While like-minded in their rejection of photographic conventions, the four artists were too set in their ways to collaborate on a single work. “But it would be wrong to say that there was no collaborating,” Mr. Johnson said.

In an audio clip from a May 1983 meeting at the Lyons home, for instance, we hear the wonderfully analog sound of Mr. Heath’s Polaroid SX-70 churning out snapshots. He later worked those Polaroids into his artist’s book, and sent others to Mr. Wood, who collaged them into his contributions to the exhibition.

The whereabouts of much of the artwork is still unknown, but none of it would probably have existed if Ms. Cohen and Mr. Johnson hadn’t initiated the project. Ms. McDonald hopes that she’ll be able to piece together a checklist of what was to have been in the planned show.

“If the exhibition and book had happened, it would have been amazing, but in a way the archive itself is the best way to understand what happened,” Ms. Cohen said. “You open a box and you read a file full of paper and you put on a videotape and watch that, and it’s in tiny pieces like that. That’s realer to what happened. The map is not the territory.”

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 12, 2019, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Photography Time Capsule Revealed.