



Photobooths

The Art Of The Self Portrait

Michelle Stevens text
Brian Meacham image

If self portrait is not already the most common form of photography, it's pretty close. The advent of cheap digital cameras and camera-phones has led to a minor revolution in the taking and developing of one's own picture. Gone are the days of sitting in a photo booth in a mall or train station, adjusting the seat just so and trying to smile four different ways as you await the flashbulb, then waiting patiently for the strip to develop and dry, eventually cursing yourself for not holding your chin up or making sure your hair was straight.

Amazingly though, these booths are still around and have become fond cult favorites, as enshrined on photo-booth.net, the quirky historical site run by founders Tim Garrett & Brian Meacham. Therein the browser can find a veritable cornucopia of information and galleries dedicated to keeping the memory of photo booths alive, from the 1920s Canadian Phototeria

that placed a single photo onto a metallic disc to the John Wilkes Photo Booth, which recalls with tongue firmly in cheek the assassin's employment at the Potomac Photographic Booth Company. The booth romance in *Amelie* may certainly have helped boost the stock of such old-school items, but it is sad to think their hey-day is long past and their presence dwindling as locations opt for the faster, cheaper, more flexible digital option.

For the ordinary Joe, the old photographic booths were the sole option if you wanted to indulge in a bit of do-it-yourself photography, usually for practical identification purposes but often as a means of preserving the memory of a relationship or bond between friends. Certainly the photo booth became an instant hit upon its introduction to the public back in 1925. Anatol Josepho was the first man to launch a machine that offered a privacy curtain and selection of backdrops to the Broadway throng, although a more cumbersome apparatus had

been demonstrated at the Exposition Universelle in Paris as far back as 1889. It did not take long for booths to appear in five and dimes, bus stations and pharmacists around the world, spawning the iconic identification shot pose in a damp strip of four and enabling citizens to stare moodily into a lens. Indeed it was not until the development decades later of portable cameras with a timed shutter and instant Polaroid technology that self-portraiture advanced markedly.

Fans of the photo booth are striving to keep the legacy alive, with a long list of booth locations available on Tim & Brian's site. A constantly updated blog informs the reader of news in the booth world, and visitors are encouraged to submit information regarding booths they find out there in the wilderness, as well as their own strips of photos, with two stipulations – keep it clean and no digital, please.

ISM: How important have photo-booths been in photographic history?

BM: The photobooth is an enormously important element in the history of photography, as the first simple, affordable, and completely anonymous method for taking self-portraits. The majority of the population in the 1940s, when the photobooths we know today became widespread, might have had a camera in the family, but did not have access to a dark-room, and the spontaneous, unique, and in-the-moment nature of a photobooth meant that it captured many faces, many couples, many moments that never would have been otherwise captured. The photobooth has also played a significant role in the history of portraiture, with artists such as Bern Boyle, Herman Costa, and of course, Andy Warhol, using the photobooth to capture and interpret the human face in surprising ways.

ISM: What motivated you to start a museum dedicated to photobooths?

BM: The story from my end is that as a film archivist with an interest in the history of photography and technology, I became interested in documenting photobooths as they appeared in film a few years ago, and started a list on the web of photobooths and photostrips in film. Alongside that, I started listing all of the photobooths I had visited in an attempt to create a national photobooth directory, because at the time, in the fall of 2003, the listings on the web were stagnant, inaccurate, and unappealing. Tim, a photobooth artist and enthusiast, saw the work that I had done and suggested a collaboration: his ideas, technical know-how, and resources, combined with the work I had already posted online and my design ideas. Photobooth.net is about to celebrate its third anniversary, and we're gathering more and more resources and information about photobooths every month.

ISM: What are some of the more unusual photobooth locations you have discovered, and any personal favorites?

BM: Some of my favorites range from the bizarre - the booth in Sam & Willy's pet store in Chicago to the very appropriate, such as the old Model 11 photobooth at the Museum of Photographic Art in San Diego, California. Some other strange and wonderful photobooths include the booth in the alley next to Birdies Panties store in Kansas City, Missouri and the beautiful booth in the lobby of the Ace Hotel in Portland, Oregon. Though I haven't visited them yet, I'm also a big fan of the outdoor photobooths that dot the streets of Berlin; there are currently at least seven, which can be found on our website.

For more information please visit: www.photobooth.net