



WEEKEND EXPLORER

Coin. Smile. Click!

By JOHN STRAUSBAUGH  
Published: March 14, 2008

ON a recent sunny but frigid morning, I strolled up Broadway through Times Square with Näkki Goranin, a visitor from Vermont making a pilgrimage through the swirling crowds and the sensory overload of all the signage. We stopped on the west side of Broadway between 51st and 52nd Streets. It looked nondescript to me, with the usual fast food, souvenir shop, gym and drugstore.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Josh Haner/The New York Times

Rachel Risen, left, and Jessica Millsbaugh in the photo booth at BB&R, on the Upper East Side, one of the bars with a coin-operated machine.

Multimedia



Video

[Weekend Explorer](#)



But Ms. Goranin, a photographer whose book “American Photobooth” (W. W. Norton) has just been published, declared it “a landmark in photo history.” Because, she said, in 1926, roughly where the gym is now, a Jewish inventor from Siberia named Anatol Josepho (shortened from Josephowitz) opened a photo-booth concession, the first Photomaton in the world.

An instant hit, the photo booth spread from this spot in Times Square to arcades, amusement parks, state fairs, bus depots and five-and-dimes around the country. Across eight decades it has recorded countless youthful frolics, loving kisses and inebriated indiscretions. Its popularity has survived the Depression, the vanishing of the old arcades and five-and-dimes and the proliferation of disposable, digital and cellphone cameras. Nick Montano, executive editor of the industry monthly Vending Times, estimates that there are still something like 10,000 booths around the country.

But the old-fashioned booths with their “dip ’n’ dunk” chemical developing process and breathless wait for the damp strip of black-and-white images to slide out are disappearing into scrapheaps or into the homes of collectors (Tim Burton and Quentin Tarantino among them), giving way to booths with digital, computerized equipment.

On the busy Broadway sidewalk, Ms. Goranin explained how it all began. Mr. Josepho was just one of many

[More Articles in Arts »](#)

TicketWatch - Theater Offers by E-Mail



Sign up for ticket offers from Broadway shows and other advertisers. See [Sample](#)  
**btbulk@mac.com** [Sign Up](#)  
[Change E-mail Address](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

- [E-MAIL](#)
- [PRINT](#)
- [REPRINTS](#)
- [SAVE](#)
- [SHARE](#)

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. [Skin Deep: Lasik Surgery: When the Fine Print Applies to You](#)
2. [Well: An Enduring Measure of Fitness: The Simple Push-Up](#)
3. [Priest-Cosmologist Wins \\$1.6 Million Templeton Prize](#)
4. [Gail Collins: Unwelcome Surprises](#)
5. [For an Aspiring Singer, a Harsher Spotlight](#)
6. [Personal Best: To Stretch or Not to Stretch? The Answer Is Elastic](#)
7. [Collapse of Salmon Stocks Endangers Pacific Fishery](#)
8. [Outposts: True Irish](#)
9. [Nicholas D. Kristof: Do as He Said](#)
10. [Backyards, Beware: An Orchard Wants Your Spot](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



[nytimes.com/tmagazine](http://nytimes.com/tmagazine)



Weekend Explorer

[Download the Walking Tour](#)

#### Related

[Booth Views](#) (March 14, 2008)

inventors striving to perfect a fully automated photo booth in the early 20th century, she said. He was born in 1894 and grew up in Omsk, Siberia, dreaming of the Wild West and learning to use a Brownie camera, which Eastman Kodak introduced in 1900. As a young man he roamed the globe, from Paris and Budapest to Shanghai, finally reaching the Wild West, or Hollywood anyway, in the mid-1920s, then hitchhiked cross-country with his photo-booth schematics. In New York City, he assembled the engineers and mechanics to build the first few Photomaton he unveiled at 1659 Broadway in the fall of 1926.

“When it first opened, there were people standing all the way around the block,” Ms. Goranin said. Mr. Josepho kept the Photomaton “studio,” as he called it, open 24 hours. In April 1927, Time magazine reported that 280,000 customers had entered his booths in the first six months. They spent 25 cents each to pose and then wait the eight minutes it took to process a strip of eight small photos. Among them was Gov. Al Smith, not the last political figure to step into a photo booth. In 1953, the newlyweds Jack and Jackie Kennedy took glowing self-portraits in one.

In the early years, Ms. Goranin said, using a photo booth was not quite the private affair it would become. At Photomaton, attendants in white smocks and gloves took patrons’ money, suggested poses, cut the strips into individual photos and sold extras like frames and color tinting. Curtains were added later, inviting romantic and sometimes risqué behavior.

Photomaton was such a sensation that in March 1927 a business consortium headed by Henry Morgenthau Sr., the former United States ambassador to Turkey and a founder of the [American Red Cross](#), paid Mr. Josepho \$1 million for the American rights. The deal made the front page of The New York Times.

Competitors soon sprang up. A few doors up from Mr. Josepho’s studio, at 1671 Broadway, a place called Photomovette appeared, followed over the years by Photomatic, Auto-Photo, the Photo-Strip Junior, Photo-Me and others. Some booths weren’t as automated as they seemed. In storage in Vermont, Ms. Goranin has an old booth in which a hidden employee would quickly develop the strips and push them out the slot to unsuspecting patrons.

Farther down Broadway, between 47th and 48th Streets, on a block now dominated by Morgan Stanley’s headquarters, the 3,000-seat Strand movie theater once stood. Two doors away, a Photomaton concession opened in 1932. It was run by a man named John Slack, and it was so popular that he kept a large extended family employed there through the Depression.

In the course of researching her book, Ms. Goranin tracked down Slack’s son, Jeffrey, on Long Island. He told her he had just thrown several decades’ worth of old photos, family business records and even camera lenses into a Dumpster.

“I got moderately hysterical,” she recalled. “I started crying.” The next morning she received a phone call from Jeffrey, who had climbed into the Dumpster and fished out the treasures. Many of the images are included in her book.

Crossing 47th Street, we found a modern digital photo booth in the Times Square Information Center, housed in the former Embassy movie theater at 1560 Seventh

#### Where to find the beautiful people

Also in T Magazine:

[George Clooney is talking dirty](#)  
[Enforcing cellphone etiquette](#)  
[Pierre Hardy shoe collection designed for Gap](#)

#### ADVERTISEMENTS

All the news that's fit to personalize.

In a world of second opinions, get the facts first.

Arts & more.

50% off Times delivery.

Which movies do the Critics recommend?



All the news that's fit to debate.

Avenue, between 46th and 47th Streets. The photo booth offers digital images in a variety of formats, from a standard head shot to a Photoshop version of your face on the body of a surfer or a cartoon character. A disembodied female voice, the 21st-century descendant of those white-smocked attendants, led us through the steps. She had a British accent; the booth came from Photo-Me, a distributor based in England.

Tim Tompkins, the president of the Times Square Alliance, which operates the center, said that both the photo booth and the peep-show booth appeared first in Times Square and noted that clothes were known to come off in both. “Times Square has always been about this particular mix of narcissism, exhibitionism and voyeurism,” he said, adding that on New Year’s Eve, the information center’s booth was dressed up as a kissing booth “where you could practice your New Year’s Eve kiss.”

“It was a huge hit,” he added.

At the [International Center of Photography](#) (1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street), Brian Wallis, the chief curator, described how a couple of famous artists made creative use of photo booths. In 1928, Photomaton installed booths on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. The Surrealist André Breton, whose novel “Nadja” was published that year, “rounded up his Surrealist crew and took them there to pose for portraits,” Mr. Wallis said.

The photography center’s archives contain photo-booth portraits of Breton, a young [Salvador Dalí](#) and [Luis Buñuel](#). They all posed with their eyes closed, as though dreaming, because Breton believed that “the dream was the key to the unconscious,” Mr. Wallis explained.

In the 1960s, [Andy Warhol](#) often used photo booths to take portraits, including his own, which he incorporated into his art. Mr. Wallis showed us photo-booth strips of Edie Sedgwick and the art dealer [Holly Solomon](#).

Before she died in 2002, Ms. Solomon reminisced with Mr. Wallis about a visit with Warhol to a 42nd Street arcade. “They had to try several photo booths so he could find the one that had the right combination of chemicals to produce the best imagery,” he said. “She had a sack of about 30 or 40 strips. She said he was there all day with rolls of quarters, and he was quite choosy about the poses.”

Mr. Wallis said Warhol’s use of photo booths was consistent with his appreciation of mug shots, snapshots and news photos. “Warhol was such a great connoisseur of these vernacular types of photography,” he said. “He wasn’t making judgments. He understood that it doesn’t have to be a work of art to be a great image.”

Looking for an old-fashioned chemical booth, Ms. Goranin and I went down to Lakeside Lounge, a bar in the East Village (162 Avenue B, between 10th and 11th Streets). A ’60s-era Auto-Photo booth, a model prized for its durability, Ms. Goranin said, stood at the end of the bar, near vintage fortune-telling and test-your-grip machines.

Trixie Salke, who owns that booth and the similar model at the nearby bar Otto’s Shrunken Head (538 East 14th Street, between Avenues A and B), opened it to show us the machinery inside, a Rube Goldbergian contraption of metal arms and springs and chemical baths, with grippers that dunk the photo strip in a lazy susan of developing tubs before sliding it out, still damp, to the waiting patron. The images print directly onto the specially treated paper strip, so no film or potentially embarrassing negatives are involved. The images you hold in your hand are the only ones that exist. (The same is generally true of digital booths.)

With the number of vintage booths dwindling, Ms. Salke said, finding spare parts for the antique machinery has become difficult. Worse, no one is producing the treated paper anymore, so owners of older booths like hers are working their way through existing stock.

Up on East Gun Hill Road in the Bronx neighborhood of Baychester I met Allen Weisberg, president of Apple Industries and owner of Face Place, who distributes new digital photo booths throughout North America. He led me around the crowded workshop where his employees prepare and crate booths for shipment. The booths come in a variety of models, from a new fold-up version that can be easily transported to events to one that looks like a giant walk-in camera. Some do a fair job of reproducing the look of old black-and-white photo strips, which nostalgic users prefer.

No Goldbergian contraptions here: the inner workings of these models entailed merely a small computer and printer, not much different from anyone's home-office equipment.

Mr. Weisberg, 50, was more or less born into the business. His father repaired coin-operated amusement machines and jukeboxes around the city and took him on the rounds.

Tenth Avenue from 41st to 43rd Street "was the coin-op world at that time," he recalled. "Every coin-op vending machine that was sold in the tri-state area went through the distributors there."

A distributor took the young Mr. Weisberg to a basement workshop where photo booths were assembled. "He said, 'Kid, this is the business to be in,'" he continued. "I didn't do anything about it until I was 35 years old, but that's the story of how I got into the photo-booth business."

In New York City, Mr. Weisberg said, he has sold new booths to several bars, like Bleecker Street Bar in the East Village (between Broadway and Lafayette Street) and BB&R on the Upper East Side (1720 Second Avenue, near 89th Street); movie multiplexes like Atrium Cinemas on Staten Island; and bowling centers like Maple Lanes in Brooklyn. Because digital booths are more easily transported and set up than the old chemical models, he added, many event planners now rent them out for weddings, parties and corporate affairs.

Back in Times Square, the artist Raul Vincent Enriquez is using the intimacy of the photo booth to make very public art. He installed a homemade digital booth at the storefront Chashama gallery (112 West 44th Street, between Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenue). Through April 26, you can take a quick series of portraits in the booth, then see your giant self projected on the Lumacom display screen 48 stories up atop the Condé Nast building (4 Times Square, Broadway between 42nd and 43rd Streets).

"I think if I had set up a portrait studio people would have been intimidated to pose," Mr. Enriquez said. "But everybody has used a photo booth. People like to sit down, hit the button and make silly faces."

[More Articles in Arts »](#)

[Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.](#)

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

[Los Angeles GMC Dealers](#)

The Official Los Angeles GMC Site Schedule a Yukon Test Drive!  
[www.SoCalGMCDealers.com](http://www.SoCalGMCDealers.com)

**[William Bennett Gallery](#)**

Chagall, Dali, Miro, Picasso SoHo's Newest & Largest Art Gallery  
[www.williambennettgallery.com](http://www.williambennettgallery.com)

**[Study Photography: Europe](#)**

Summer 2008 Workshops Boston University in Prague, CZE  
[www.cdiabu.com/prague-workshops.php](http://www.cdiabu.com/prague-workshops.php)

**Tips**

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

**Past Coverage**

[SAMSUN JOURNAL; A Patchwork Land Confronts a Lie of Whole Cloth](#) (March 11, 2008)

[Easing the Pain Of Collecting](#) (February 28, 2008)

[Home & Garden Calendar](#) (February 28, 2008)

[THE CITY VISIBLE; Pink Is for](#) (February 24, 2008)

**Related Searches**

[Art](#) [Add Alert](#)

[Photography](#) [Add Alert](#)

[International Center of Photography](#) [Add Alert](#)

**INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**



[HOME & GARDEN »](#)

[U.S. »](#)

[OPINION »](#)

[FASHION & STYLE »](#)

[OPINION »](#)

[TELEVISION »](#)



[Backyards, Beware: An Orchard Wants Your Spot](#)



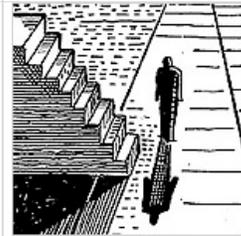
[Drawing Lots for Health Care](#)

### Campaign Stops: Practice Makes Perfect

Ron Klain explains why recent staff problems in the candidates' camps mean nothing.



[Be a Fashion Insider or Just Look Like One](#)



[Op-Ed: Spitzer's Defense Won't Rest](#)



[Pro-Clinton? 'SNL' Says You're Joking](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)