

NEWCITY.COM | CHICAGO BY CHICAGOANS | FREE

# NEWCITY

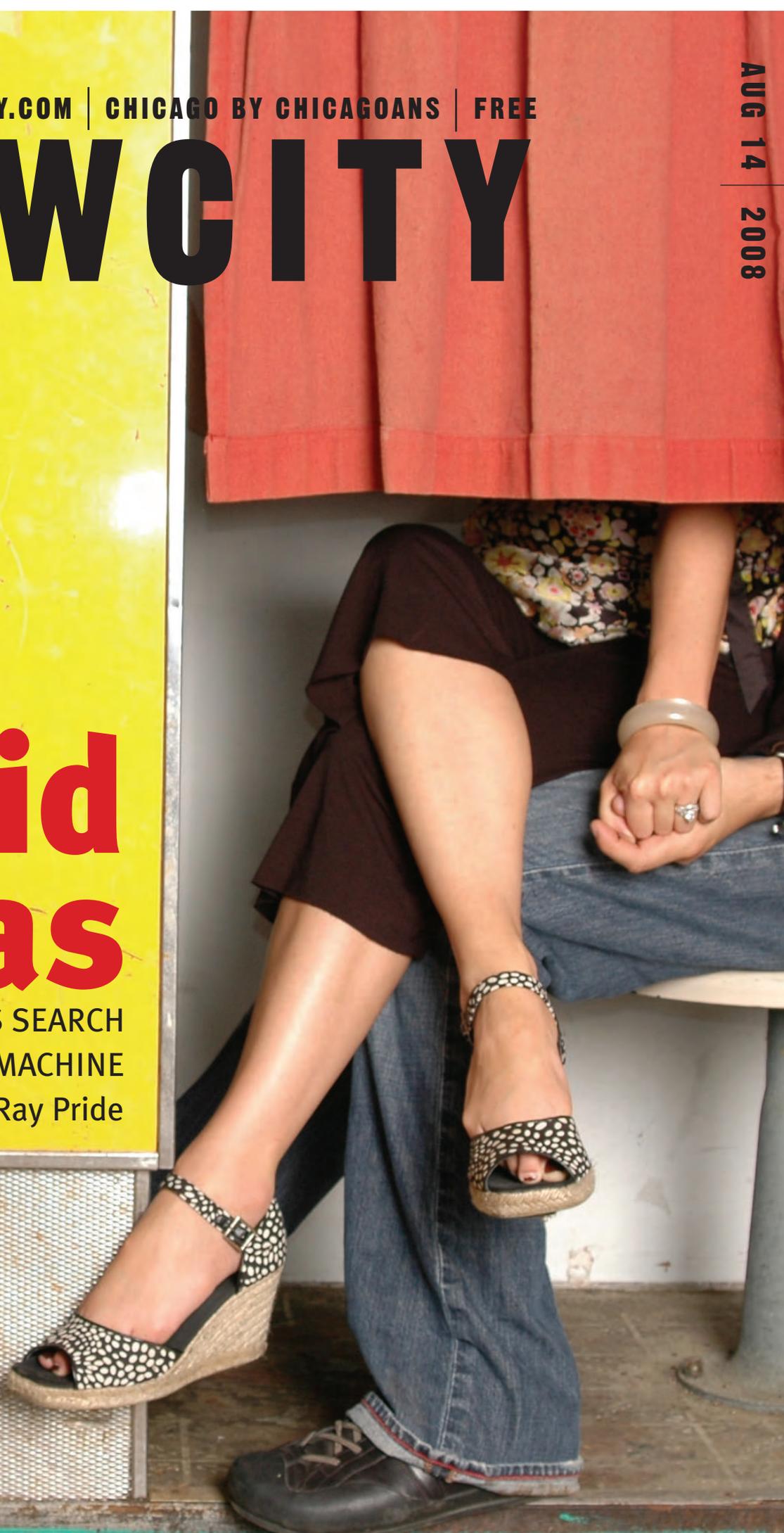
AUG 14  
2008



## Candid Cameras

PHOTOBOOTH FANS SEARCH  
FOR SOUL IN AN OLD MACHINE  
By Ray Pride

**+** *Printer's Ball  
guide inside*





# Candid Cameras

PHOTOBOOTH FANS SEARCH FOR SOUL IN AN OLD MACHINE

By Ray Pride

**T**he light fires: four slow bursts to the eye, four shots. Corner of your eye, corner of the room, there's a couple dozen places this is commonplace in Chicago. But there's more ritual than with the now-ubiquitous self-portraits from cell phones and digital cameras: the photobooth is a foursquare, three-ring circus all its own. They're also an endangered product, created by a fragile mechanical contraption for the age of carnivals and midways, nothing so sleek you can slip in your pocket.

The city's most notorious is in Ukrainian Village, at the Rainbo Club tavern, where it's sat twenty years or so, capturing one-of-kind images of fancy and frolic. The fashionably flush like Brett Ratner and Quentin Tarantino anachronize their party digs with personal booths. As a pro at name-dropping, Ratner's even published a book of his peerless pals at play: "Hilhaven Lodge: The Photo Booth Pictures." There are two handsomely illustrated general books on the subject, Babette Hines' "Photobooth" and photo artist, historian and former Chicagoan Nakki Goranen's recent "American Photobooth," which provide neat looks back at the timeless black-and-white imagery. There's even an obsessive Web site ([photobooth.net/locations](http://photobooth.net/locations)) that's mapped the apparatuses around the world, citing twenty-four in Chicago, each entry geeking-out over specifics of technology and chemistry. Of Skylark's shot-shack, their locale correspondent notes, "The photobooth, a Model 21E black and white machine, had the classic 'Photographs' sign on top, and produced great photos with four rounded corners on each shot. Very nice." And Rainbo Club "takes good care of its booth, a black and white Model 12. The photos were nice and bright, with the rounded bottom corners crisp and clean." Smart Bar? "My photos, when they came out, were truly bizarre: great contrast and tone, but the strangest, widest white borders I'd ever seen."

We all have our obsessions, large and small. A few months back at Rainbo I was introduced to Anthony Vizzari and his wife, Andrea. A mutual friend set us to talking photography and we shared stories. We sat near the front of the room where the bar's annual calendar of previous year's patrons is affixed to the brown paneled wall. The conversation took a spin when a flash went off in the other end of the boxy room. "What do you know about photobooths?" Vizzari asked with a smile. "We've got three of them in our garage."



Lauren Pollock

**A** few days later, behind a near-Northwest condo they've since been lucky enough to sell before relocating to Oak Park, I'm standing over Vizzari's shoulder while he fishes through the guts of a machine that's set to be rented out shortly. There are tasks aplenty: taking orders, scheduling professional movers and supervising the booths for events like wedding receptions (including making sure the site is on ground level or has a freight elevator), and most intensively, maintaining the persnickety innards. A burgeoning family-run business is nothing they expected when they bought their first booth a little over a year ago.

Plastic gallon jugs are grouped around, marked in bold black with names of chemicals. I hold a thick sheaf of test strips in one hand while trying to decipher the workings of the machine he's opened up. Inside the near-half-ton box are guts: unexpectedly but understandably prosaic guts. Its elegance lies in its simplicity, but not in its pageant of metal arms, clips and succession of chemical baths. Every operator fashions quick fixes for mechanical bits that are no longer manufactured: strips out of this machine are dried by a taped-up hand hairdryer. To keep them functioning, a collector must work with pieces nicked or cannibalized from other machines, or cannily adapted from other objects, like Bondo-toughened De Sotos along the waterfront of old Havana. When the machines were first introduced, some models really had a little man inside. Now it's a prosaic carousel of twentieth-century mechanical ingenuity. Rube Goldberg would want only for a loud explosion at the end.



Nakki Goranen

Above & below: pictures from *American Photobooth*.



Nakki Goranen



I thought I knew photobooths. I thought we had a *relationship*. The soft humming sounds, the gentle kicks and clicks, the steady purr as the strip emerged. The consistent sulfurous smell. The sudden evidence of something you didn't quite intend to do four minutes ago. But Vizzari, 28, working with Andrea, 32, kicks the fascination to a higher level. Trained as an architect, with a degree in photography from the Art Institute, he had no special attachment to their termite allure until the couple tried to rent a booth for their wedding. (Andrea, in advertising, and also a photographer, has bunches of color ones from the mall from when she was a teenager.) It was nearly impossible. While one of the two primary suppliers, Photo Me, has a location in Chicago, it didn't exactly seem like a legacy career after their introduction to the business. Still, the couple had long accumulated vernacular photography, including images taken after death. The Museum of Mourning Photography & Memorial Practice, once located in their living room, is now down an alley near Damen and Augusta alongside Vizzari's studio.

"You know there's no negative, right?" he asks, marveling. "The only thing that exists is that strip. There's no digital file, there's nothing. It's one-of-a-kind. It's almost like a daguerreotype or a Polaroid." Photobooths are still around, but it seems strange that Polaroid is probably more endangered than this delicate process. "The chemicals are always going to be easy to find. You can go to a photographer's formulary, any chemist, and you can buy the chemicals and mix them up if you know the mixture." The rub with the non-digital photochemical-based photobooth, however, is paper. "There's only two suppliers I can get it from, and I understand they get it from only one supplier they don't release the information about. But I know it's in Russia somewhere. It's got Russian writing all over the package when I get it."

One supplier says there's five years worth of paper supplied, if the vendors are lucky. Another "says that's not true. Talk is, some American company might get it produced in China. That's the last place where you're going to get anything made. Just contract them to do it. They can basically reverse-engineer anything, which is frighteningly cool. So where might this medium go? I don't know. It might not exist, the truth is."

Somehow this enhances the allure. The vulnerability and the transitory quality are underlined. Everyone I ever knew who admires these personal thumbprints have piles of them. There are boxes everywhere. Atop a shelf. Back of the closet. Beneath the bed. Pencil cases, lunchboxes, cigar boxes, all manner of tins. Ticket stubs. The rare lock of hair. A 312 phone number inside a matchbook cover in architect's neat print. And tickling out from all these souvenirs, the teasing tongue of instant photographs. What's your box? Where are all the small faces? A shoebox, filled, slightly forgotten. Look at you! So much younger then. Making faces. Pulling "gookies." Piles, stacks or neat arrays, rubber-banded. Friends, lovers, your little brother. An extremely informal history of in-between times, moments extracted from memory like hiccups.

But capital's a hiccup, too. "The companies [maintaining photobooths] really all wanted to go digital and they abandoned a lot of their film machines," Vizzari says. In the three months since he and I started talking, he's acquired more. "Since March, we've exploded. We had to move! From three, we got up to eight, then I flipped one and I sold one. I've been buying them and refurbishing them and flipping them to people who want them in their house, that kind of thing. I bought a guy's whole inventory from Ocean City, Maryland, that had been on the boardwalks since the sixties. He just wanted to get rid of it, go digital. Since then I've bought out two different lots like that from arcades. We've just gotten jammed with booths. It's crazy!" The machines are in different states of refurbishment, but, he says, "We've got six in the garage now and we've got another one sitting in a permanent location. I don't know how that happened. Since March? That's nuts."

Still, it's not a pursuit that lends itself to corporate tidiness. "Now that it's kind of popular for events and things, it's still not a huge part of their business. A large part of the market, these photobooths in bars, I think most of the supplies are going to people like us who are going to events with them. It can take a couple of months to go through a roll in a bar. Chemicals go a little faster. Just as an aside, these machines were not meant to be moved around from event space to event space. They're a pain in the ass to move. They're really meant to be parked somewhere, a boardwalk, an arcade. You can do it. We do it... but that's not what they're designed for."

An image comes to mind of an antebellum mansion in the South being jacked up on a wide-load truck and moved from one side of Mississippi to the other. "It's not that heavy. It's still pretty heavy, depending on the booth. We've got a booth that's about 950 and one that's 750."

In "American Photobooth," David Habetstich, curator of photography at the Smithsonian, introduces the subject: Photobooth pictures "record not the encounters and collaborations between two persons—a subject and photographer—to be analyzed and decoded in the way of the traditional photographic portrait. Instead, they portray an encounter between a solitary human and a dumb machine. Or is it in its purest sense a dialogue between the subject and the self in which the machine merely serves as a conduit or facilitator? The self-portrait is perhaps the rarest, the most elemental, the most poignant and mysterious of all artworks."

Vizzari never had a romance about the process but it seems fortuitous that his interests and skills have fed into the pursuit. "It's weird. I don't disagree with what you're saying. It's the same way, it's architectural in some way, I don't know how to explain it. The design is pretty sweet, how they're done. It's mesmerizing."

So how do aficionados get hypnotized? Vizzari doesn't see it as nostalgia so much as simple novelty. "People are used to immediacy. When you're dealing with the photobooth, I feel like you're forced to, I dunno, I almost equate it to a record. You have an MP3, you have your iPod, that's immediate, right? But it's not the same experience as you get with the vinyl, you know, pulling out the album artwork, putting it onto the record player. Flipping the sides. It's slower. It's not as fast. Sometimes when you slow things down, you're able to appreciate a little bit more." He shakes his head. "When photobooths first came out, it was considered instant photography. Now at events people ask, when's it coming out? Little kids especially don't get it."

Almost anyone of a certain age who goes out at night could reel off a couple of the rock-and-tavern locations the booths largely loiter in. The Rainbo's annual calendar, a complex equation of bar-fleas like relationship sudoku, used to end with a photo of the maintenance man, staring straight ahead from behind thick glasses, head back, small as a peanut. That booth's notoriety after more than twenty years still rests on stories of whether Liz Phair flashed or faux-fellated for the cover of "Exile in Guyville" in that stubby shed, or was it recreated and given that reputation in a photo studio? The myth obtains. Frozen mouths always await kiss. Theatrically scaled gestures and sex-intimate motions conjure timeless hanky-panky. Whatever: "Miniature Portraits... Photos in 2 1/2 Minutes."

In "Photobooth," Lawrence Wechsler observes the precession of "nameless, typical, typified individuals momentarily struck dumb, pillow of air lodged in our mouths [as we look], marveling, particulate, as the transcendence comes hurtling forth and strikes home."

There's no way it can become a mass-market experience again, ever, period. It's too bulky and involved. "It is! It's really involved," Vizzari says with his customary enthusiasm. "It's impossible to train somebody. I just don't know how to train them! You have to take it apart to figure it out and monkey with it to understand it. There's manuals and stuff, but it's not like a computer. It requires a definite investment. You can't just buy one of these things and start renting it out. When we first saw one, we said, 'Oh we'll just rent it.' Luckily, I was able to invest that time or otherwise it never would have happened. It's crazy." He pauses, returns to customers' reactions. "What do you mean, why does it take four minutes in the photobooth?" It comes out wet and they're freaked out, 'Why is it wet?' It's a really funny experience sometimes. A lot of people, different ages, too, don't even know there's four poses. In my mind, everyone knows what it is, but that's not the case. People get in and they're like, 'What do I do?' Or they'll get out before the four flashes are finished. But I guess not everyone's used the photobooth, I dunno. I just *assume* it's common knowledge."

Vizzari's greatest astonishment comes from the possibility he and his wife could do this for a living. "People are into it because we're getting a ton of calls. I mean, I don't have to do any architectural work ever again! If people still have this [desire]... It's pretty much taken over. Which should have been a side business to all my other [pursuits], I do like a thousand different things because I have a number of different interests. But we're working all the time now. We're just slammed. I'm not sure if it's just a fad—I hope it's not a fad, I hope that people understand it and appreciate it. The party we dealt with last night? We had so much fun. It was in a banquet hall, it must have cost [for the photobooth] half the price they paid for the banquet hall. But at the end of the night, the guy said, 'This is the best money we spent on the entire wedding and we're glad we did it.'" Ninety-eight percent of all the events we've done? That's been the experience."

Vizzari's Web sites include [312photobooth.com](http://312photobooth.com), detailing the photobooth business, and the "investigation of human ritual" that is *The Museum of Mourning Photography & Memorial Practice* is at [mourningphoto.com](http://mourningphoto.com). Aside from [photobooth.net](http://photobooth.net), there's more information at the Web sites of the two primary suppliers, [autophoto.ca](http://autophoto.ca) and [photo-me.com](http://photo-me.com).

