

# Visual Arts

## Click! Click, click! Click, click, click!

### Making art with cheap cameras

### Lomo lovers, this show's for you

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VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

Good news. We can finally say the season has begun art-wise, now that World Toy Camera Day is so close upon us.

World Toy Camera Day (WTCD) is being celebrated here and elsewhere Saturday by users of disposable cameras, or those cheap plastic jobs that come in lurid plastic hues, or lens-less cameras, or any of the growing range of Russian-built Lomo cameras that, because they sell for around \$100, can be called pricey cheap cameras.

This is not child's play, although you can detect a kind of wilful innocence with toy-camera freaks. The toy camera's potential — at least as it is manifested via the Lomo's approach to the craft — is considerable, as can be better appreciated with the Shift Gallery's current exhibition. "99 Portraits of People On The Wall" is by Dan Bergeron, a local photographer turned hard-core Lomo-user with his sleek little, nine-lens Pop 9 model. As its contribution to the world celebration day, Shift is hosting a toy camera day party tomorrow, 8 p.m. to 1 a.m., in its space at 688 Richmond St. W. at Tecumseth, a block south of Queen St. W.

This is image making at its most proletarian, beyond the imagination of any Communist still standing or the purveyors of Citytv's *Breakfast Television*. In keeping with its mass culture roots, WTCD is a web-based event and anyone interested can click on [toycamera.com](http://toycamera.com), a good starting point to get involved.

But since toy camera buffs react to modern camera technology as if it were the measles, being web-based is supremely ironic. (For the record, toy-camera people seem to prefer the two words "toy" and "camera" to be scrunched together as in "Toycamera," when they're referred to as a group, although cult

would be more like it.)

As one Toycamera web-based bulletin board luddites haughtily, Lomo-loving luddites eschew — yes, "eschew" — "the modern developments of camera technology, the reliance on computerized exposure systems, motorized film transport, PPI, TTL, CCD, DOF, the drive for higher and higher resolution, for gizmos, gadgets and carbon fibre tripods."

This doesn't mean back-to-the-Brownie days, exactly. Toy camera users are modern-minded. (Bergeron uses a pretty sophisticated printing process.) They tend to be design-freaks who love the look of the thing way more than its bargain basement price. They're also tech-heads who just want to feel the technology as it works, the click, buzz or snap as a simple mechanism does its thing. I have to pull a short black string to advance the 35 mm film in my little Lomo. I keep expecting it to make some horrible rude sound.

Lomo is in fact the acronym for Leningradskoje Optiko Mechnitschéskoje Objedinénie, a company based in St. Petersburg, which first came to many photographers' attention some years ago with incredibly cheap, single-lens cameras. Lomo really hit its stride some five years back with the arrival of its many multi-lens packages — mine has four lenses, pretty much on the low end of the Lomo totem pole — and its snazzy packaging, with blazing bright reds and yellows, or aqua blues and sea greens.

Part of Lomo's evolution can be traced in Bergeron's show. Before you get to the "99 Portraits," you come across some earlier work in his handsome "Life & Times of ... Series," where four identical 12-inch by 18-inch images of his friends and/or fellow artists are matched with other sets of multiple signifying images — a bit of a painting, a few letters — chosen by the subjects themselves.

Tweaking the meaning of multiple images certainly didn't begin with Lomo. The great Toronto photographer Arnaud Maggs has explored this interplay of repetition and identity for years. With Maggs — or any

number of other photogs working along similar lines — each single shot can be as revealing as a passport photo. Yet a number of them arranged sequentially can in fact have the effect of blurring the subject's identity.

When Czech writer Franz Kafka was shown a series of nearly identical portraits taken by a new fangled automatic multi-image camera installed in Prague in 1921, he described it as a "mistake-thyself" device. He was right. Many versions of the same thing don't increase our knowledge of it. They only serve to increase the chances we may misunderstand what we see.

With Maggs, it's all about control, his control. But with Bergeron, it's not. The cheap camera — even its diminished technological state — plays a big role in determining what's shot. This makes any toy-camera photo shoot a pretty loosey goosey affair. Indeed when Bergeron wants to show me his technique, he mostly means how and where he holds his Lomo.

"It's about this far, usually," he says, sticking the shiny thing in front of me. I duly note this down while feeling wonderfully satisfied that for the very first time, I've understood something about camera technology.

The entire "99 Portraits" shoot — done in a mini-tent set up on Queen St. with lurid lighting — had its roots in Pop 9's nine lens.

"I wanted some community involvement," says Bergeron. "Then I realized that the day I was going to shoot on was September 9 this year, 2004. I also realized that this was the ninth day of the ninth month. So I came up the idea of shooting nine portraits of 99 people which made it more of a challenge for myself."

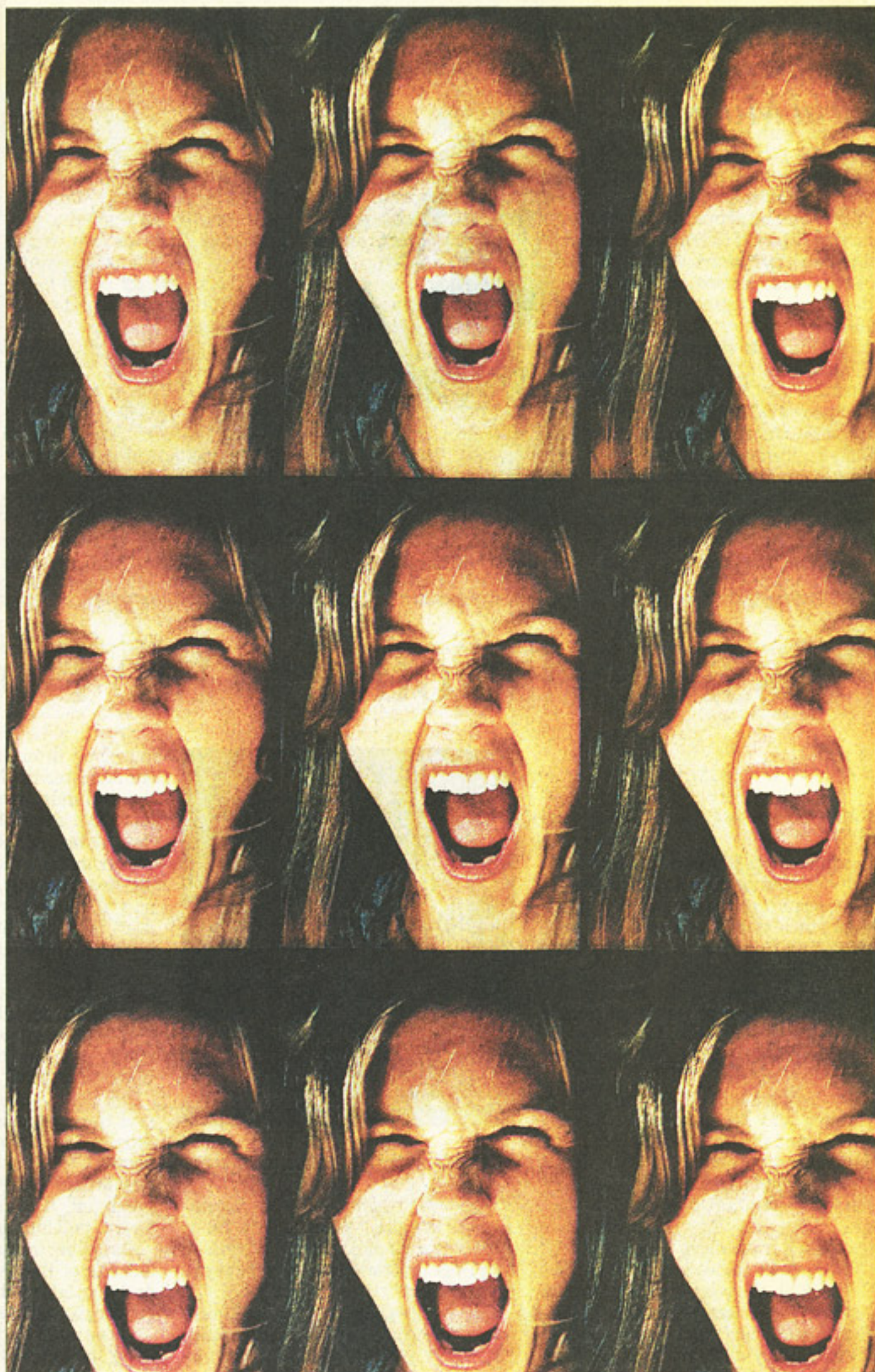
Perfect. Here's a case of the camera determining the content of an exhibition, a claim no expensive digital gizmo has yet to make.

### Just the facts

**What:** Dan Bergeron's "99 Portraits On The Wall"

**Where:** Shift Gallery, 688 Richmond St. W.

**When:** Party tomorrow night. Show runs to Sept. 31.



Nine-faced image by Dan Bergeron, part of his playful portfolio on the walls at the Shift Gallery.