

The Birth of the Author: Lartigue from the Margins to the Mainstream

PAUL JOBLING

Jacques Henri Lartigue The Invention of an Artist

KEVIN MOORE

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Lartigue, Album of a Century

MARTINE D'ASTIER, QUENTIN BAJAC
AND ALAIN SAYAG (EDS)

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In a seminal essay, 'Photography between Labour and Capital' (1983), Alan Sekula contested, 'Not only are pictures in archives often literally for sale, but their meanings are up for grabs. New owners are invited, new interpretations are promised'. The idea that the art status of both photographic images and the photographer is economically and culturally provisional – who or what exactly is inside or outside the canon? – is very much at the heart of Kevin Moore's intelligent and articulate reappraisal of the oeuvre of Jacques Henri Lartigue (the subtitle of his book, 'The Invention of An Artist', is telling), and to a lesser extent embodied in Lartigue, *Album of A Century*, the book published to coincide with the major retrospective of his work held at the Hayward Gallery last summer.

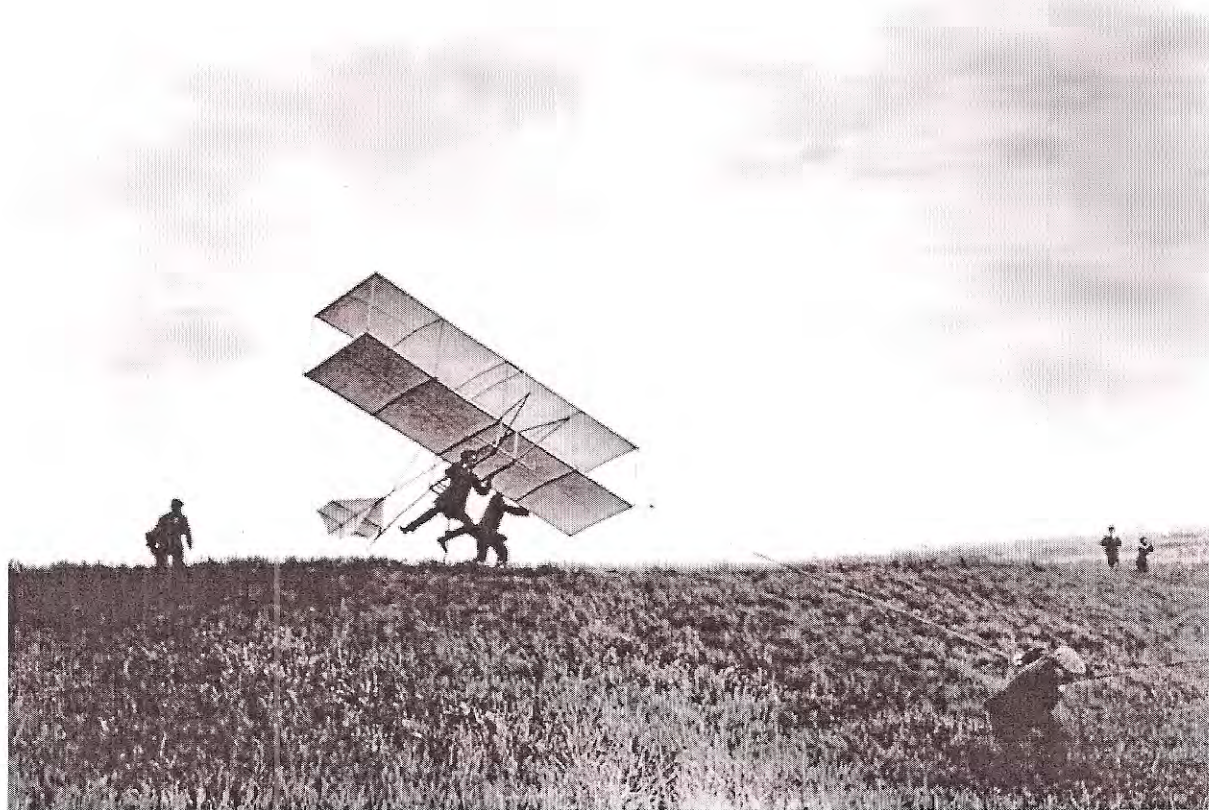
Lartigue's career as an image-maker spans more than 80 years and he was prolific: in 1902, when he was eight years old, his father Henri gave him his first camera and he was still in the process of editing his work shortly before his death in 1986. His reputation as a pivotal figure in the history of photography was not sealed, however, until he was discovered by the American art establishment and more particularly by the first exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1963, curated by John Szarkowski. Given that there is such a large volume of work to take into account – thousands of photographs and sketches,

many of which Lartigue also incorporated into albums – Moore makes an extremely good fist of things. He organises the material not just chronologically but also thematically, and effectively elaborates the tension between what he calls Lartigue's 'formation' as a photographer in France between 1902 and 1922, when he produced his first cohesive corpus of images, and the subsequent 'transformation' of the same oeuvre, achieved by both the artist himself and the way he was lionised by *Life* magazine and MoMA in 1963, and by exhibitions in France after 1975. As Moore trenchantly observes, 'With Lartigue there are two countries, two temporal moments, two historical contexts'.

The first of these temporalities coincided with the *belle époque*, a period that was dynamically both formative and transformative in regard to technological progress as well as to the role and scope of photography in art, science and society. During these years Henri Lartigue, in keeping with his professional background and class status (he was an engineer-cum-financier and member of the haute bourgeoisie), demonstrated considerable vision as an amateur photographer. He took numerous photographs of his family at home and outdoors and was an avid follower of the latest equipment and techniques. Indeed, as Moore amplifies, just what constituted the meaning of amateur photography was keenly debated at the turn of the century but has since tended to be underdeveloped in the history of the medium. On the one hand, there was the growing band of 'snapshot pests' armed with their Kodak Brownies, while on the other there was the more talented and technocratic amateur, someone described by the *Annuaire des amateurs de photographie* in 1903 as the owner of 'serious' cameras, who practised daily in order to hone his eye for tasteful composition. Lartigue *père* fell very much into the latter category, owning at least six state-of-the-art Gaumont cameras by 1911 and developing and printing his own images in the darkroom. Accordingly, his son was steeped in photographic culture from a very young age and, contrary to one of the

popular myths perpetrated by Szarkowski, Lartigue was not, therefore, a 'true primitive' but someone who inherited much of his own enthusiasm and knowledge as an amateur from his father. As Moore demonstrates, such photographic skill was enabled by a progressive familiarity with a wide range of cameras: in 1902, a heavy 13 × 18 cm plate Audouin, which had no shutter and was mounted on a tripod; in 1903, a hand-held Jumelle with 9 × 12 cm glass plates; in 1904, a Block-Notes Gaumont, with 4.5 × 6 cm glass plates and a shutter speed of 1/100 of a second; and, in 1905, a Folding Brownie No.2, which had the same shutter speed as the Block-Notes but came with roll film and produced images 6 × 9 cm in size.

While the photographs by father and son, produced between 1902 and 1910, have much in common and are often hard to distinguish in terms of style and content, soon afterwards Jacques Henri Lartigue's approach began to differ, insofar as he sided with those amateurs who realised that changing camera technology would facilitate a more expressive and aesthetic treatment of form. Central to his vision at this time was the desire to capture instantaneous action, a moment of chance that only the photographer could distil from the broader continuum of time and movement in order to create novel and arresting images. By 1910, Lartigue was using a 9 × 12 cm Takir-Klapp with a shutter speed of 1/1000 of a second and a 6 × 13 cm Klapp-Nettel stereoscopic camera with a shutter speed of 1/1200 of a second. Thanks to the mobility and faster shutters of such equipment, the need for perfect lighting conditions and for the photographer to remain completely inert was overcome. Thus Lartigue began to gravitate towards new kinds of modern subject matter: sport (principally aviation, cycling and car racing), fashion and cinema, and occasionally to have some of his photographs published in popular periodicals such as *La Vie au Grand Air*. It is this body of work that Moore analyses with considerable perspicacity and poise in the first three chapters of his book, locating it in its proper historical context



Jacques Henri Lartigue, *The Zissou 24*, 1910.
Glass negative. Association des Amis des
Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Paris. Photograph
J Lartigue © Ministère de la Culture-France/AAJHL

while examining Lartigue's personal investment in such subjects. He was, for example, as much amateur sportsman as photographer, and as keen a satirist of fashion as an arbiter of good taste. There are, however, several historical slips in Moore's treatment of the illustrative processes deployed in the nineteenth-century periodical press: he is mistaken in asserting that it was copperplate engraving that led to the publication of new illustrated weeklies after 1830 (they relied on wood engraving for their pictorial content), or that *L'illustration* (1843–1944) did not begin to publish photographic half-tones until 1903 (it had printed its first half-tone in 1883 and by 1898 the clear majority of its images were photographic).

The final two chapters of Moore's book deal with Lartigue's epiphany as an institutionalised figure and his ascendancy into the photographic canon of the great and the good. This was heralded by John Szarkowski, the curator of the first major retrospective of Lartigue's early work at

the Museum of Modern Art in 1963, who expatiated, 'Time works in favor of the honest photograph and will in fifty years often turn a banal record into a moving souvenir, sweet with the slight poetry of nostalgia'. In the early 1980s, Szarkowski was to perform a similar pantheonisation on Atget, one of Lartigue's contemporaries who, before his death in 1927, had earned a living selling his photographs of flora and fauna, monuments, and topographical views of Paris to artists, architects, and set designers as well as to the public and various publishers, libraries, museums and archives. Thus Szarkowski brought him from the margins of critical acclaim (he had been championed in the 1920s by Man Ray and Berenice Abbott, and by Walter Benjamin in his 'Short History of Photography', 1932) to the mainstream (MoMA acquired Abbott's collection of his work in 1968 and four large-scale exhibitions followed between 1981 and 1985).

As Moore rightly argues, however, it is not so much the case that Lartigue (or Atget, for that matter) had any natural or pre-ordained claim to such status, rather that Szarkowski could conveniently mobilise him to legitimate his own ideas

concerning photography as art, something he envisioned along the lines of Greenbergian formalism rather than in regard to the narrative content of images. It was this formalist approach that enabled him to recontextualise Lartigue's photographs ahistorically, juxtaposing disparate images taken over a period of time into neat configurations of shape and tone, such as in the third wall of the 1963 exhibition, where pictures of people, kites and planes were grouped together because of their common diagonal thrust. Lartigue fitted neatly into this kind of schema because he was framed (literally) by Szarkowski as a naive and spontaneous author of vernacular photography. By extension, on this level he could also be located as the missing genealogical link that preceded, but more importantly justified, later masters of the so-called 'snapshot aesthetic', such as Cartier Bresson and Garry Winogrand. Furthermore, represented in such a way, Lartigue's *belle époque* photographs struck an ideological chord with the American public because they coincided with a wave of nostalgia for the past and offered, in Moore's lapidary phrase, 'a kind of psychic retreat from contemporary

conflict' during an era overshadowed by the Cold War, civil unrest and Vietnam.

In fact, Lartigue was solicitous of public approval at this time and more than willing to promote himself in such terms, as he was living in somewhat straightened circumstances (having failed to win acceptance as a serious painter, he was forced to sell his photographs to religious publications in France, such as *Fêtes et Saisons*), even if he also realised that any notion of his work as innocent or spontaneous was spurious. The publication of some of his photographs in *Life* and the subsequent MoMA exhibition, therefore, came as a mixed blessing but they initiated an unprecedented reappraisal of Lartigue's work that took hold in his homeland as well. In 1974 he was commissioned to make an official photographic portrait of president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and one year later his first major exhibition in France opened at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Taken together, then, the two chapters in *The Invention of An Artist* that deal with Lartigue's 'transformation' are a percep-

tive evaluation of the dynamics of historiography and the role of the art market and curators in authorising the canon, which would form the basis of a lively seminar discussion for any students involved with the history of photography and museology. In turn, they appear in truncated form in *Album of A Century*. Here, Moore's is one of five short essays, along with an indicative list of the photographic oeuvre from 1902 to 1978 that Lartigue donated to the French State.

The essays are organised to cover the life and times of Lartigue in a more obviously chronological way and, in comparison with *The Invention of An Artist*, the volume is more schematic in its analysis. Two of the essays concentrate on Lartigue's childhood years and three of the authors are keen to reiterate, for instance, the importance for his adult photographic practice of the 'eye-trap' game, whereby the infant Lartigue would attempt to freeze images of people and things in his mind by shutting and re-opening his eyes directly after seeing them for the first time.

Nonetheless, the anthology is a worthwhile introduction to Lartigue for the uninitiated reader and is similar to Moore's project in several respects. Like him, all the authors are consistent in both disavowing the simplistic idea that he was a precursor of photographic modernism and foregrounding him as a fully-fledged amateur in his own right. Like his, the book is also based on the prints and series of 130 albums that Lartigue had donated to the French State in June 1979, and is even more lavishly illustrated, teeming with iconic portraits such as *Anna la Pradvina* (1911) and *Renée at Biarritz* (1930) as well as reproductions of photo-essays and facsimile pages from his albums and diaries. And, finally, in common with Moore's book and the exhibition it commemorates, which included a reconstruction of the 1963 MoMA show, *Album of A Century* is an instructive and timely reminder of just how much photographs are bound up with our own ideas of history and memory: of how, as Nietzsche so eloquently puts it, 'Forgetfulness is a property of all action'.

Paul Jobling, University of Brighton

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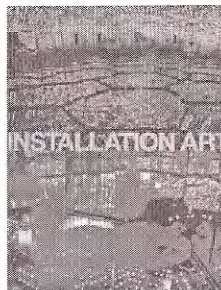
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