

It's All Dreaming

Essential Writings about Photography from Aperture

aperture

In 1952, Ansel Adams, Melton Ferris, Dorothea Lange, Ernest Louie, Barbara Morgan, Nancy and Beaumont Newhall, Dody Warren, and Minor White launched *Aperture*. These artists and writers created the quarterly journal to connect with “serious photographers and creative people everywhere, whether professional, amateur or student.” At a time when photography was still on the outskirts of the art world, *Aperture* presented writing and critical dialogue of the highest caliber.

Today, Aperture, a not-for-profit foundation, connects the photo community and its audiences with the most inspiring work, the sharpest ideas, and with each other—in print, in person, and online. Each year the organization publishes four issues of *Aperture* magazine, photobooks ranging from surveys to monographs, the biannual *PhotoBook Review*, and dozens of original online articles.

In partnership with LensCulture, Aperture would like to offer this free guide as an extension of its mission to share the best in photography. Twelve pieces have been selected, each providing inspiration, advice, or an understanding of a photographer’s process. The artists’ backgrounds and practices vary, but they are united in their rigor, and in their commitment to photography.

The title, *It’s All Dreaming*, references an interview with Gregory Crewdson published in *Aperture Conversations* (2018) and included here. Crewdson remarks, “Preproduction is great because it’s all about dreaming.” This collection of texts and photographs embraces a spirit of openness and experimentation, and encourages those reading it to do the same.

—The Editors

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Aperture Conversations

01

Gregory Crewdson

By Melissa Harris



Gregory Crewdson, *Woman at Sink*, 2014; from the book
Cathedral of the Pines, 2016
© the artist and courtesy Gagosian Gallery

An acclaimed photographer with the eye of a filmmaker, Gregory Crewdson has created some of the most haunting pictures in the history of the medium. His meticulously composed, large-scale images are striking narratives of small-town American life—moviescapes crystallized into a single frame. Often staged with crews that rival feature-film productions, Crewdson's work takes inspiration as much from his own dreams and fantasies as the worlds of Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch, Edward Hopper, Terrence Malick, and Diane Arbus. In this interview, Crewdson describes the extensive process that goes into making a single image. —The Editors, 2018

Gregory Crewdson: There are two distinct ways of working in terms of the way I make pictures. One is on location. So, on location, we're dealing with real neighborhoods or townships, or nature. Then, the other way of working is on the soundstage, which is essentially beginning from nothing and building up the entire world of the picture.

Melissa Harris: Where do you do it?

GC: I make the pictures in Massachusetts. On-location photographs, they're all in seriously small towns—Pittsfield, North Adams. Then, for the soundstage pictures, I also work in Massachusetts, on the soundstage at MASS MoCA. The reasons I work there are grounded in something psychological in myself, and then also something about, obviously, the landscape. Also I think one of the main reasons now is because I've been working there for so long, I'm able to work with the support of the community, with the mayor's office, the police department, the fire department.

MH: How do they respond to you? What did they think the first time you came in and wanted to photograph?

GC: I've been working in this area for twenty to twenty-five years. It started so incrementally that I came in unnoticed, and now it's to the point that before we start shooting, usually we meet with the mayor and the chief of police and the fire department, and we'll give them a list of the things we want to do. Often, it's like we want to close down the main street of Pittsfield, or we want to set a house on fire.

MH: Little things like that!

GC: It's been such a long working relationship that they trust me, and they understand I'm committed to the area.

MH: Are you hiring local people?

GC: I'm hiring local people. I hope I'm maybe good for the local economy, too.

MH: What do the people think?

GC: I think in general there's always a core level of people who are interested. And, people respond to having an interest in them. There's also a sense of spectacle, and a connection, too.

MH: Have they ever seen the finished work, the final work?

GC: Yes. I give them books. If somebody's in a picture, I'll give them a proof print.

MH: So they understand the finale.

GC: Yes, I think so.

Despite the enormous level of production, the process always starts with me alone. That's really central to it. When I'm on location, months before the production starts, I'll just go up for weeks at a time. I typically stay at this inn called Porches, which is right by MASS MoCA, and I spend almost every day just driving around. I drive around almost aimlessly. It's in some ways my favorite part, because there's no schedule. At that early stage, I'm not really forced to make any final decisions. There are certain spots that I know I'm particularly drawn to, so those are spots that I go back to, drive back, over and over and over again.

MH: You have a sense of place there.

GC: Yes. Place is so important to the work. Setting. Place. That sense keeps changing because of light and everything.

MH: You start with a place, but you don't have a narrative or anything in your head.



Gregory Crewdson, *Mother and Daughter*, 2014; from the book *Cathedral of the Pines*, 2016
© the artist and courtesy Gagosian Gallery

GC: Never. The first response is always location. Location, location, location.

MH: Spoken like a true New Yorker.

GC: Yeah! Then at some point during this process, I committed to this as a location. That's always a very scary thing, because you commit to it, then it starts the ball rolling, essentially. But I committed to it. I didn't know what was happening in the picture, or exactly what the vantage point would be. But I knew this would be one of the ten locations that we shot in. The next stage is probably about a month to six weeks from production. We have our first tech scout. I dread those.

MH: A tech scout?

GC: A tech scout is what we call them. I dread them because it's the first time other people are going to see the locations. That's when somehow I give over to a process.

MH: Who is at that meeting?

GC: Well, always Rick Sands, the cinematographer.

MH: What does that mean in terms of what you do versus what he does?

GC: I always call him "the genius of light." He is the person who puts all of the lighting scenes together, and he's a true genius. There's no question about it. He thinks differently than everyone else I know. We just have this interesting working relationship after so many years. We don't have to speak anymore. I imagine it happens with directors and cinematographers, where there's an unspoken communication.

MH: What do you tell Rick about what it is that you want to do?

GC: Rick is on that first tech scout; so is Saskia Rifkin, who is the line producer, who's the one who organizes all the budgets and does all the logistics; and Sarah Crofts, who is the location manager, is also there. Those are the three people at that tech scout. At that first meeting, we talk almost nothing about content.

MH: Will you talk about time of day, or sense of mood, or the light?

GC: I'll say something like, "There will be a light on this porch." Basically, that's all I'll say. I want to try to keep it inside me. And I don't know really what's happening.

MH: How much is preconceived at this point and how much is evolving?

GC: It's starting to evolve. Essentially Rick, in his mind, comes up with the lighting. Then, Saskia is now thinking overall about the logistics of it. While we're there, for the first time, Rick brings Sarah, and he starts talking about the logistics of where all the lighting sources are going to be. So she has a long list, and she has to get clearance for all of this. For instance with "Oak Street" [2006] I decided we needed a wetdown. That's where the fire department sprays down the street to make it wet.

MH: So somebody goes to talk to the fire department.

GC: That's Sarah. Sarah has, by far, in some ways, one of the hardest jobs. She's on the ground working with a couple of people. There are some characters in these towns, believe me! Then I also decide about all the cars and where they have to go. Then the next thing that happens is usually, at some point, the image will start to pop into my mind. Then Cosi Theodoli-Braschi, who works with me every day, and I go out for a separate tech scout. This is solely about content. We start talking about it in the office. She is the one who I really speak to about the ideas. Then we go to that location, and she starts taking notes about the mood and the houses, and on who's going to be there. So then she



Gregory Crewdson, *The Haircut*, 2014; from the book
Cathedral of the Pines, 2016
 © the artist and courtesy Gagosian Gallery

starts writing the descriptions. They're really beautifully written. They're one paragraph. Then once we have that description, it becomes sort of the bible for that picture. Also, because Rick and I don't really talk about the lighting so much, that's where I put in the ideas about the lighting—in the descriptions.

MH: What might you say?

GC: I would say something like, "It's sort of dark and sort of moody, there's water on the ground, there's a kind of light coming from the interior, there's low-lying fog." Then there will be something like, "and then there's a lone woman, a pregnant woman, maybe nude . . . that couple there . . ." It's all written in the description. Once that description is written, I will not really talk about the image to anyone. The description is given to all the crew, so they'll read about it, and it's given to the actors.

MH: Are you thinking in terms of narrative, or plot, or mood, or something psychological, or an emotional state?

GC: It doesn't give away anything except a description of the actual event. There's no motivation.

MH: What about in your head?

GC: In my own head, I don't want to know either. I just want to keep the image. I don't want to know what happened before or after, ever. So, in this particular case, it was interesting because I came up with different ideas about what's going on, and then it wasn't until we actually started production where—

MH: What does that mean, the day you actually start production?

GC: When I say "start production," it's that five- or six-week period of time when the entire crew is up there and we're starting to shoot. That's part of the

“I came in unnoticed, and now it’s to the point that before we start shooting, usually we meet with the mayor and the chief of police and the fire department.”

logistics of it. We have to have the entire crew of like forty people housed and fed, and they’re all on insurance and they’re all on payroll.

MH: It’s really like making a film.

GC: Yes, it is. Really, truly it is, at this point. I mean, early on, when I first started *Twilight* [1998–2002], we didn’t have insurance, we didn’t have permits. Now, every single thing is signed-off on. But the funny thing in this picture, “Oak Street” (that’s not a title, just our way of referencing the picture), is that this woman, Julianne Hiam, is actually our local casting person, and she was super pregnant. In the back of my mind, I was thinking about her, but I wasn’t really clear on it. I think I surprised her two weeks before or something when I said, “What would you think about being in one of the photographs?” She was like, “Sure, whatever, but I don’t one hundred percent want to do it.” I said, “Okay, let me send you a description.” So we emailed her a description. She loved it. She was also nine months pregnant, and she was about to give birth. This was on her due date, practically.

MH: She had presumably, then, done the casting for the random people on the porch on the left side of the picture?

GC: Yes. When I say “casting,” I use that term very loosely. Because in all these new pictures, there are no real actors. It’s all, like, going out on the street and looking. These people actually live on the block. I liked the idea of having a young couple there, unaware of this naked, pregnant woman. That actually happened two days before, and then I had *Cosi* add it to the description.

MH: How does something like that, the couple on the porch, happen? You’re thinking of the image. Still nothing is on paper, but you’re thinking of the image.

GC: Yes. Once I decided to put her in, then I wanted to counteract it with something. In the meantime Sarah, over the course of the month, is getting all the clearances for everything. This was tough logistically because of the

ambulances across the street, and the fact that there was going to be a nude woman in the picture.

Two weeks before production, we come back for the second tech scout. Usually the idea is now in my head. We come back with Daniel Karp, who's the cameraman, and we set up the camera and we do a Polaroid.

MH: Is the Polaroid done with the characters in it, or is the Polaroid about the place?

GC: It's just the place.

MH: But is it framing it the way you want?

GC: Yes. It's an eight-by-ten black-and-white Polaroid, and we have to crop it, but the actual frame is set at this point.

Now, if it's all going correctly, everyone has their descriptions and we're framing out the picture. So now, we're in production. We just finished another picture. We get here two days before. So it's a preshoot and the shoot day; those are the two days. The preshoot is just . . . if you can imagine, there are hundreds of yards of cables going through everything, and there are always like forty lights, and there's big trucks coming in, and the condor is going up—so it's hectic.

MH: Is there any serendipity in the process of photographing, or is it mostly very planned out?

GC: Oh, yes. There's always things that change and happen unexpectedly in every single picture. The weird thing is, no one really knows how the picture is going to look, because we've been just setting up all these lights. We don't really know.

MH: But then, the composite aspect of your process can also translate it into anything.

GC: Yes. So, on the day of the shoot, the camera is up. Like an hour before, basically, I talk to Dan, who is the cameraman, and Trey Edwards, who is his assistant, and I say, "Here are the focuses we need. We need foreground, we need the hero focus, we need midground . . ." So we figure out exactly what we're going to focus on.

The camera will never move. But we need to do a foreground pass, we need to do a hero pass. That just means the main focus. Then at the very last moment Juliane gets ready. She has someone who helps her in the shed, and Rick is now on a walkie-talkie. Everyone is on a walkie-talkie but me, and they're all on different channels. Like an hour before, all Rick's guys go up in the air. Then he starts focusing all the lights, and then, when we're ready to shoot, Dan is by the camera; Trey is right behind him, ready to give him film; Rick is curved to the left or right; Saskia is right next to me; and then Cosi is off slightly to the side. That's the group that's behind the camera. Now I'm focusing on things. Rick is talking to his guys. I'm talking to Saskia, who then talks to the person in the shed.

MH: Giving her directions.

GC: Yes. I'll say, "Have her a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right." Then the light starts going down. We start to get the atmosphere. Then the electric company has to come and turn off all these streetlights. This time, I think they came late or something. That's always a huge thing. I started to flip out, because we were starting to lose the light, and Juliane was sitting there naked, and then there was some problem with the fire department, and literally she's standing there naked, and the fire department and the police department were all wandering around. But, once we got that taken care of, then came what is the most beautiful time: when everything just becomes still and quiet, and all the sense of process becomes removed. That's my favorite part. You can see

“When somebody is looking at my picture, I want them just to fall into the world of the photograph . . . I just want pure image.”



Gregory Crewdson, *Beneath the Bridge*, 2014;
from the book *Cathedral of the Pines*, 2016
© the artist and courtesy Gagosian Gallery

everything transform. You can see the light starting to come on. There's a fifteen-minute period where it's just perfect.

MH: Oh, how marvelous.

GC: Yes. And all through this period, Rick is talking to these guys, nonstop. In his mind, he knows exactly where each light is and what gel is on it. It's unbelievable.

MH: It must be very sublime for you.

GC: Yeah, it really is. I know exactly what I want, so there's no improv. Like, I wanted Juliane slightly framed by this door, I wanted her to look down this way, and that's that. We start shooting when it's daylight, and then we go into night, and there's really only like a ten-minute break. My only instruction to Juliane is, "Position," and then she'll go into position; "Hold," and then she'll hold; and then "Relax." That's all I say. And I'll do it fifty times.

MH: What about you? You're someone who clearly likes to have a lot of time alone. The moments in this project that seem to be the most sublime for you are those moments when it's totally still and quiet and focused, and yet you probably choose to collaborate more intricately than any other photographer I know.

GC: I know. That's the personal irony I guess.

MH: Visually, in terms of your sensibility, is the process itself where you think something really interesting happens?

GC: Yes. I think what happens is, in a way, I respond to the chaos and all this stuff, and I always feel like I'm at the center of the swarm, in a way, and if it's all going correctly, I don't really have to say anything to anyone. Then, when it's all set up, it feels like everything recedes; like, all the people recede and everything transforms.

The final step in all this, for the soundstage and location photographs, is postproduction. In fact, I joke that I divide my life into three distinct sections—preproduction, production, and postproduction. In preproduction, it's like everything is possible. It all exists in the imagination, so there's a great sense of expectation and hope and possibility.

Production is like combat, sort of. You're just getting through the day, and then there are moments of beautiful grace, where everything comes together. Then postproduction is dealing with the remnants of what you have, in a sense. In a way, I like that least. Preproduction is great because it's all about dreaming. Production is great because you're making it and you're in it. Then postproduction is very depressing, because it's just like you're dealing with whatever residue you have, all the while trying to match those moments of grace.

Once the eight-by-ten camera is set up on a tripod, it never moves, ever. The main reason for that is we shoot eight-by-ten film, we shoot a lot of it, and we'll wind up using different elements from different negatives for the final picture. So, if someone came by and knocked the camera, the registration would be destroyed. The grips actually have created this contraption that makes it impossible to move the camera. When we're shooting, we shoot forty to fifty plates of eight-by-ten film, and then after everything is said and done, that film is developed, and then we make contacts, and then I'm faced with fifty contacts of essentially what looks like the same exact thing. But while we're shooting, we're changing the focus. We have camera logs for all of this. So, we have every imaginable focus, and then we have every imaginable slight change in light or something.

MH: How do you do that? How do you get all the focuses?

GC: The camera is stabilized, and so the only thing that moves slightly is the front standard of the eight-by-ten camera. Let's say we're shooting through this window. We do a foreground pass, which would be just to focus on this

“I’m a believer in photography and in truth and in photography as a document.”

window, and then we would do a medium focus. And then the hero focus, and so on. We have all these things. We will wind up not using most of it. But you have to shoot all of it just in case you need it. So then, later on, in my studio, I’ll look at all these things, and I’ll decide on what’s called the hero negative, which is the one that you’re mostly going to use, and then, depending on the situation, there will be four or five other elements that you might use, like foreground, background; maybe we’ll change the light in one window. Those are edited out, and then we make very high resolution scans of those eight-by-ten negatives. That’s when I start working with Kylie Wright. Then there will be months in the studio just looking at a computer screen essentially, and we’ll start integrating all these images. It’s excruciating. We’ll take the foreground from one, and we’ll use the light in a window of another. Basically, it’s all meant to be seamless. I am trying, in a way, to re-create the way I saw.

Usually in my pictures there’s nothing out of focus, there’s no blurring, no grain. Anything you associate with anything photographic, I don’t want in the picture. Do you see what I mean by that?

MH: I do. But why?

GC: Because when somebody is looking at my picture, I want them just to fall into the world of the photograph. Anything that moves against that

transparency is too much about the medium. I’ve always said, “If I could figure out a way to do this without a camera, I would.” I don’t want grain, and I don’t want pixels, I just want pure image. And that’s a hopeless impossibility.

MH: Well, it’s sort of like the people who wear tons of makeup to achieve the natural look.

GC: Yes, exactly! It is. It’s hopeless. The pictures are doomed, in that my compulsion to make a perfect world looms against the impossibility of doing so. No matter what, you cannot achieve perfect representation.

MH: But you don’t mean “perfect” in terms of “utopian,” do you?

GC: No. I mean in terms of the image. But I think that’s where the mystery of the picture comes from—that tension, from the impossibility of that happening while trying as much as you can to make it happen. I also think that every artist has one story they’re telling.

Whoever the photographer is, that’s a constant, because it’s who they are. It’s their history, it’s their trauma, it’s their desire, it’s their fascination, it’s their terror. So you have that story, that compulsion, and then you have the pictorial form, which is the attempt to take that invisible story and represent it in pictorial form. It’s that coming together of form and content, essentially.

MH: Would you relate this to photojournalists?

GC: Yes, they’re doing their thing like any photographer. If you’re speaking with a great war photographer, the first question you would ask is, “Why are you there? What need are you trying to satisfy? What are you trying to record? What is the thing? Why are you putting yourself that close to death?” That’s a compulsion that’s unanswerable. You’re trying to figure out that ultimate meaning.

MH: But for people who want to witness, to document—who have a strong sensibility, perhaps work metaphorically—do you believe that there’s absolutely no concept of real truth in photography or in art, or that conversely everything is true to somebody? Well, there’s truth and there is evidentiary truth.

GC: But I’m a believer in photography and in truth and in photography as a document. I believe in that. I align myself to that belief system, in a certain way. I want to get that moment of truth.

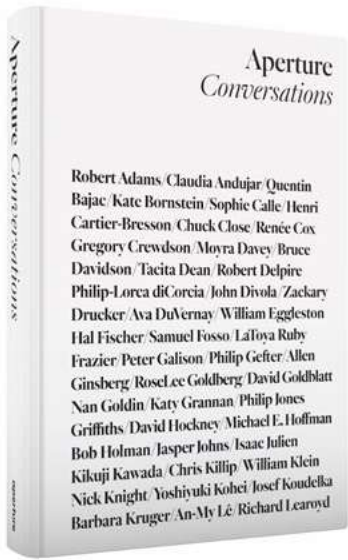
MH: “Truth” for you might mean a level of transcendence.

GC: But at the end of the day, almost despite the production, despite the artifice, the theatricality, I want at the end of the day to have something be real there. Or else I’m wasting my time. Richard Prince is a great example because he’s photographing other photographs, but he’s going after something that’s truthful, that kind of weird connection between his own desire and compulsion and something in the culture.

In the end, the central story never changes. But the form may. When I look back to my early pictures you first published in the “Our Town” issue in ’92, it’s still the same preoccupations. It’s still that fascination with ordinary life and the uncanny, and that strange kind of coming together of reality and fiction. All those things are at the core of all the pictures.

MH: Is there such a thing as photography anymore?

GC: Well, it depends how you define photography. For me, yes. Because ultimately, it’s a thing I believe in. The thing I believe in is the still and mute image that is singular and transparent, and is a record of life in some way. So if that is photography, then yes, absolutely. But I don’t limit myself to any kind of paradigm. I believe that you just figure out any tool necessary to achieve the job, and you use it.



First published as “Gregory Crewdson,” *Aperture Online*, January 2008, and republished in *Aperture Conversations: 1985 to the Present* in May 2018. [Click here for more information.](#)

A List of Favorite Anythings

02

A List of Favorite Anythings

By Alec Soth

Larry Sultan, *Mom on Chaise Lounge*, 1987
© The Estate of Larry Sultan



“The struggle of many professional photographers is to make images that have the same purity of heart as the family snapshot.”

Frank O'Hara

Whenever I'm asked to make a list, I have the desire to formulate some sort of manifesto. I like rules and guidelines, as in Lars von Trier's filmmaking movement "Dogme 95" (the film must be in color, the shooting must be done on location, and so on). But then I reread Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" and remember that his whimsical, rule-free manifesto is probably the most I'd ever be able to adhere to. "Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art," writes O'Hara. "But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity...."

The Family Photo Album

Picasso famously said that it took him four years to paint like Raphael but a lifetime to paint like a child. In a similar way, the struggle of many professional photographers is to make images that have the same purity of heart as the family snapshot. As someone whose primary ambition is to make photobooks, I've found the ultimate guide in the vernacular album. After years of collecting these albums, it was great to see this art form acknowledged in the recent Aperture book *Photographic Memory: The Album in the Age of Photography* (2011).

Masahisa Fukase's *The Solitude of Ravens* (1991)

When asked to name my favorite photography book, I always answer *The Solitude of Ravens* by Masahisa Fukase. Made after his divorce, it describes the feeling of a broken heart as lyrically as a Roy Orbison song.

Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1977)

In an era when just about every still photographer is experimenting with video on their DSLR, it is eye-opening to revisit Chantal Akerman's 1977 film of barely moving images. Every frame is perfect. But it is the voice-over of Akerman in New York reading letters from her mother, who is back home in Belgium, that gives this film its haunting beauty.

Robert Frank's *Pangnirtung* (2011)

Though I've never met Robert Frank, I feel like I've been having an ongoing conversation with him for the past twenty years. In many of our conversations, I question his later work. But with his modest 2011 book about a five-day visit to a remote Inuit village, I ceased to question and now simply enjoy being in the company of a master.



Still from *News From Home*, 1977

© Chantal Akerman and courtesy Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris and New York



Pedro Meyer, Untitled, from the series *I Photograph to Remember*, 1991

© and courtesy the artist

Pedro Meyer's *I Photograph to Remember* (1991)

I own an original CD-ROM of Pedro Meyer's multimedia piece *I Photograph to Remember*, but it no longer opens on my computer. Fortunately, Meyer eventually put the essay online, though that presentation feels dated too. What doesn't feel dated is Meyer's heartfelt tribute to his parents. The love, humor, and vulnerability of Meyer's intimate family slide show stands the test of time.

Leonard Cohen's *Ten New Songs* (2001)

A number of years ago in a frigidly contemporary German hotel room I discovered Cohen's CD in a drawer. As always with Cohen, the lyrics are the biggest draw. Nobody is able to describe the full spectrum of yearning—from physical to spiritual—the way Cohen does. But what I love most about this album is that Cohen isn't singing alone. In almost every song the vocalist Sharon Robinson accompanies him. Since that first night in Germany, the blend of their voices has served as a tonic to my loneliness in a hundred hotel rooms.

What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney (2000)

There is so much meat on the bones of this book about the underappreciated photographer William Gedney. There are Gedney's wonderful photographs, of course. But these fragmentary glimpses of grace are made all the more meaningful by reading about Gedney's process in transcriptions from his notebooks and in two illuminating essays by Geoff Dyer and Maria Friedlander. Every (as-yet) unsung photographer grappling with the medium would do well to own this book.

Wim Wenders's Im Lauf der Zeit (Kings of the Road, 1976)

Since I first rented the double-cassette VHS as a teenager, Wenders's depiction of two lonely men on the road together has felt like some sort of prophecy. So when I started traveling extensively with the writer Brad Zellar a couple of years ago, you wouldn't believe my shock when he told me that *Kings of the Road* was one of his favorite movies.

Larry Sultan's Pictures From Home (1992)

One of the hardest things to do with photographs is accompany them meaningfully with words—particularly those written by the photographer. *Pictures From Home* achieves this goal better than any other book I've seen. But I only allow myself to read the book every few years because (1) it is so heartbreaking and (2) it is so good that it makes all of my work seem trivial.



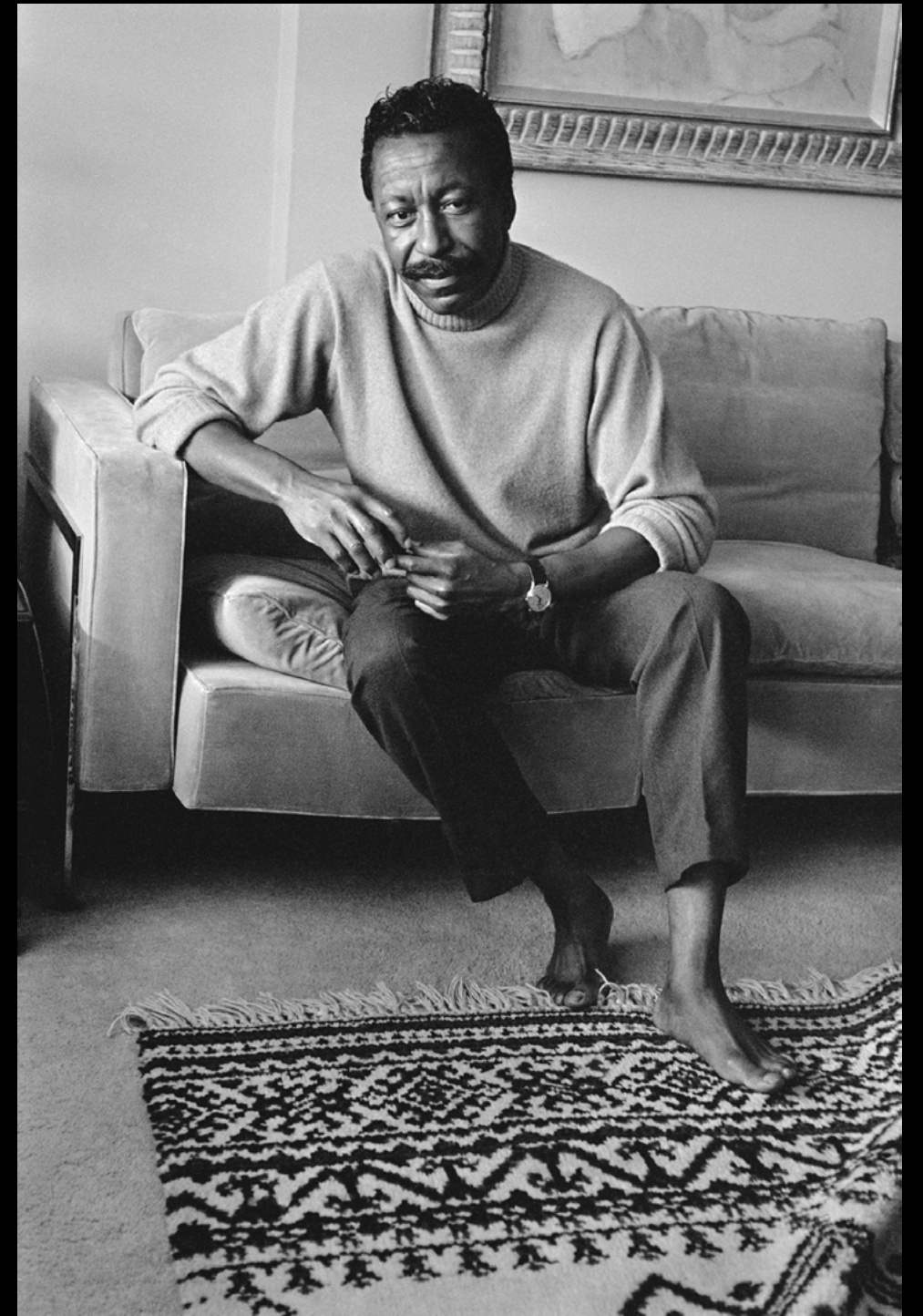
First published in *Aperture* 216, Fall 2014, "Fashion."

[Click here for more information.](#)

A List of Favorite Anythings

By LaToya Ruby Frazier

Eve Arnold, *Gordon Parks*, 1964
© the artist/Magnum Photos



Growing up in Braddock, Pennsylvania, LaToya Ruby Frazier saw firsthand the economic and environmental decline and racism that affected her industrial hometown, subjects she explores through a personal documentary approach. For twelve years, she photographed her mother, grandmother, and herself in a series of deeply evocative images contained in her book *The Notion of Family*, published by Aperture in 2014. Also a lecturer and professor, Frazier is among the most compelling new voices working within and expanding the tradition of documentary photography today.

Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 1966

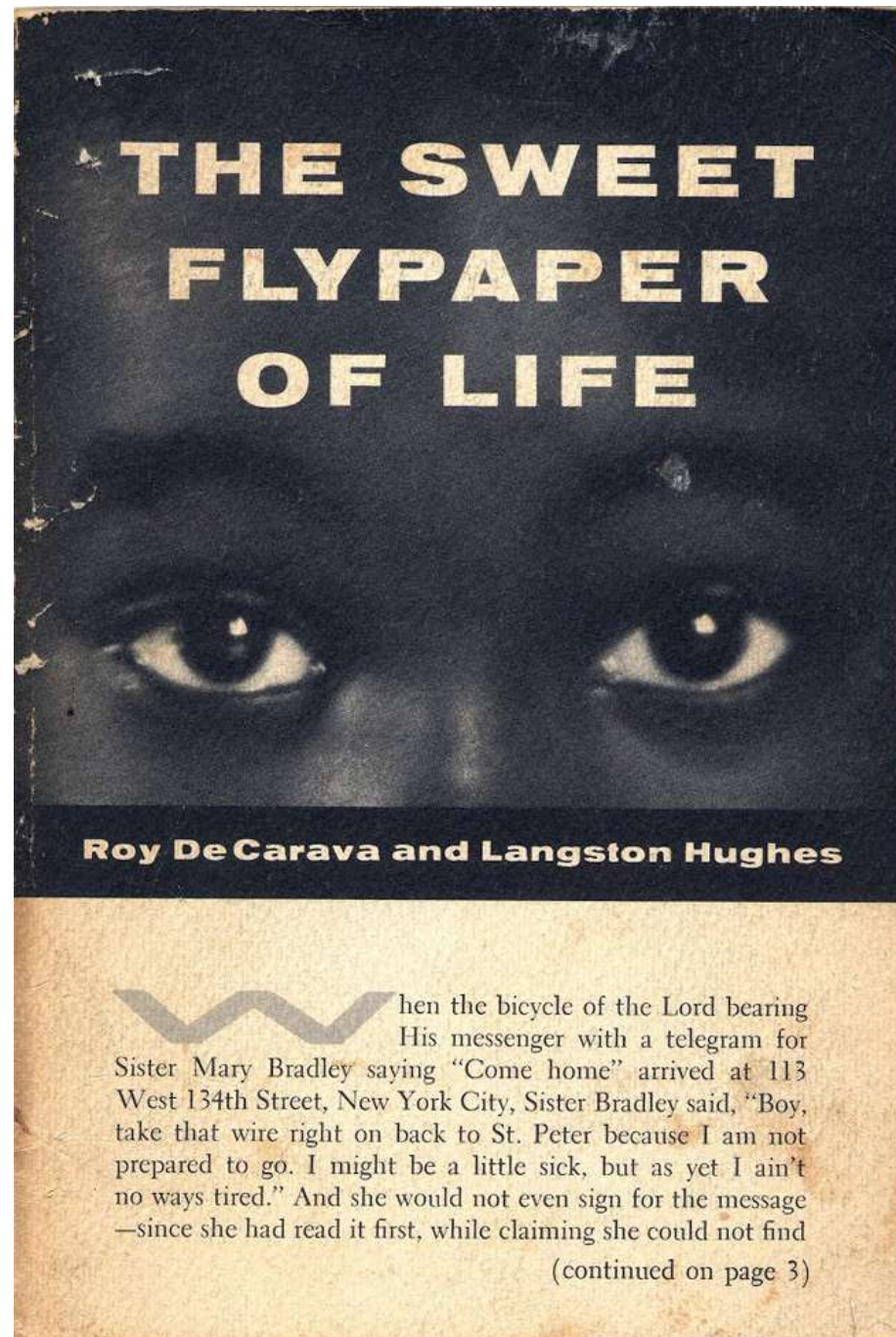
Gordon Parks's memoir taught me the best reason to pick up a camera: "My deepest instincts told me that I would not perish. Poverty and bigotry would still be around, but at last I could fight them on even terms." It is a story of strength, courage, honor—a will to survive and make a mark on history. His ability to express his disdain for poverty, racism, and discrimination in America through eloquent, beautiful, and dignified photographs is timeless. Any student struggling to understand why some photographers document humanity will gain insight from this autobiography.

Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 1988

I've been fascinated by literature's freedom to render the complexities of dark childhood memories and abject realities. Kincaid's fictions, semiautobiographies, and multiple points of view are intensely rich and unapologetically evocative. Her ability to take on themes of patriarchal oppression, colonialism, race, gender, loss, adolescence, and ambivalence between mothers and daughters inspires me. Any reader who wants descriptions of familial relationships or a sense of human relationships to homeland, economy, and education could certainly glean universal themes from Kincaid.

Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, 1977

My understanding of how to create atmosphere, mood, and narrative largely comes from my love of film and cinema—from Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, and Charles Burnett to Wong Kar-wai. I love showing my students the relationship between these filmmakers' visual language and that of classic photographers, like Eugène Atget, August Sander, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and Parks. With its sound track and lyrical visual language, *Killer of Sheep* is the ultimate masterpiece. Set in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, a portrait of American life is rendered as the protagonist Stan struggles with social class and disillusionment while working long hours at a slaughterhouse; the stress to generate financial stability strains relationships with his wife and close friends. The film is an incredible depiction of how we negotiate intimacy and how we are restricted by landscapes and labor.

Cover of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955**Jason Moran, "Artists Ought to Be Writing," from the album*****Artist in Residence*, 2006**

Sometimes when I'm editing in the studio, I play music by jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran. I was brought deeper into his music when I heard artist Adrian Piper's voice in his song "Artists Ought to Be Writing." While writing the text to accompany my photographs in my first book, I followed Piper's instructions: "Artists ought to be writing about what they do and what kinds of procedures they go through to realize a work.... If artists' intentions and ideas were more accessible to the general public, I think it might break down some of the barriers of misunderstanding between the art world and artists and the general public."

Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955

DeCarava and Hughes's collaboration is a perfect example of how history can be reclaimed and redirected through storytelling and imagination. Hughes's words take us through the eyes of a fictitious grandmother to reveal a representation and memory of Harlem that is at odds with the unloved depictions reported by mainstream media in the 1950s. Hughes's last book, *Black Misery* (1969), is seldom discussed or quoted, but this line resonates with my work: "Misery is when you heard on the radio that the neighborhood you live in is a slum but you always thought it was home."

New Museum survey, *Emory Douglas: Black Panther*, 2009

Though I speak primarily through photography, I am not limited to it. Occasionally, I work in video and performance. When I look at the artwork, illustrations, prints, and roles of Emory Douglas as a revolutionary artist and minister of culture for his community, I am reminded of Bertolt Brecht's *The Popular and the Realistic* (1938): "There is only one ally against growing barbarism—the people, who suffer so greatly from it. It is only from them that one can expect anything.... Anyone who is not a victim of formalistic prejudices knows that the truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways."

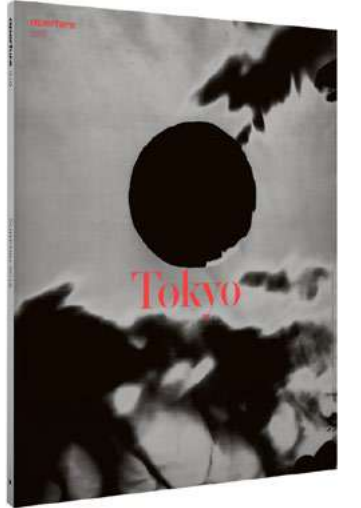
“My understanding of how to create atmosphere, mood, and narrative largely comes from my love of film and cinema.”

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 1990

I watch this play to understand the great migration from the South, self-worth, and how to put my cultural legacy to use creatively.

Albert and David Maysles, *Grey Gardens*, 1975

This is the film that helped guide me into my collaborations with my mother. Full of compassion and without judgment, this brilliant documentary takes cinema verité and psychological space to another dimension. Shot over a six-week period of time, the Maysles brothers' encounters with Edie and Edith Beale are not shown in chronological order. This destabilizes the viewer's sense of time and heightens the complexity of the Beales' relationship. The passage of time is indicated through a gradual collapse of a dilapidated wall; at the beginning it's a hole in the plaster, toward the middle the hole expands, and by the end it falls completely as a raccoon crawls out. This is a great example of how time can be used as metaphor and to build tension in a set of relationships.



First published in *Aperture* 219, Summer 2015, "Tokyo."

[Click here for more information.](#)

A List of Favorite Anythings

By Leslie Hewitt

Andrea Bowers, *Hope in Hindsight*, October 2009. Photograph by Eric Hester.
Courtesy Project Row Houses



Saturated with references to the lives of African Americans, Leslie Hewitt's work explores the poetics of visual history, its absences, and its mysterious narratives. In her series of constructed images *Riffs on Real Time* (2006–9), Hewitt overlaid found snapshots of everyday people onto ephemera, including pages from *Ebony* magazine. Her photographs, often presented in sculptural installations, function as portals into memory, where historic scenes mingle with personal lives.

Eva Hesse: Diaries, 2016

Mon. Be stronger—say no.
—Eva Hesse, 1964

Each entry from the beautiful object that is *Eva Hesse: Diaries* is a strange yet paralleling space between a finished and unfinished thought. Her objects and drawings in a similar way give room to the viewer, inviting a proximity of intimacy and engagement. How much to reveal and what should remain a mystery (yet to be discovered or experienced) is a delicate balance for all artists. Hesse's interior world (shared in the diaries) is as rich as her material investigations (shared through her studio work).

Pamela M. Lee, Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark, 1999

In 1990s New York, shifts in demographics were visible, and the effects of public policies shaped my walks through the city. Pamela M. Lee's book on the work of Gordon Matta-Clark—her words contextualize the spatial histories his cuts revealed—was a counterpoint to the modules of erasure that were “cleaning up” the cityscape his art addressed. Lee's writing is crucial to a stance that acknowledges architectural and sculptural acts as sharing a temporal relationship with photography.

David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble, 1991

How can David Hammons's inert objects produce critical energy, curiosity, and a sense of playfulness while evoking complex systems of knowledge and culture? In his mostly nonobjective approach to sculpture, and adept transformation of material, there's a cross-pollination of conceptual art practices with a blues aesthetic. Concepts of introspection and contrapuntal modes of expression evident in the artist's power objects and installations move together seamlessly. Hammons's investigations of objecthood, performance, and provocations guide artists in the twenty-first century toward a formidable critique of systems of power.

Stan Brakhage, *Mothlight*, 1963

The 1960s visually and intellectually provide a place of refuge, even within that era's political volatility and convention-breaking *modus operandi*. Third Cinema, along with the structural approaches found in the works of Tony Conrad, Michael Snow, and the nonnarrative explorations of Stan Brakhage, give me courage to seek out new visual registers through repetition. Brakhage's *Mothlight* is as arresting when viewing the still frames as it is in motion, asking the viewer to consider collage and montage equally across time and space.

Deborah Willis, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, 1996

Deborah Willis's scholarship and mentorship opened a world of criticality and emotion in the approach to photography, challenging me to see beyond the surface of things, to dare to uncover what lay unpictured, underexposed, or overexposed. The juxtaposition of snapshot images with the book's narrative text, built around the pictorial gaps, led me to nestle my artistic practice in a similar space, full of sociopolitical modes, that questions history and asserts agency even in subtle gestures.

Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 1975

Irwin Rubin, a painter and professor at Cooper Union and my teacher, utilized the educational strategies of his teacher—artist and color theorist Josef Albers. In Rubin's course, we interrogated modes of color phenomena and materiality. Beyond the classroom, I could not unsee aspects of color relationships from the moment I opened my eyes in the morning to when I closed them at night. The transmission of art through exchange, methodology, interplay, and experimentation can radically change a person's life.



Still from *Mothlight*, 1963

Courtesy Estate of Stan Brakhage and Fred Camper



Still from *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013
© Hito Steyerl and courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Sherrie Levine, *Meltdown*, 1989

Sherrie Levine uses appropriation to critique mythologies around art and genius. The results defy categorization and create a symbiotic relationship between her subject of criticism and her artistic gestures. *Meltdown* engages the works of Marcel Duchamp, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Piet Mondrian, and Claude Monet, resulting in woodcuts with variations on twelve squares of color. Levine made this portfolio in the late '80s. Considering the velocity of images we contend with by the minute, the contemplative pace of this work continues to mesmerize.

Hito Steyerl, *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN:*

***A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013**

“The most important things want to remain invisible. Love is invisible. War is invisible. Capital is invisible.” In *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN*, Hito Steyerl reminds the viewer of the underlying paramilitary technology photographic practices employ, and to what end. This playfully disturbing video creates the cognitive dissonance needed to fully embrace and acknowledge the risks taken while indulging in the virtual window. The socialization process of self-surveillance and constant mediation produces strange effects, procedures, and navigations, one of which is agency.

**Project Row Houses, Houston; the Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago;
the Underground Museum, Los Angeles**

Writer Greg Tate refers to “maroon spaces” of black music, but could such spaces also exist as architectural sites in the contemporary art world? I would argue yes: At Project Row Houses, where the logic of John Biggers’s paintings interacts with the notion of Joseph Beuys’s social sculpture and a concrete rebuke of gentrification. At the Stony Island Arts Bank’s four dynamic archives (academic glass lantern art history slides, a collection of “negrobilia” or racist “kitsch” objects, house-music pioneer Frankie Knuckles’s vinyl collection, Johnson Publishing archive). And at the Underground Museum, with its recent, probing exhibition *Non-fiction*. These vanguard projects create space and open platforms, both in theory and in practice.

Kellie Jones, *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*, 2011

Genealogy matters in art: Who are your teachers? Your friends? Your community? What are these cacophonies of influences? Plotted onto a graph, is summation even a possibility? Kellie Jones opens up such questions, offering up multiplicity as a system for understanding contemporary art. *EyeMinded* brings to life New York, the creative class, and the intricately laced art worlds that shape Jones’s view and her approach to writing about art objects, artists, and the collective act of making meaning.



First published in *Aperture* 227, Summer 2017, “Platform Africa.”
[Click here for more information.](#)

The Photographer's Playbook

Assignments and Ideas

03

A Short List of Remedies for Photographer's Block

By Matthew Connors

Top: Matthew Connors, *Beijing*, 2008, 2008
Courtesy the artist

Bottom: Matthew Connors, *Nagasaki*, 2006, 2009
Courtesy the artist



Hello to You

Choose a street corner with moderate pedestrian traffic and stand there for a predetermined hour. Say hello to every person that passes by. Take portraits of the people who stop to talk to you. Return to the same corner the following week at the same time and hand out copies of the pictures.

Perimeter Delimiter

Identify the boundaries of your neighborhood or town and draw them out on a printed map. Walk them to the best of your abilities and take pictures along the way. Stand as close as you can to the border when taking each picture.

Neighbor Labor

Introduce yourself to your closest neighbor. Tell them you are a student working on an assignment and ask permission to accompany them to their job tomorrow. Spend at least an hour with them at work and make pictures there. Additional permissions may be required. Repeat with other neighbors.

Physical Laws

Using household items, construct devices that will illustrate one or more of the following laws of physics: Snell’s law (the refraction law) the Tyndall effect, Lambert’s third law, Archimedes’s principle, or Newton’s laws of motion. Photograph them. These are illustrations and need not be viable experiments.

Sticks and Stones at Home

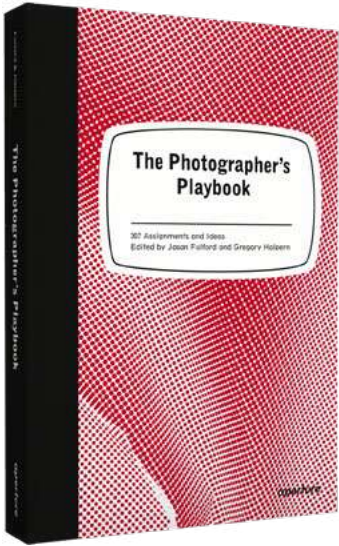
Contact a former bully and ask them if they would be willing to meet up with you. Make a portrait of them in their childhood bedroom.

In the Family

Make a series of pictures of the decorative objects, art, and photographs found in the houses of your relatives. Consider photographing as if you were making images for an archaeological study or exhibition catalogue.

Terms of Estrangement

Contact a former partner that you haven’t spoken to in a long time. Arrange to meet and take their picture. Make a distinct portrait for each year that you were together.



First published in *The Photographer’s Playbook*.
[Click here for more information.](#)

Discomfort

By Katy Grannan

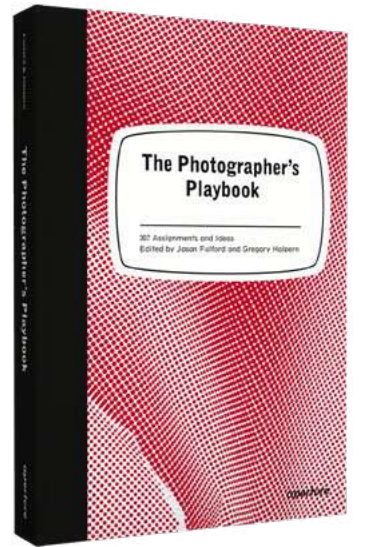


Left: Katy Grannan, *Anonymous*, Modesto, California, 2014
Courtesy the artist; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; and Salon 94, New York

Right: Katy Grannan, *Anonymous*, Bakersfield, California, 2011
Courtesy the artist; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; and Salon 94, New York

Get comfortable with discomfort. There are so many ways to do this—it doesn't even have to involve making a photograph. When I was in graduate school, after our weekly critiques, a bunch of us would go out and get drunk and do karaoke together, visiting artists included. We all looked and sounded like asses, but most important, it reminded us to have fun and be stupid and have a life outside of making art. School can be an incredibly intimidating place. I'd never "studied" art until I went to graduate school, and I spent two years terrified of the potential for humiliation. My work mattered more than anything I'd ever done. But you have to make mistakes—sometimes you need to make terrible work to really get somewhere. Failure can make you brave.

The good work will come over time, and, of course, you'll still feel terrified because, hopefully, you're always risking something. Otherwise, why bother? That's when you need a sense of humor and humility, because in the end, we're all beggars here.



First published in *The Photographer's Playbook*.

[Click here for more information.](#)

The Spaceship

By Charles Harbutt

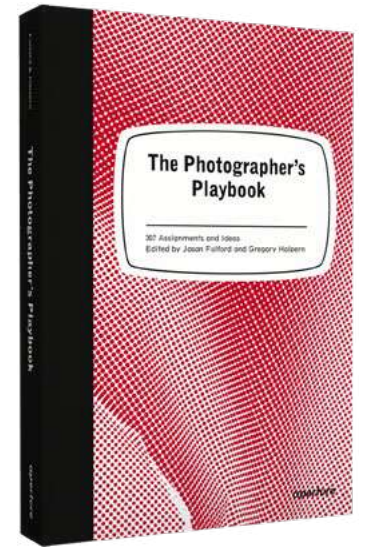


Charles Harbutt, *Chrysler Building, New York*, 1970
Courtesy the Estate of Charles Harbutt

Twenty-four hours from when you start this assignment, you will board a spaceship headed toward a point in the solar system from which it's unlikely you'll return. No one is going with you—at least no critics or art buyers, no editors or savants. Certainly no teachers. There is nothing on the walls of the spaceship, no mirrors or paintings. The food comes in tubes with barcodes for labels. There is no radio or hi-fi, no TV or movies, no games or books. No dope or alcohol either. But you can dream.

All you can take with you as art or entertainment, as puzzle, pastime, or memento of life on Earth are the photographs you make in the twenty-four-hour period before blast-off. Take the day off, at least from all that strain to make “good photographs.” You can take any pictures you want, any way you wish. Maybe you'll make a “bad” photograph in a new and original way.

Bon voyage!



First published in *The Photographer's Playbook*.

[Click here for more information.](#)

Dear Me

By Hank Willis Thomas



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Cotton Bowl*, 2011; from the series
Strange Fruit
Courtesy the artist

If you can’t tell, I’m a firm believer in earnestness. I wish there was a word called “earnesty” though. I like the sound of that better. Anyway, it’s best to try to face yourself before exposing yourself to other people. This is good to do when feeling blocked. Grab a piece of paper and pen. Better yet, grab a notebook. The one you keep your ideas in. Do you have a book of ideas? Where do you log your dreams? So, now that you have that: Sit down in a quiet place. If you can, get some other creatives around to partake in the exercise. Being naked is always more fun when you have company. Take a moment to quiet your mind.

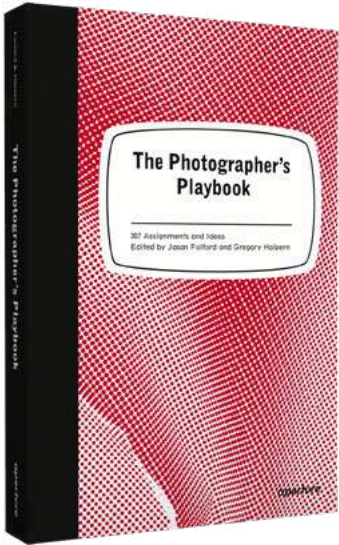
Compose a letter to yourself. You always know when you are lying so this should keep you honest.

Dear [insert your name],

Thank you for working through these exercises with me. Let’s cut to the chase. The reason I decided to be an artist is_____. What I love most about it is _____. I must admit I never expected to _____. But that’s okay because _____. When I’m faced with creative challenges I _____. Which is really good _____. But I wish I _____or _____, as well as _____. What I want most out of creating art is _____. I do not want _____. But I’m okay if _____. I am driven to create by _____. What I like most about my work is my ability to _____and when it _____or _____. I feel best when a piece _____. I hate it when _____. I don’t like when my work _____or _____. It makes me feel _____. I know I can’t control what others see, but I would like viewers to _____and _____or at least _____. I don’t want them to _____or _____. I will consider myself successful if _____or _____. I don’t mind _____or _____if it means _____.

[You can ad-lib from here, but try to get to the bottom of the page and end with some positive reinforcement.]

Ahhhhhh. Now doesn’t that feel good?



First published in *The Photographer's Playbook*.
[Click here for more information.](#)

The Photography Workshop Series

04

Repetition as Progress

By Todd Hido

Todd Hido, #2122, 1998
© the artist and courtesy Rose Gallery, Santa Monica, California



“It’s okay to stay in the same place for a while and to trust the desire to do so.”

I used to get really freaked out when I didn’t have new ideas, thinking, “Oh my God, what am I going to do next?” I thought I had to change everything, and of course, you can’t just go and do that because you can’t change yourself.

I keep this list of rules for art students in my office, the same list that John Cage kept in his studio. They’re by Sister Corita Kent, and the first rule is, “Find a place you trust and then try trusting it for a while.” It’s okay to stay in the same place for a while and to trust the desire to do so. I’d go to the same suburbs and make pictures of houses at night with lights on. I’d see that a picture was really good and then make another one to see what happened. I’d go back again and again, making pictures in the same places. Slowly but surely the work evolved. I don’t think our human nature lets us truly repeat ourselves. Repetition is just part of the creative process.

Frederick Sommer used to say a lot that “variation is change.” That’s the thing about photography that’s so curious. There’s something essential in doing the same set of actions over and over again. It’s a kind of ruminating. There’s a comfort and consistency in the repetition, but it’s not too comfortable. You’re not bored. There is still something sustaining your interest, pulling you along. You have to trust that you will come up with something different, arrive somewhere new in the process. It may start with making a picture of a house that’s orange instead of blue.



First published in *Todd Hido on Landscapes, Interiors, and the Nude*.
[Click here for more information.](#)

Amanda

By Mary Ellen Mark

Mary Ellen Mark, *Amanda and Her Cousin Amy*,
Valdese, North Carolina, 1990
© the artist



“You don’t have to be on a magazine assignment to follow your interests and instincts. Following one subject can be an assignment in and of itself.”

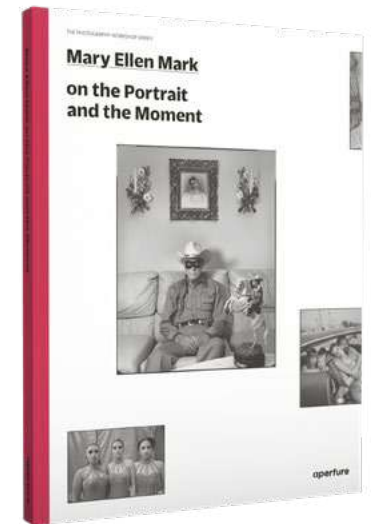
There was a school for problem children in Valdese, North Carolina, and I went there on assignment for *LIFE* magazine. I thought all the kids were great. Nine-year-old Amanda was very intelligent and very naughty. She was, of course, my favorite. I took a lot of pictures of her, and one day I rode the school bus home with her. I was curious about where she lived. She got off the bus in front of her house but ran into the woods. I ran after her and found her sitting there in an old chair smoking a cigarette. What could I do? She was nine and smoking a cigarette. If I had asked her to stop, she would have just laughed at me.

I met Amanda’s mother and arranged to come back the following Sunday to spend a day photographing. I always recommend sticking with a subject you like to photograph. You don’t have to be on a magazine assignment to follow your interests and instincts. Following one subject can be an assignment in and of itself.

Amanda got really excited that I was coming. She put on her mother’s makeup, and even got fake fingernails. So I spent the day with the family, mainly Amanda and her cousin, Amy. I was a little disappointed because Amanda was so into being photographed that it was hard to catch an authentic moment. Sometimes, the hardest thing is to get people to stop mugging for the camera. Also, with children, if they are playing too much to you, it’s not real (they’re too involved with you). Treat them like adults. Sometimes I’ll say, “If you smile, I won’t take your picture.”

Toward the end of the day, as I was about to leave, Amanda’s mother said, “Amanda’s back in the kiddie pool if you want to say good-bye.” So I went back to the pool, and there she was smoking a cigarette. I had my Leica with me. I composed the picture quickly with the round pool filling a lot of the frame. Amanda commands the foreground with her attitude and her cigarette. You can see that she’s totally relaxed in front of the camera after a day of shooting. She’s not performing anymore. I shot two frames, maybe three.

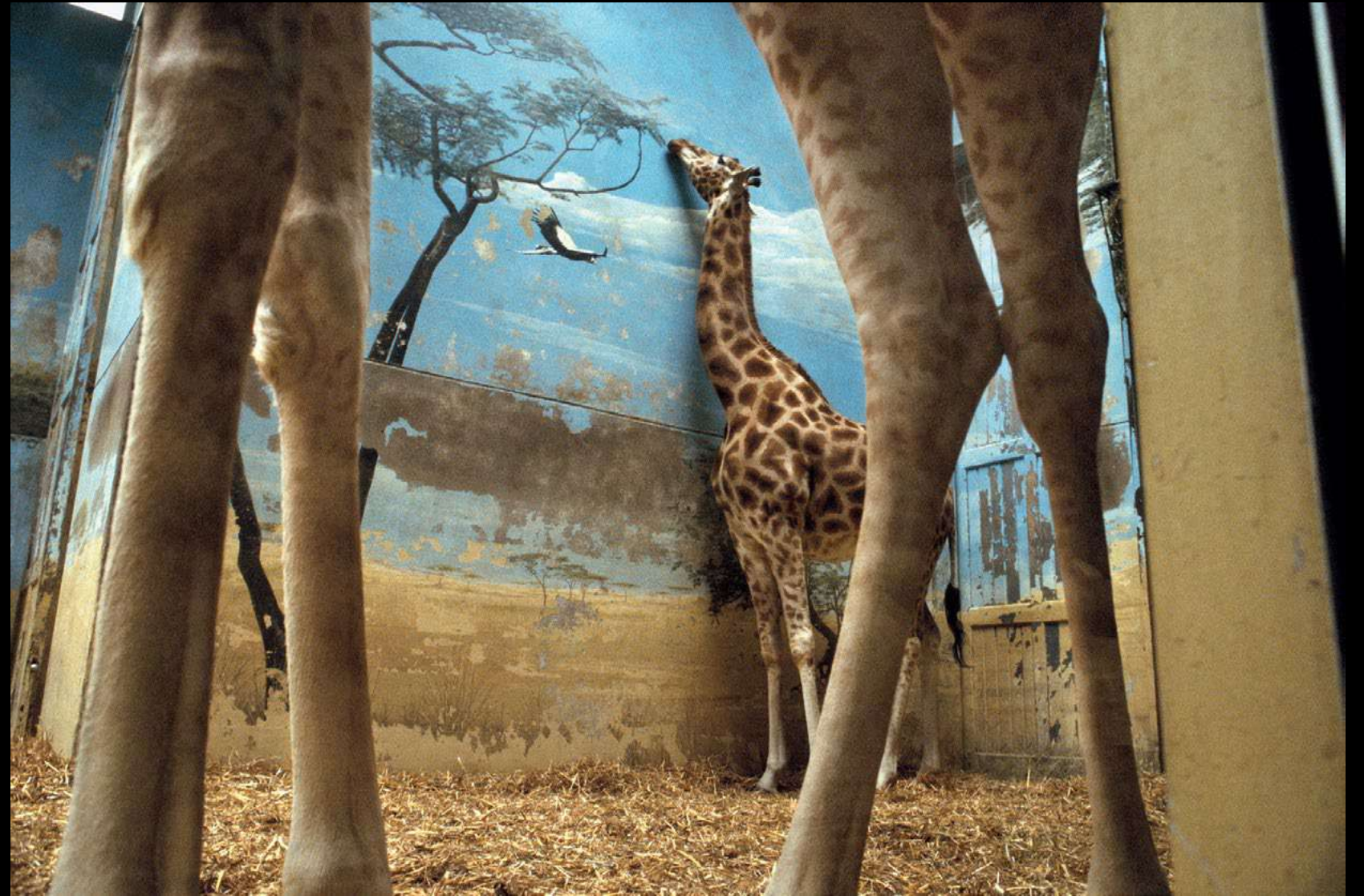
I often tell students, “Don’t put away your camera. Keep it out at all times, even when you think you have the shot already.” Something can always happen. I had packed up all of my other equipment but luckily I had the Leica on me.



First published in *Mary Ellen Mark on the Portrait and the Moment*.
[Click here for more information.](#)

Mistakes as Road Maps

By Rebecca Norris Webb



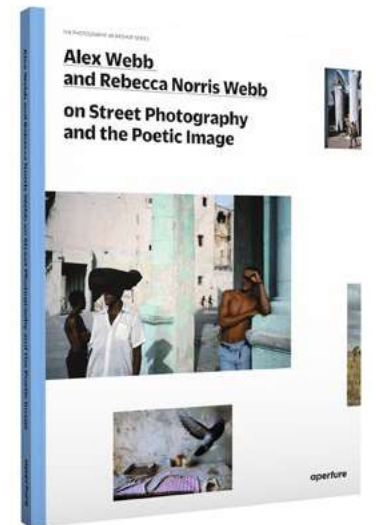
“[I] was surprised and delighted that the god of photography smiled down upon me that day.”

It's important to take bad pictures. It's the bad ones that have to do with what you've never done before. They can make you recognize something you hadn't seen in a way that will make you recognize it when you see it again. —Diane Arbus

Many of my contact sheets for *The Glass Between Us* are filled with mistakes. Occasionally, some contacts hold nothing more than blurred tails or wings; others show more promising images thwarted by my frustratingly close calls. I ended up keeping some of these contact sheets around to serve as kind of a reminder or road map, just in case I had the chance to revisit the same location.

Early on in the project, a friend in Paris, Agnès Sire, who is now the director of the Cartier-Bresson Foundation, told me about a Paris zoo that had an African savannah scene painted by a noted French muralist in the 1930s. I visited and saw the lovely, faded mural but, alas, there were no animals in sight. A year later, I decided to return to the zoo. As it started to rain softly, I gathered my gear to leave when I noticed that the keeper was about to shepherd a herd of giraffes into the enclosure with the mural. I ended up lingering for two hours—just the giraffes and me—and was surprised and delighted that the god of photography smiled down upon me that day.

As Bruce Davidson once said, photography depends on the three P's: passion, persistence, and patience.



First published in *Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb on Street Photography and the Poetic Image*. [Click here for more information.](#)

The Grace of Others

By Alex Webb



Alex Webb, *Nuevo Laredo, Mexico*, 1996
© the artist

“In the end, it’s not only what the world gives the photographer, it’s also what the photographer brings to the world.”

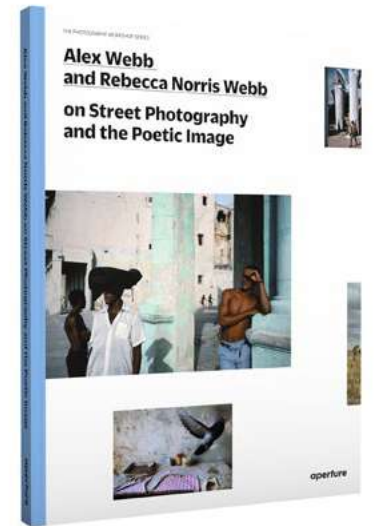
Every culture has its own mores, its own traditions; every group of human beings has a different sense of privacy and personal space. And so photographing in the streets in different cultures inevitably calls for different strategies. In some places, people seem to almost embrace the presence of a photographer; others resist it. What works for a photographer in Havana, might not work in London. In Morocco, people often shy away from being photographed by outsiders; in India, they’re so curious about strangers that, later on, one often discovers unexpected smiling faces peering into the edges of one’s photographs.

How to tell if one will be accepted in a given culture? For me, the only way is to simply walk out the door and see what happens. On a snowy day in Armenia, I was pleasantly surprised to be invited in for breakfast. In Jamaica, I remember my apprehension as a red-eyed, dreadlocked Rastafarian accosted me in the streets of Trenchtown, one of Kingston’s most notorious slums, only to announce: “Some Rastas they a wolf. I a sheep.” Then he smiled broadly—a languorous, ganja-induced smile.

There are also many places where one can’t simply walk around and photograph, where there is crime or violence, or perhaps widespread suspicion of the camera. In these cases, the photographer may need someone else—a social worker, a community leader, or simply a local—to help enter these worlds. Or he may need to return to a neighborhood again and again to establish trust with a particular community.

In the end, it’s not only what the world gives the photographer, it’s also what the photographer brings to the world. If the photographer seems nervous in the street, the people around him will also feel nervous. If he approaches situations with a sense of ease or a sense of humor, and with seriousness, gravity, and respect for the culture, he may discover that he will be welcomed into other worlds. There’s nothing wrong with gentle joking, or allowing yourself to be the butt of jokes. After all, we photographers often do look a little silly traipsing through the streets in search of what only we imagine to be ineffable moments.

Ultimately, how long a street photographer can linger in any given situation is largely thanks to the grace of others.



First published in *Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb on Street Photography and the Poetic Image*. [Click here for more information.](#)

**IT'S ALL DREAMING: ESSENTIAL WRITINGS
ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY FROM APERTURE**

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