

dear reader,

Every day between my thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth birthdays, I tried to make at least one completely new and compelling photograph. The idea was to create a narrative that was attentive to place, change, and the meandering pace and flow of life. For practical reasons (family, job, sleep), the pictures emerged from my daily activities. I used a digital camera and worked quickly, usually generating scores of photographs in a matter of minutes. Each night before going to bed, I chose a single image and often wrote an accompanying caption.

6

The idea of making daily pictures was one I'd considered for years, but in the pre-digital era, it was a notion that was prohibitively expensive, if not logistically impossible. As a college professor and a professional photographer, I also had serious doubts about what could even come from such an effort. The basic concept was certainly a little nutty—after all, how could the endeavor possibly warrant the time and attention that it would require? And who would ever want to see the results? Eventually, a series of events justified the idea until I not only felt that I had something worthwhile to say in this way, but also became desperate to say it. The following is a rough account of how I came to carry a camera everywhere and why I didn't go to sleep at night until I'd made my picture.

#### what goes in the box

I'm a typical dad: I have a camera and I'm not afraid to use it, especially around the house. For years, I memorialized traditional family events, but I rarely made the kinds of pictures that normal people would want to paste into their scrapbooks. I tended to photograph such things as the halo of crumbs left after a flurry of plastic forks had obliterated a birthday cake, or the kids' tears following the inevitably popped party balloon. I thought that these kind of images were more engaging and truer to the experience of the occasion than a blinding "just-say-cheese" flashbulb moment, even though many of my pictures required an awkward account of their origin ("I know it looks like a mound of crumpled wrapping paper, but it was our son's birthday party"). My wife, who is a kind and understanding person, was usually untroubled by the shortage of pictures we



Rocking our first son to sleep in the bedroom of my youth, June 1997.

could confidently send off to relatives' refrigerators. Unless I had explicit instructions to do otherwise, I made family pictures so offbeat that they went straight into a box, safe from the light of day or any need for an apologetic explanation.

#### **desperately standing still**

On other occasions, I made pictures around the house that commemorated ordinary mileposts. Captions for those photographs included "When the car turned 200,000 miles" and "Our annual wedding-tree picture, year seven: spraying to kill a fungus." These pictures honored events we valued—they were serious and simple elegies that chronicled a young couple's shared life and lamented the passage of time. They were also an effort to somehow slow the pace of our rapidly accelerating lives, which were increasingly filled with work, school, and kids.

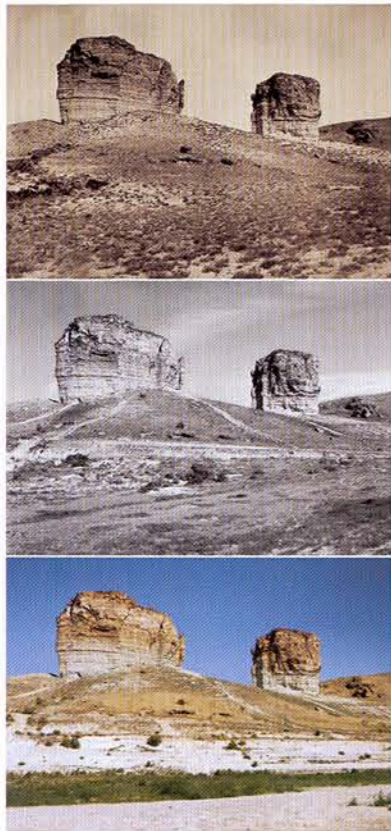
Because the pictures were mostly about the world that my wife and I inhabited, we were rarely visible in them. We weren't characters in a play; instead, the play was onstage before us, and we tried to pay attention as its stories emerged. More often than not, though, these pictures, made for an audience of two, were just as likely to land in the box of photos that needed explanation.

#### **pictures as bookends**

I was thirty-three when my grandmother died on a bitterly cold day in late December. I traveled alone across a blizzard-shocked country from my home in Northern California to attend her funeral in Indiana with my parents, siblings, and relatives. Like all such occasions, the entire experience was intensely emotional, but in one especially profound moment, I glanced at a photograph of her as a young wife and then saw her as an elderly woman lying in a casket. These two bookends of her life brought forth an explosion of mental images, a jumbled mix of my own experiences (recalled vividly as the family pictures I'd been making and putting in the box) and my memories of the black-and-white snapshots I'd seen in my father's photo albums. In a flash, the fullness of my



Maple tree in a blizzard: from my grandmother's kitchen window on the day of her funeral, January 2000.



From *Third Views and Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West* book and DVD: Three views of the Teapot and Sugar Bowl, Green River, Wyoming; Timothy O'Sullivan, 1872; Mark Klett, 1978; Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, 1997.

grandmother's life arced between two distinct points, and the real and imagined scenes fused together and imprinted themselves on my mind.

#### rocks, trees, and clouds

My ideas about how photographs can work as bookends, and my need to distill seemingly insignificant moments into emblematic images, weren't simply accidental or the result of a quirky personality; I'd been trained to think this way. For several years, I had been roaming the American West with a band of like-minded photographers, making new versions of nineteenth century landscape views from precisely the same vantage point. In our case, we were re-doing what had already been done in the 1970s, so we tacked an updated third view onto the existing pair, effectively creating time-lapse landscape studies.

These sequenced rephotographs are useful as ways to visualize time and change on a scale that transcends generations, and they're often engaging because differences between linked pictures—or even the lack of any discernible difference—suggest a narrative. What any given location's narrative might be is often anyone's guess, so we tried to rough in some missing details by connecting the sequenced pictures to contemporary human stories. This required talking to people who lived in the contemporary space of an old picture, or collecting on-site "artifacts" (discarded photo albums, old magazines, unraveled cassette tapes, rusted and decaying toys) that revealed something of the place's character. We also made our own pictures that addressed our personal experiences. Collectively, these attempted to find specific and personal emblems that stood for something far more universal. By linking old photographs of rocks, trees, and clouds to new pictures and collected junk, we tried to tell stories about where we'd been, and possibly even speak to where we were headed.

An especially confounding aspect of rephotography is that there is no guarantee you'll end up with a new picture that is even remotely interesting when considered on its own. It's the historical photograph—the very first in the series—that guides you on where to

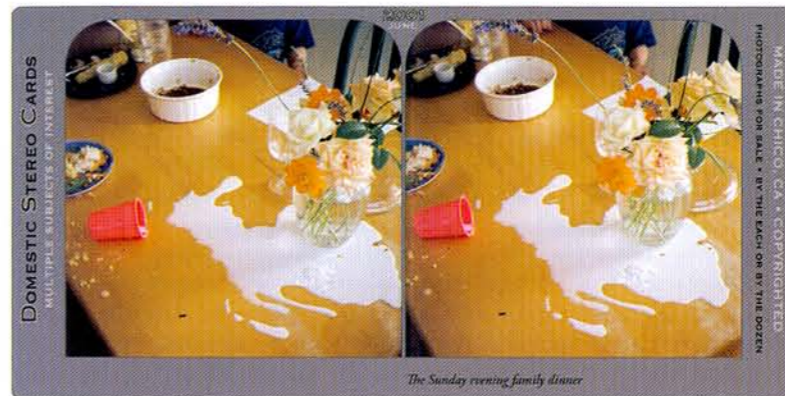


Artifacts discovered at the base of the Teapot and Sugar Bowl, 1997.

stand and when to press the shutter, so rephotography's seemingly random results require acceptance of that which is unexpected and often less than aesthetically ideal. It requires suspension of the expectation for singularly defining images. Moreover, understanding a rephotograph is largely dependent upon knowing that it's part of a larger sequence.

#### food on the table

As someone who makes his living teaching photography, I've spent a lot of time looking at the very first pictures that students have ever made. For reasons I have yet to divine, fire hydrants, aluminum miniblinds, and skateboarders are disproportionately represented in the pantheon of new student pictures. Looking at so many of these first pictures inevitably leads me to consider a basic question: What really deserves to be photographed? It's a simple question that beginners and experts alike must continually answer.



The Sunday evening family dinner, June 2001.

The teacher in me tries to help my students answer the question by calling on an old writers' adage: "Write about what you know." It's a statement that translates easily to photography, but it's difficult to put into practice when you're just starting out. It's hard enough to know "what you know," let alone learn how to use an intimidating machine with dials, buttons, and flashing lights to turn an experience into an image that resonates with meaning. Yet there is another adage that's just as valid: "Write to discover what you think." It's a variation on what I like to call the "document everything" method, in which everything (including fire hydrants, miniblinds, and skateboarders) deserves attention and one can begin to uncover ideas and opinions by sifting through the photographic evidence.

Seeing my students try to decide where to point their cameras has helped shape my own answers to the question of what deserves to be photographed. Once in a while,

and often by accident, my students give me a glimpse of the world through *their* eyes, and I get to see *their* friends, families, homes, and jobs. These are pictures usually made on a whim and with little forethought. But they are also the pictures students hold in reserve and later present with an apology because they're just too embarrassing, personal, unimportant, or quirky, or they're outside the bounds of a given assignment. If my students kept boxes of photographs that they were reluctant to show, these would be the pictures they'd toss in first.

Several years ago, I became so intrigued with these pictures that I asked my students to carry their cameras everywhere and to consider photographing what was literally and figuratively close to home. Finding unexplored territory, I argued, has more to do with changing perception than with seeking exotic locations. Plus, taking your camera everywhere is now easy to do, since new digital models are smaller than ever, give instant results, and cost virtually nothing to operate. Making at least one picture a day seems like a reasonable expectation and fundamentally good practice. Musicians and athletes practice every day, so why shouldn't photographers?

Yet asking my students to make pictures everywhere and every day was a disingenuous request, and I knew it. I didn't carry my camera with me everywhere, and despite a genuine desire to do otherwise, I reserved my picture-making primarily for vacations and special occasions.

#### **unrelenting sadness**

Then, 9/11 happened. In a very short time, we were swept up by a rolling cloud of fear, anger, and overwhelming sorrow. As the days progressed, we collectively yearned for life to return to normal, and we felt an urgency to value the basic and the routine. This was a longing that went beyond ordinary sentimentality and nostalgia; amid the intense and unrelenting sadness, that which was simple became revered as essential.

Standing in the emotional shadow of 9/11 made me, like so many others, reconsider a number of ideas. I thought a lot about my box of family pictures that needed explanation

(by this time, I'd figured out how they were like rephotographs, making sense only when they could lean on one another). I recalled the power of the real and imagined photonarrative of my grandmother's life, suspended between two fixed points in time. I confronted my unsettled feeling that I was asking something of my students that I wasn't doing myself. I decided that there was value in photographic subjects I'd sheepishly dismissed as unimportant and maybe even a little self-absorbed. In my mind, all of these disparate thoughts and ideas pointed to one thing: I absolutely had to do what I'd long considered—practice making *my* pictures, every day, no matter what.

#### **reassuringly unoriginal**

I chose my birthday as a starting point, mostly because the date falls in the summer, which is the best time for me to establish a healthy working routine. Plus, that date is more about marking personal time than are the other, arbitrary, days of the year running from January to December.

When I began, I only had one or two ideas for pictures, though I was generally aware of the boundaries within which I expected to bounce around. To be sure, it was an unnerveing undertaking, and even today I have to remind myself, as I often did then, that I just had to try to make one picture a day, and not all of them at once. Despite this, I had to constantly relearn the lesson that the more pictures I made, the more ideas I generated. For me, ideas usually came from doing work—not the other way around. But I was always searching for inspiration, which I found equally among the works of poets, painters, writers, musicians, and photographers.

Because I generally employed the “document everything” approach, genuinely surprising themes emerged, and I learned to pay attention to things I'd not previously considered important. But what was most surprising—and reassuring—was learning that the paths I was following were anything but new. I was comforted by the reminder that for centuries, some of the most serious creative work has come from the most ordinary things: children, pets, fruit trees, seasons, and the passage of time.