

Words in My Vicarious Journeys

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Biographical Overview

I am currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, Nebraska USA, teaching Foundations Design and Photography. I received my Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts from the University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho USA, and a Bachelors of Science in English with a Minor in Photography from the University of Wisconsin—Superior, Superior, Wisconsin USA.

Introduction

In the 1990s our culture became more aware of the internet and email. What I noticed with the use of this technology when corresponding with friends and family was that communication occurred more often, but just as often much poorer in quality and content. A typical email message would be one sentence in the realm of “hey, how’s it going”. Sometimes the messages would contain misspelled words, no capitalization, and an increasing use of emoticons. It was as if the more we corresponded the less we had to say. I began to wonder if, despite these newer technologies making it easier than ever to communicate, we were better off before because people thought more about what they had to say.

At the same time my own medium, photography, was transforming via the influence of these newer digital technologies. I could see that digital cameras and digital output were coming, and understood that as the equipment got better most people would be better off with digital technologies than film technologies. But what, I began to wonder, was the value of traditional photographic technologies? Is there any reason to continue using these technologies? Should we dispose of all our traditional photographic gear and go “straight” digital? Or, are there things that the analog processes can do better or easier?

As digital tools transform my world, I often feel it is not always for the better. Though I find computers useful and use them often, and am personally very thankful for PowerPoint and, especially, word processing, for I do not know if I would have had the patience to type and retype my college papers, I wonder at what cost does this technology come.

The other part of transformation I was concerned with was environmental. I grew up in rural Midwest America. There were a lot of lakes, trees and wetlands where I lived and my parents instilled in me a love of the outdoors and our natural world. My brothers and I spent our time either helping our parents cultivate our gardens or running through the woods and wetlands (we affectionately called swamps) chasing each other and our friends. But in graduate school, I really began to be concerned with how we were treating and effecting our physical world. Reading from the likes of Edward O. Wilson, Rachael Carson, and others gave a sense of foreboding. Edward O. Wilson wrote in his article *Is Humanity Suicidal*, “We are tribal and aggressively territorial, intent on private space beyond minimal requirements, and oriented by selfish sexual and reproductive drive.”¹ Rachael Carson ends her book *Silent Spring* with these words:

The ‘control of nature’ is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concepts and practices of applied entomology for the most part date from the Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.²

These words were alarming, but just as alarming was seeing how we treat various environments as I traveled across North America and Europe, and witnessing how we

relate to our surroundings was enough to cause concern. The one idea from high school physics that continually recurred to me was, “matter can neither be created nor destroyed.” And seeing how our population is growing, how we are expanding the space we occupy in the environment, and how we interact with our landscape, I began to wonder how far can we go before we alter our ecosystem so much that we make it uninhabitable for our own species.

Developing the Visuals

So here I was, in graduate school, concerned about our environment, concerned about the future (and past) of my medium, and concerned with how we communicate with one another. So what to do? That was the question looming in my mind.

At this time a friend and fellow graduate student, John Williams, introduced me to pinhole photography. At first I was confused by its simplicity. I wondered, how does this process work? His cameras were made from everything from industrial sized electrical plugs to bricks and his images were small and very soft in focus. I also wondered what was the point to the images since they were so far from what I was striving towards. He was, admittedly, more interested in the making of the cameras than the images. But for me, it has always been about the images and less about the process.

Since the day I received my first assignment in my Introduction to Photography class, I have pursued photographs of the landscape. At first it was unintentional, but quickly it developed into a passion I have pursued consistently and continually. Much of this work is straight landscape: work that reflects the freedom I find in the disconnection from our ever-expanding peopled world. These images are fragments of beauty from our natural environment. The photographic process of this work is very traditional and stringent: cropping to the essence of what I desire in camera, visualizing the scene and exposing it accordingly, and dodging and burning until the prints express what I felt at the time I exposed the film. In a single word: beauty.

But thinking about John’s process began me reflecting on my own process: how much I loved exploring this world, searching for moments of visual clarity; how much I enjoyed the darkroom process with its infinite room to transform negatives into expressive images. I found I thoroughly enjoy the *process* of photography. But, when looking at my images I began realizing this joy was not evident in the images: they were isolated moments of beauty. I wanted my viewers to become involved in the process; and if not involved, at the very least, aware of the process.

My frustrations in my own work were offset in that I found myself enjoying my appointment as a teaching assistant. I began considering the impact photography has not only in the creator/viewer context, but also in the teacher/student context. The teacher/student context allows for a different relationship, more openness in communication exists, because instead of the emphasis on how I as the creator of images affect the viewer, the emphasis is shifted toward how to help this multitude of people

express and explore their own worlds. Seeing the variety of directions the students could take a single assignment opened my eyes to many possibilities there are for different perspectives on the same idea. I longed to express these ideas in my work.

In Eric Renner's book *Pinhole Photography*, I learned much about creating and using pinhole cameras. I found that a pinhole camera could be as sharp as a lens camera: you simply need to find the precise aperture for the focal length of your camera by using this formula. I learned how to achieve good exposures with my cameras by practicing with paper negatives from black and white printing paper. I learned that there is a fair amount of latitude when using the often-long exposures my cameras required (anywhere from five seconds on a sunny day to an hour or more for interiors).

I quickly found pinhole photography's strength. I began to appreciate that a camera is nothing more than a light tight box with a hole in it and found it opened up the possibilities in regards to how to make and use cameras. My ideas evolved rapidly and soon had a variety of cameras to create; each would multiple-expose a scene from different perspectives simultaneously. My goal was to express to the viewer that a single scene can be viewed from many perspectives; even when different individuals are at the same place at the same time.



I found that what I really enjoy about pinhole photography is its plasticity: the creator has control over perspective, focal length, film size and format, sharpness (a pinhole camera can be made to be as sharp as a lens camera), and shape of your film plane (can impose distortion). The options seemed limitless and it the process extremely intuitive without a viewfinder or light meter to guide. I found pinhole's potential in expressive possibilities fascinating and its ability to push an image further to the subjective contains unlimited conceptual potential.

The Word

The written word is something I have gained deep appreciation for: there cannot be a better, clearer way to communicate. Dialogue is great and important, for there is a chance to cross-pollinate ideas, to listen, to share. But, when one writes, there is time for reflection, and time to clearly and concisely say what one means.

Though primarily a visual artist, I have a degree in English Literature, and dabble with writing on a consistent basis. Sometimes writing has even integrated itself into my visual art: with my *Five Simultaneous Exposures* the titles were written between or beside the multiple photographs presented for each piece. The idea was to have the title and the visual work be considered simultaneously, therefore not putting a hierarchy on the writing and visuals.

Always conscious and appreciative of the written word, I began to be concerned with our use, or lack of it, as I witnessed the rise of email. What a great tool, to be able to almost instantly send those you connect with messages and get responses back within hours, minutes, or even seconds. But what is the cost of this instantaneous connection? Does it function more like conversation than a letter? Certainly with the evolution of chat rooms to Instant Messaging, it is more like a discussion. But email can function like dialogue, though not as smoothly as instant messaging, or it can function like writing a letter. I have used it both ways, and have found the way I use it is more often somewhere in the middle: I throw out a few ideas and ask a question or two and wait for a response.

But, I guess it doesn't really matter how one uses it, but what I became more concerned with was the quality of the written word. I found I often got lazy, did not capitalize properly, left misspelled words, and, in general, was sloppy with the written word. Participating in Chat rooms is where these tendencies really get exaggerated, for one is trying to communicate quickly, and if I am any indication of the norm, my mind goes much quicker than my hunting and pecking fingers can type. Hence, I present the emoticon ☺ as evidence of my being normal. People have become more and more reliant on these nonverbal symbols to represent their feelings. It started out with simple colon/closing parenthesis sideways smile :) but has evolved into a whole slew of variations. But does this really matter? Is this a sign of an erosion of our abilities to communicate effectively and expressively with the written word? Is this an indication of our increasing use of the visual over the verbal? Do these symbols speak as the old photographic motto suggests, a picture is worth a thousand words? And if so, whom do we blame? The computer? The Internet? Or maybe we go back to the Futurist poets who transformed their poems into pictures? Or, more than likely, blame does not matter. The real question is, is there a loss of information with this use of the visuals over the verbal?

I would guess, yes. There has to be. Pictures, especially ones that become universally adapted, like emoticons, lose their ability to express more than the universally understood code prescribed to it. They lack nuance, therefore, expressive potential. There is trade-

off to speeding things up, to express oneself more quickly, and that is detail. Feelings and ideas become homogenized, generalized, and therefore inexpressive, flat, lifeless, sterile, known. No need to think, that is where the danger lies, because once we stop contemplating, and we just keep doing, things become meaningless.

The web does not kill the word. The computer does not kill the word. Images do not kill the word. Speed kills. This need to rush and rush and to do before thinking kills contemplation, which kills writing. Writing requires one to stop. Think. Express. Erase. Rethink. Our society is moving so fast we do not have the luxury, or more likely, necessary time, to think

Confluence

During a Foundations' meeting another teaching assistant introduced a project for our students using the idea of mail art. This idea struck a chord deep within me. I had never considered this process, but suddenly, I saw potential for it to express my ideas of trying to see perspectives beyond my own on the environment. I also saw a project with the ability to educate people on what photography is and its potential as an art, as well as a way to communicate with people on a deeper level. In particular I saw a project that could unite three of my passions: photography, writing, and traveling.

I began making pinhole cameras out boxes relating to photography with the intent of mailing them to people. I realized if I wanted to get good results, I needed to clearly explain the process I wanted the people to participate in, and how to use the pinhole camera. I experimented with exposures under different lighting conditions and created an exposure guideline to include with the camera. I wrote a letter expressing what I would like the receiver to do. It expressed that I would like to see other peoples' perspectives on the environment, asked them to expose the film at a place that is meaningful to them, and asked them to include a statement on why they took the photograph of that place.

With five cameras ready to go I sent them and waited, wondering if any of these cameras would return to me. Amazingly, I ended up waiting only two weeks for the first camera to return. It was from a friend of a friend I had never met, but who was recommended because he is a photographer. The letter was present and insightful and I found the participant also wrote on the camera, pushing my decision to include the camera as a visual object when I present this work. I learned he shared the camera with his wife, and each wrote their name next to the pinhole they used. This idea changed my own preconceived notions about the project, because I made the 8x10 paper box into two pinhole cameras simply to increase my odds of getting a usable image. These individuals trusted my makeshift exposure guide so much they say in their letter, "*The indicated exposure was 15 seconds, but we exposed for 20 seconds—a tad more light on the film. So cut your development a wee bit to keep the highlights in check.*" Immediately after reading the letter I went to the darkroom to see if my process was successful and what my

new acquaintances photographed. The film density looked good and the two images of different beaches are clear and beautiful.



The project since has exceeded my expectations. I have vicariously met new people and learned about places I have not been. I also have learned more about places I have lived or traveled to and learned things about people I did not know, despite having known them for years. The most surprising thing is the level of openness and sharing the people have expressed to me, a stranger to most of these people. It is also very apparent that this process causes people to slow down, think about what they have to say, and often, write some elegant prose.

Beth Pappenfuss writes about St. Louis, Missouri, USA:

St. Louis was and is the gateway to the Western United States. I've traveled a few places and it seems I naturally gravitate to the West. I was reading about the components of the inner ear and how human can sense balance by a loose, round, pebble like bone called the otolith which continuously rolls to the bottom of a tiny cavity, touching hairs that tell us which way we are leaning and how to walk straight. The St. Louis Arch is all about balance; however, for the most part it is stationary, except at 150 mph wind it may sway at the apex a maximum of 18 inches. Physical feats and monuments based on balance are impressive to witness and wonder at. The physical sense of balance that humans maintain through the evolution of the inner ear is also impressive yet it is a tiny structure. I've balanced rocks and stones on mountains, beaches, and quarries, into small pylons. Sometimes they're used as navigational markers, most times the act of balancing odd shaped rocks and sticks is for enjoyment and challenge. I was fascinated by the presence of the St. Louis Arch. I had always wondered about the Arch. I know the basic facts, 630 ft. tall, steel, erected in the 1960s, monument to all the pioneers, based on a catenary curve, etc... But numbers and facts lose their meaning to me unless I happen to experience and use my own senses. Using my (not so great) sense of balance, I walked around and leaned on one side of the St. Louis Arch. It was hot and immense. Each leg has an access point which leads to an underground museum directly below the expanse. Passengers can board a tram, which travels up inside the arch leg to the apex where tourists can look out from windows at the Mississippi River and the city. Needless to say I was fascinated by many facets of the Arch and my curiosity was heightened. Well, I can understand physical balance and some of the engineering behind structures such as the

Arch and even the inner ear, but I still think about the big “whys” and wonder why balance is sometimes an elusive and endless task in our life.

And, if people do not write elegant prose, some are at least quite humorous. Pearla writes in this excerpt about her image:

My first time at this place I was with my groom, we hadn't been married long. He being a very cautious man finally relented to my pleading with him to skinny dip in the creek with me, and undressed for a cold dip. If the rocks hadn't been slippery I could have made it back to the vehicle with all of his clothes tucked under my arm laughing all the way. I haven't seen him move that quickly since. He caught me just before we hit the clearing...

This also illustrates the effects words and context can have on a photograph. This image does not contain the laughter and liveliness of Pearla's story. The landscape comes across as quiet and sublime.



I find it amazing how much personality can come across in the images and letters. While most statements are one-half to one full page, my friend who has a PhD in mechanical engineering wrote this as his whole statement to go with his image of the Nevada desert:

Today people are in a rush to travel from one point to the next. Frequently we miss the value of the points between our destinations. This pinhole was taken from a turnout on Interstate 80 west of Patrick, NV. The simplicity and serenity attracted me to this point. The peaceful views coexistence with the chaotic major

highway seemed to be a paradox. I wondered how many passed this place that day. Who stopped? Who took a picture and rushed away? Who saw beauty? Who saw land awaiting development?

There is obviously some philosopher within this engineer.

With my *Vicarious Journeys* series I am reminded that the true pleasures in life are in the simple things, our relationships with others. It is important to explore these relationships in depth, and the more we do that, the more we understand ourselves and others, and therefore the more harmonious of an existence we can create.

This photograph from Kingdom of Lesotho, a small country surrounded by South Africa, speaks of simplicity. It also illustrates what happens when people are given, or take, the time to think about what they have to say. Summer Brandt was a Peace Corp volunteer serving in Quacha's Nek, Lesotho when she participated in this project. She obviously took time in writing her letter. About this image she writes:

This image was taken 4 days before I departed from my home of two years: Qacha's Nek, Kingdom of Lesotho. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Lesotho, I spent nearly two years sipping my morning tea as the sun lit up the mountains. Each night, upon returning from my "work", I watched the sun set behind these peaks. I have no idea when I will return to this little piece of Africa, but it has become a home and a bit of myself will always remain with the Basotho people and, hopefully, my voice will echo through the mountains for years to come. Khotso, Pula, Nala! (Peace, Rain, Prosperity!)

---Summer "Nyakallo" Brandt



This project also reminds me that simplicity itself offers the most possibilities. Pinhole photography, the foundation for all analog and digital cameras, offers so much flexibility that there are endless ways to work and see in the photographic spectrum. With this

endless potential it becomes just as important to see and encourage others in their photographic explorations, as it is to pursue our own photographic explorations.

In the end my *Vicarious Journeys* series reminds me of the importance of simplicity in another way, a more practical way. Six-year old Salvadoran, Kennya Elizabeth Argueta Molina, writes from los Heroes, El Salvador, “*Esta Fotografia Fue tomada enfrente denuestra vivienda que es el lugar mas importante.*” Or, in English: “*This photograph was taken in front of our house. That is a very important place to us.*”



End Notes

¹ Edward O. Wilson, *In Search of Nature* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996)

² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962)