

WHY PEOPLE PHOTOGRAPH



ROBERT ADAMS

aperture

COLLEAGUES

YOUR OWN photography is never enough. Every photographer who has lasted has depended on other people's pictures too—photographs that may be public or private, serious or funny, but that carry with them a reminder of community.

Nicholas Nixon made one that I especially treasure of our Airedale (plate II). It is a perfect record of her intense gaze, and was included in a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, although I prize it as much for the recollection it affords of first meeting the photographer. The dog had barged ahead at our front door, and when Nick saw her through the screen his delight was so undisguised that Kerstin and I and then he started laughing; in the confusion he gave up on words, but managed to find in his billfold a snapshot of himself as a child with an Airedale. All of which—the dog, Nick's enjoyment of the moment, his sense of humor, his gift as a photographer—returns to me now as I look at the picture that he eventually made that day.

I rely on the photograph just as I do on those of others' enthusiasms—baseball, cottonwoods, children, grain elevators, basalt, petroglyphs, the wonders of Peru, Japan, Greece, India. . . . And though the photographers' fondness for



II Nicholas Nixon, *Fred*, 1975

these subjects is evident in their pictures, I am especially strengthened by those where I can also recall it in their letters and conversation.

If I like many photographers, and I do, I account for this by noting a quality they share—animation. They may or may not make a living by photography, but they are alive by it.

I think for example of a friend who, when he was a young man, sometimes took pictures along country roads while sitting half up out of the sun roof of his moving car, steering with his feet. You couldn't argue him out of this practice because the rationale was to him so clear—the view. And apparently he was meant to do it, because over the years he went on to assemble a vast photographic celebration of Colorado life. When I hear his voice on the phone now, full of avidity even in old age, I promise myself that I will take grand, unsafe pictures.

I remember too an acquaintance who, when he was asked by a dealer to autograph a book, wrote his name and then, burning his bridges, "NOT FOR RESALE." It was a reckless thing to do, but also a kind of life insurance. Many photographers in fact remind me in temperament of Thomas Hart Benton; in addition to painting, he said, what he liked was to "drink whiskey and talk big."

Why is photography, like the other arts, that kind of intoxication? And a quieter pleasure too, so that occasionally photographers discover tears in their eyes for the joy of seeing. I think it is because they've known a miracle. They've been given what they did not earn, and as is the way with unexpected gifts, the surprise carries an emotional blessing. When photographers get beyond copying the achievements of others, or just repeating their own accidental first successes, they learn that they do not know where in the world they will find pictures. Nobody does. Each photograph that works is a revelation to its supposed creator. Yes, photographers

do position themselves to take advantage of good fortune, sensing for instance when to stop the car and walk, but this is only the beginning. As William Stafford wrote, calculation gets you just so far—"Smart is okay, but lucky is better." Days of searching can go by without any need to reload film holders, and then abruptly, sometimes back in their own yards, photographers use up every sheet.

I have to admit that there is another reason I like photographers—they don't tempt me to envy. The profession is short on dignity: Nearly everyone has fallen down, been the target of condescension (the stereotypical image of a photographer being that of a mildly contemptible, self-indulgent dilettante), been harassed by security guards, and dropped expensive equipment. Almost all photographers have incurred large expenses in the pursuit of tiny audiences, finding that the wonder they'd hoped to share is something few want to receive. Nothing is so clarifying, for instance, as to stand through the opening of an exhibition to which only officials have come.

Experiences like that do encourage defiance, however. Why quit while you're losing? And so there's room for idealism. There was no fortune or reputation to be made, for example, when Alex Harris arranged to publish a book of views by an elderly, obscure photographer in Chiapas, Mexico (*Gertrude Blom: Bearing Witness*, University of North Carolina Press, 1984). The only conceivable rationale was to share an understanding of a subject—contemporary Mayans—that both he and she believed was important. Similar motives have brought photographers Richard Benson and David Wing to help along others' efforts (see, for instance, Benson's *The Face of Lincoln*, published by Viking Press in 1979, a book that reproduces all the known portraits of Lincoln, and look up *Eugene Buechel, S.J.: Rosebud and Pine Ridge Photographs, 1922-1942*, published by Grossmont College in 1974, a volume that was

assembled by Wing and a group of his students to make available remarkable views of Lakota reservation life). In the company of photographers like Harris, Benson, and Wing we discover a galvanizing sense of purpose.

I respect many photographers for their courage. Sometimes this quality is undramatic and private—the grit to fight bad odds with discipline. "I feel like I have been living in a small hole somewhere," one writes in good-humored self-mockery, "ever busy with problems of nest management." An aspect of that is likely to be, of course, the threat of insolvency, something with which the unlucky have to learn to live as they would with a chronic disease. One photographer I admire, for instance, had to go back to cleaning houses when her Guggenheim fellowship ran out.

There can be physical danger as well. Two acquaintances have while working been injured by livestock, and one when he fell from a railroad car. Several are making pictures at hazardous waste sites, and another has been recording the no-man's-land beneath Los Angeles freeways.

Photographers must also withstand, with the help of their families and friends, the psychic battering that comes from what they see. In order to make pictures that no one has made before, they have to be attentive and imaginative, qualities partly assigned and partly chosen, but in any case ones that leave them vulnerable. When Robert Frank put down his camera after photographing *The Americans* he could not so readily escape the sadness of the world he recorded as could we when we closed the book.

Paradoxically, photographers must also face the threat that their vision may one day be denied them. Their capacity to find their way to art, which is their consolation—to see things whole—may fail for an hour or a month or forever because of fatigue or misjudgment or some shift in spirit that cannot be predicted or understood or even recognized

until it has happened past correction. For every Atget, Stieglitz, Weston, or Brandt who remain visionary to the end, there is an Ansel Adams who, after a period of extraordinary creativity, lapses into formula.

A bravery I respect in many photographers, especially now, is their courage for orderly retreat, that hardest of tactical maneuvers—the intelligence to see probabilities, the nerve to wait until the last possible minute to give ground, and then the will to turn and hold again until the next uneven confrontation. Consider, for example, those photographers who once worked in Glen Canyon to try to mobilize public opinion against building a dam there, and who, after it was built, continued to photograph the Southwest. I saw Glen Canyon only briefly in its final days, before I became a photographer, but the glimpse I had of it suggested a place that was in some respects as remarkable as the Grand Canyon—more intense, even, for its intimacy. How commendable to have known this geography well enough to have made hundreds of pictures there—to have loved it that much—and then to go on working without it. And without illusions about human beings.

One additional quality that I admire in my colleagues is a basis for the others: their awareness of finalities and of our place in nature. Years ago I enjoyed a winter day with a friend who was taking pictures along the Washington coast; he wrote later of a cove that we had explored: “I think now of the blackened driftwood—of the air and light, of the sea, rocks, surf, and trees—it was a world largely complete—for a moment, in that good air, it was perfect.”

Garry Winogrand's subject was, I now believe, also perfection, though many of his street scenes appear to tip under the weight of roiling confusion—so much so that for a long time I did not appreciate his accomplishment. I even wondered

if I would like him in person, though when I met him one afternoon at a conference in Carmel I certainly did, as anyone would have. He was cheerful, ardent, and without pretense.

After Winogrand died, a mutual acquaintance told me that he had said he wanted to make pictures related to mine. I could hardly believe it because our work seemed so far apart, but later when I saw views that he had recorded in Los Angeles I realized that we had in fact hoped to make some of the same discoveries.

Since then I have begun to suspect that aspects of my work might be changing, becoming a little more like his (the shift is puzzling to me, which I hope may excuse the presumption in speaking of it). If so, I welcome it, because he was accepting of complexity in ways that I admire.

The second time I talked with Garry Winogrand, and the last, was during an informal lunch at the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco. Photographers, curators, and teachers had seated themselves on the carpeted floor of the gallery's office, a room suffused with indirect natural light; conversation was animated as people shared their enthusiasm for pictures and enjoyed French bread and wine. Winogrand had to leave early to catch a plane, but before the party closed in over the space he'd occupied there was visible a humorously untidy ring of bread crumbs where he'd been. He had, as he did when he photographed, turned to everyone, taking pleasure in their company and in the good food. It makes me smile to think of him there in that halo made from the staff of life.