Living the Dream

by

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For my sisters.
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Introduction: Without Nostalgia

Of the twenty images in this series, twelve were taken between December of 2009 and February of 2011, mostly during school vacations. Three remain from the hundred or so rolls of ten frames each that I exposed over the three week long winter break of my sophomore year. I had just gotten a new camera and I photographed almost every day I was home. There wasn’t much else to do.

At school I had begun to get more involved in American Studies and was considering it for my major. American Studies contributed to the genesis of this work by providing me with an intellectual framework through which I could critically approach the culture of which I am a product. My academic work inspired me to investigate and it made sense to photograph familiar subjects because I was immersed in them. My own home, my family, and my friends were right there. Then I got more curious and made a list of acquaintances, many of whom I had lost touch with, who I was interested in visiting. I called some of them and explained that I wanted to take their picture, and they either said yes or no or never called me back, and some outings yielded better results than others.

Four of the final pictures were taken during the summer after my sophomore year. With the pictures from winter break, along with others from the spring and some fiction I had written, I was able to apply for a fellowship from the English department at Wesleyan to continue working on my project over the summer. I traveled to Boston to stay with my aunt and uncle and cousins and photograph there. Two of the pictures were taken that weekend. I went on other short trips but spent the majority of the summer at home writing and shooting. I was ecstatic to have the opportunity to focus so fully on my personal creative pursuits. For me, it was a dream come true.

I returned to school with bags full of shot film, but a hectic class schedule kept me from developing it all. That fall, one of my classmates immolated herself.
on the soccer field. I did not know her personally, but I was disturbed. I wanted to leave school, and I decided to spend the next semester in Argentina. The campus felt haunted, even more so because the event went largely unacknowledged in day-to-day student life. People seemed reluctant to talk about it, although I must admit that were it my responsibility alone, I would not have known what to say. The suicide made me think more about my uncle Paul. On September 11, 2001, Paul was on the first plane that was flown into the World Trade Center. After his death I grew up a neurotic kid who knew that anything was possible. I started keeping a journal when I was sixteen to try to archive myself against calamity. The living may try to speak for the dead but no one can ask them any questions, so I wrote down my thoughts and experiences as a testament. Over time I became quite compulsive about doing it every day.

That semester I wrote a paper that analyzed how the trauma of individuals and families affected by September 11 was subsumed by the national consciousness and co-opted by the State. I had never made such a concerted effort to understand Paul’s death and articulate my anger about the politicization of my family’s grief. For several weeks while I worked on this paper I was unable to sleep. I simply couldn’t stop imagining what it was like for Paul on that plane. He witnessed history firsthand before anyone knew what was happening and then he was incinerated. Did he realize he was about to die? Did he buckle his seatbelt? Did he pray?

In the same week that the paper was due I also had to turn in the final project for my drawing class: a life-size self-portrait. By the time I finished, the wall where I had the paper tacked up was filthy, as was the shower where I had washed myself of charcoal after working. I was delirious from lack of sleep, but felt a new emotional freedom. I had hoisted the burden of so much confusion and melancholy onto the work I had just completed. 9/11 was no longer an object lodged in my throat, I had stared directly at it and nearly collapsed but didn’t. While moving out of my school apartment at the end of the semester, I documented the clean up. One picture was of
the mirror I’d used to draw myself, leaning against the dirty wall where the six feet of paper had been. I wonder if, in this blank mirror, the camera sees its own self-portrait.

The first pictures were all born out of my own lived experience. I documented the present and tried to reach into the past, determined to record as I much as I could. I could not have conceived of or anticipated the picture of the mirror before taking it, nor did I look at it seriously again until almost a year later. Furthermore, I would never have taken it at all had I not enrolled in drawing that semester and, perhaps, in the American Studies class that made me unravel for a little while. But this became a critical image when the time came to finish the project. One picture remains from the long winter break I spent at home before going to Argentina. Then a year elapsed before I took the remaining eight photographs in the final series. I came home from abroad and finally got to spend time with all of my film from the year before, but I was resistant to shooting more. I spent the fall helping my friends make short films and seeking out landscapes. The urgency that drove me to photograph at first was gone and I shirked the idea of taking more portraits. I think I was afraid to plunge back into the dissociative regimen of portraiture. I was also unfocused, trapped in the photographic equivalent of writer’s block, until my professor suggested that I look for more pictures like the mirror, which led to several still-lifes in which I removed elements from the frame and rearranged what was there.

Lately after shooting I’ve thought back on the session that same day and been unable to identify the photographer as myself. Taking someone’s picture is a bizarre interaction and a lot of the time you have to act in order to elicit the right response from the subject. But I don’t usually know what the “right” response is until it happens, and I often can’t recognize whether it’s happened or not until I see the contact sheets. Some subjects give you what you need immediately while others must be coaxed or prodded. I give directions when I think they’re necessary, but some of
my favorite pictures have involved spontaneous gestures that I would not have known
to suggest. I discovered the earlier pictures like a detective not entirely sure what the
case was about, intuitively scouring the present for clues that might help me make
sense of the past. My insistent devotion to a conception of picture taking as a sort
of scavenger hunt, in which the camera led me through real spaces and showed me
what was interesting there, made me balk at first at the idea that I should take a more
active role in producing images. But working on my friends’ movies was a novel
experience with the camera, and being charged with helping someone else realize
their preconceived vision instead of seeking out my own in the world made me think
more actively about what can be changed in front of the camera before an exposure
is made. I made more trips home and started to imagine photographs before taking
them. Although I was never certain about what the picture would look like, I would
consider elements that I associated with the subject or the space that I might include.
For example, I knew that my grandmother had a collection of fan vases above her
fireplace and an ottoman in her living room. Earlier, I would have followed her
around her home, conversing and taking pictures wherever she was, but now I knew
before I arrived where I wanted to place her. I moved a pair of chairs and put the
ottoman in the space normally occupied by a small coffee table. I told her where to
look. But I didn’t know she would sit like that, with her left leg bent back slightly
beneath her. I didn’t know how she would hold her glasses, balanced by the hinge
on one finger. The photograph happened between us. It came out of our interaction,
which involved the imposition of my imagination on my grandmother and her home
but did not preclude—indeed, actually depended upon—her reaction to my presence
with the camera.

Tod Papageorge refers to Eugène Atget’s pictures as “feats of imaginative
fabrication,” the “expressions of an impulse where the act of seeing and picture-
making was indivisible” (Core Curriculum 17). In his insight I find something
akin to how I understand my own work. These pictures were made at the juncture between the present and an imagined personal past. They represent the fragmented results of an attempt at the impossible task of compiling a complete record of my life so far. In a way, I might relate the initial impetus behind this project to a well-known Western literary form, the Bildungsroman, the novel of formation that attempts to reconcile through narrative “the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization” (Moretti 15). But photography is an emphatically non-narrative medium, resistant to the imposition of rational, readily apparent messages or meaning. My work does not tell a story. I did not seek reconciliation through photographing but an unsentimental view of the place I came from. Elsewhere, Papageorge says that, in order to do the sort of street photography practiced by himself and the late Garry Winogrand, one must be “extremely disinterested.” To explain, he invokes the poet John Keats’ concept of “negative capability,” that is, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (“Eden”). This connection struck a profound chord with me and remains fundamental to my photographic practice and understanding. The main difference, of course, is that I took this disinterested approach into a more personal environment than the public city spaces in which photographers such as Winogrand and Papageorge worked. The camera let me step out of and then back into my own life as someone else, a more detached observer. I became an alter ego who aimed to make impersonal pictures of personal subjects, to look carefully and without nostalgia at my own origin.
I. Living the Dream
II. Critical Insights
Alienated Fictions

Chauncey Hare worked extensively throughout the sixties and seventies, photographing primarily (but not exclusively) strangers in their homes. “Oakland, California, 1969-71” is a picture of a birthday party whose attendees stare back at the viewer from behind their uncut cake and a table neatly set with paper cups, plastic forks, and a pair of cookies stacked on each paper plate (Hare 115). The knife gleams, clean and ready. These folks are celebrating and it’s only natural that they commemorate the occasion with a group photo. But this one is strange. It’s almost like you’d expect it to be. There’s one flash but it is off to the side of the camera, so the light is not as flat as it would have been were it attached, as is typical of box cameras and amateur point-and-shoots. The subjects are doubled by their well-defined shadows behind them. The table juts diagonally in from the lower left corner of the frame and the flash reflects harshly off of the white tablecloth. One girl’s face is partly obscured by another’s paper party hat. There are nineteen faces and all those eyes are overwhelming. The picture looks to have been taken moments after everyone was properly posed and ready. Their smiles have faded or appear strained and some of the children are distracted by something beyond the frame. It is an off beat that produces something like a crack in the expected picture, and the stark black and white tones also help present a familiar occasion as utterly alienating.

Furthermore, while we may recognize the event, we know nothing about the people in the picture aside from their location and the year of the party. When looking at the picture we may consider the fact that the celebrants are almost all African-American and Hare is a white man. But, due to his method of choosing which doors he wanted to knock on to ask to be let in to photograph almost at random, based on his own intuition, as well as the equally odd way in which he represents all of his subjects, it’s hard to read much about race from the picture (however, it may be worth noting that while Hare made many photographs of whites and blacks, other ethnicities are almost
never represented.)

The photography critic Vicki Goldberg names Walker Evans and, more importantly, Russell Lee, as Hare’s photographic forebears, noting that in his introduction to *Interior America*, Hare himself describes their work as having “moved” him. Goldberg adds that a significant difference between Hare’s work and that of Evans and Lee is “the decline of a kind of humanism, of a belief in the absolute significance of the individual” (94-95). This diminished emphasis on the individuality of each subject is partly acknowledged in Hare’s introduction to the later volume *Protest Photographs*, where the photographer describes his pictures as “archetypal images of America.” In spite of the “honor and respect” that Hare felt for his subjects while working, the particular circumstances of their lives are less important to the picture than the common birthday party ritual that they are enacting before the camera (Hare 16).

“Monongahela, Pennsylvania, 1972” is an austere image of a man in what is presumably his living room (49). He is small in the center of the frame, surrounded by a television, a clock on the wall, a ceramic bulldog on the floor, a lamp on an end table, sofas, and a variety of other decorations and furniture. His hands are crossed and he stares sullenly down, toward the lower left edge of the frame. He looks to be leaning against the wall, which is bright white around him but which appears darker on either side of the picture. The ceiling is a darker gray and its expanse occupies the entire upper third of the photograph. The room is full of things and yet it seems so bare. “Bare,” for me, is a critical word in approaching Hare’s work, especially in light of Goldberg’s observation that *Interior America*, his first book, was “a harsh interrogation of the life he came from” (97).

In “Richmond, California, 1969,” a family of four poses in their kitchen (Hare 120). The husband and wife stand in front of their stove, each holding up one of their children for the camera. Like the birthday party, this picture bears enough
resemblance to a common photographic situation, the family snapshot, to appear familiar even though the subjects are anonymous. Also like the birthday party picture, Hare’s composition, lighting, and timing make an ordinary scene strange. The gleaming water heater on the right occupies almost as much space in the frame as either of the adults, both of whom are smiling although only the man stares straight at the lens. Through the doorway on the left we can see the toilet in the bathroom. The woman and the small child she is holding both look toward the lower left corner of the frame, where we see part of a table but no hint as to what might be on it. The other child, who sits supported by his father’s interlocked fingers, has one eye closed and appears to be rubbing the other with the back of his hand. Depicted here is, again, not the proper family picture but the moment before or after. The picture’s stark, unforgiving representation of an instant in which the common mask of domestic contentedness has slipped askew makes the scene sad and unsettling. Susan Sontag describes the presupposition in many discussions of photography that “photography provides a unique system of disclosures: that it shows us reality as we had not seen it before” (119). She suggests, “photography’s program of realism actually implies [...] the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled” (120). However, when Hare writes in his essay in Protest Photographs that while photographing he felt an “obligation to honor the reality of each person and their home,” he seems to understand said reality not as secret but readily apparent, waiting to be thoroughly looked at or ignored (16). The work is not revelatory in some magical way, but documentary in a very literal sense. Choosing to photograph moments when domestic facades break down, Hare lays bare to acute visual study these American interiors and their inhabitants by way of his bright flash and the camera’s “superhuman focus” capabilities (Goldberg 95).

But we must not forget that these photographs are subjective documents, especially when we consider the implications of Hare’s flash. When a picture is taken
using available light, the shutter speed (how long the film is exposed) and the aperture (the size of the hole that opens to expose the film) together determine the amount of light that passes through the lens onto the film. However, when the flash is used, the instantaneous burst of artificial light essentially takes the place of the shutter speed in determining how the film will be exposed. The aperture and the power of the flash along with the distance of the flash from the subject are now more important, for they affect the strength of the thrown light when it reflects off the subject. Unless the shutter speed is especially long or the available light is exceptionally bright, the artificial light from the flash replaces the light from the scene. The image is not merely taken of the subject, but projected onto it and recorded in an instant. It is as much about this glaring light and the unnatural shadows it produces, so unlike how we normally see, as it is about the person, place, or object in the frame. Hare’s photographs thus represent the “reality” of his subjects as he himself has interpreted it. The images invite the viewer to take part in his alienated sensibility, ultimately as works of fiction rather than evidential records.

A concise statement at the beginning of *Protest Photographs* states: “These photographs were made by Chauncey Hare to protest and warn against the growing domination of working people by multinational corporations and their elite owners and managers” (6). These are angry, even aggressive pictures, but in looking at them it is not entirely apparent how they may be read in such explicitly political terms. By understanding the work as a type of fiction, however, we can see how Hare’s photographs function as dissident expressions.

For the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, fiction “involves the re-framing of the real, or the framing of a dissensus” opposed to the normal social logic of “consensus,” which allows for some individual difference but insists that “nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible
signification.” Fiction is not merely the rendering of imaginary worlds, characters, or narratives, but a way of “changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales, and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (141-4). In Rancière’s work, the bureaucratic, state-centered government apparatus that is normally called “politics” is instead referred to as the “police,” and the word “politics” is reserved for extra-institutional actions that rupture the logical order of the “police.” While “the mainstream fiction of the police order […] passes itself off as the real, [and] feigns to draw a clear-cut line between what belongs to the self-evidence of the real and what belongs to the field of appearances, representations, opinions, and utopias” (149), politics “breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order” and “re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible” (139). Considering Rancière’s suggestion that a politics of aesthetics “lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience” (140) alongside Sontag’s observation that “photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe” (Sontag 3), it would seem that photography as a medium is well suited to a kind of radical enunciation in image-saturated industrial societies. Hare’s photographs in particular, with their alienated take on the American home, are a good example of how “[p]olitical and artistic fictions introduce dissensus by hollowing out [the] ‘real’ and multiplying it in a polemical way” (Rancière 149). The political effect of these pictures does not derive from an explicit exposure of injustice, a visualizing of the invisible, or a parody of power (to name some of the more common strategies of politically engaged art), but from a jarring representation—literally, re-presentation—of average Americans and the spaces they inhabit, that are thus fundamental to their conception of what is normal and what makes sense.
Raiding the Archive

_Evidence_, published in 1977 by Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan, is a sequence of images that the pair gathered from the archives of various corporations, educational institutions, and government agencies. Alan Sekula writes that “[o]nly by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome,” but in _Evidence_ the artists sever the pictures from their discursive origins and deliberately exploit the ambiguity of decontextualized images (457). There are no captions and we do not know from which of the dozens of archives listed in the front of the book any one picture was taken. The only frame of reference for any given image is the rest of the sequence. These pictures were intended to be records and they are precisely composed in an anonymous, straightforward manner that denotes them as such, but they are also striking, surreal images rendered in exquisite, eye-catching black and white. Many are comically absurd—a person in a space suit lying face down on the floor, a group of men in suits looking on while one speaks at a lectern atop a boulder. Others are somewhat unnerving, such as a small primate being held down by a hand in a heavy leather work glove with its face covered, while its bizarre, almost-human ear is turned toward the camera. Associations are emphasized between pairs of images placed not opposite one another on a single spread, but on either side of a page, so that the turning over of the paper invites a graphic or conceptual revelation. In an essay published in the second edition of the book, Sandra S. Phillips, senior curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, describes a narrative progression from “a world of human traces” to pictures of parts of people to the “pictures of men entrapped or commanding technology” which make up the work’s “tragic motif.” She writes, “[t]aken out of their original context and placed in a narrative formed from the internal logic found within the pictures themselves, these mute images provided a wealth of archaeological clues about the kind of society that produced them.” Although she
acknowledges the work as “a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate work of art, […] which engages the loss of belief provoked by that era,” she insists that it is “poetic rather than specifically political” (N.P.). But this is a simplification that disregards the political capacity of poetry as a form that can disrupt the very language out of which it is wrought.

In *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning*, art historian and theorist John Tagg argues, “the record photograph’s compelling weight was […] always discursive […] the status of the document and the power effects of its evidence were produced only in the field of an institutional, discursive, and political articulation” (225). This institutional articulation allows the State to appropriate “the right to adjudicate meaning, to decide where and when meaning stops and starts” and thereby set up certain “regimens of instrumental representation, documentation, and evidence, whose machinery was targeted at the body and its spaces” (38). Tagg describes a “machinery of capture” in which “[t]he camera, with its inefficient chemical information-storage system, comes joined to the storage and retrieval system of the filing cabinet” that reinforces “the technical-machinic enslavement of the modern State” (3). However, he also notes, even though photographs on their own are perceived as being deficient of clear meaning, there is also an “excess of photographic meaning” that must be “brought within bounds” through archival organization (218). *Evidence* releases this excess of meaning and turns the “regime of the instrumental archive and its evidential effects” inside out (235). Stripped of their original context and any defining text, the images are made useless as objects of record. Mandel and Sultan sunder the coherence of the bureaucratic archive and repurpose its individual units to produce a bewildering unreality, a fiction, out of an apparatus constructed for “the purposeful institutionalization of limits to meaning” and the homogenization of sense (Tagg xxxii).
The Family Obscured

In *Pictures from Home*, Sultan performs another archival intervention, but here it is into his own family’s record of itself. The project mostly consists of pictures that Sultan took of his aging parents over the course of about ten years at his childhood home in the San Fernando Valley and then in the gated community near Palm Springs where they later moved, but it also includes a spread of stills taken from his family’s home movies, arranged four by eleven in a grid across two pages (*Katherine Avenue* 36). There is an image of Cinderella’s castle at Disneyland, of a woman carrying a child near a waterfall and of two men running in the waterfall. There are several close ups of Larry’s mother’s face, and other stills of her in a red convertible, sunbathing, gardening. We see his parents kissing on the deck of a boat, wearing leis, and Irving Sultan, Larry’s father, relaxing in an inflatable swimming pool and raising a drink for a toast. There is a raw turkey, a train, a man on a golf course, an empty swimming pool, a boy in a life vest climbing into a raft. There are several pictures of children playing, one in which the back of a boy’s head shows a white bandage. Some images are not so clear, like a fish flailing in someone’s hand, or more ominous, such as a yellow-eyed Rottweiler in the dark. Although they look to have been shot mostly during vacations, at picnics, or simply on sunny days, there is only one frame in which someone is smiling. This is an impression of the parental record filtered through the son’s vision that bears traces of nostalgia but is not necessarily happy. From the moving films, Sultan has selected more candid pictures than the posed snapshots that would normally be taken on such occasions with a still camera. We cannot know exactly why Sultan chose certain images; perhaps his selections reflect his own recollections of growing up—a particularly memorable family trip, an archetypal afternoon—or he was simply drawn to them for their aesthetic qualities. They give the viewer a kind of magical sense of the artist’s childhood that adds to our perception of the original photographs in the series, which
supplement the familial archive from which the film stills were taken.

As a record of personal history, the familial photograph does not only, in Roland Barthes’ words, “attest that what I see has indeed existed,” it also attempts to prove that it has existed in a particular way (79). Personal pictures are “a mechanism through which the past can be constructed and situated within the present […] They lend shape to personal stories and truth claims, and function as technologies of memory, producing both memory and forgetting” (Hirsch 178). There are certain events, like birthday parties, vacations, or weddings, that are supposed to be included while others, often less pleasant, are left out. For example, thanks to my parents’ picture taking I know what my uncle Paul looked like at my own circumcision, where I was present but not quite conscious of my relatives, but I don’t think any pictures were taken of anyone in attendance at his funeral. Quotidian scenes may be recorded as well. My dad is quite obsessive about photographing our family and I have especially noticed his propensity for documenting small interactions between my six-year-old sister Shira and I. For the better part of her life I have been away at school and have only spent brief periods of time at home. When we are together, my dad will often comment on how we are “bonding” and take our picture, as if this would guarantee our special sibling relationship. This is a good example of how “[b]y taking the picture, parents consciously and unconsciously rehearse the drama of related identities. In a way the photo is the relation” (Miller 53).

Marianne Hirsch, editor of The Familial Gaze, calls Pictures From Home “an attempt to expand [the family album’s] range beyond the conventional happy representations of family rituals, to expose the darker and more hidden aspects of family life” and notes that, when the son photographs his parents, “it reverses the more conventional look of parents who take pictures of their children and construct their albums and early narratives” (xi). But Sultan’s images do not bear much formal resemblance to typical family snapshots. “Los Angeles, Early Evening” shows the
exterior of the artist’s parents’ home (Katherine Avenue 19). It is a Spanish Colonial Revival style house made of white stucco with red terracotta roof tiles. The lawn, the bushes in front of the house, and the ferns to the left of it are all a deeply saturated dark green. The tree in the front yard is barren and the undersides of its branches are colored a subtle but distinctly unnatural pale green by a light on the ground, nestled in a flowerbed. The bright flowers stand out strongly against the darker, more tones in the rest of the photograph. There are a few on the ground around the tree—orange, yellow, light blue—but right up against the house, behind a shining silver ladder, a bush full of pink blossoms explodes with color, crawling up the stucco and spilling onto the lawn. The flowers look as if they had been extracted from a Technicolor film and superimposed upon this otherwise muted scene, and they draw attention to but ultimately overshadow the orange-lit window in which Sultan’s father stands with his hands in his pockets, looking out. We can’t discern any expression on his face and his clothes and skin are cast the color of the light inside. Nothing about Irving Sultan stands out to the viewer; he is his own shape but he blends into the orange square of the window and could potentially go unnoticed behind the house’s façade and the colorful flowers with which it is adorned. Unlike a snapshot, meant to record family members as they appear, the picture actually obscures his father, who is, along with his wife, the ostensible subject of the project.

There are images, such as “Dad on Bed” (Katherine Avenue 47) and “My Mother Posing for Me” (41), in which Sultan’s parents are more plainly depicted, but these are also the most clearly staged pictures in the series. More common are images like the first one, in which his parents are blocked or blend into their home. “Thanksgiving” is taken through a window screen and the clearest subject is the raw turkey in a pan on the countertop in front of the photographer’s mother (38). The shadow of a tree falls on the screen in such a way as to render it transparent in places, so that the turkey and Mrs. Sultan’s body are bright and visible. Her face, however, is
mostly in the dark. We can only see its lower half and one eye, and these features are not as discernible as the naked bird, which echoes one of the aforementioned home movie stills. In “Discussion, Kitchen Table,” Sultan’s father is seated on the right side of the frame, turned away from the camera (21). Bright sunlight from a window illuminates most of the bottom half of the frame, including the side of his face that we do see, but Sultan’s mother’s face is in the shadows. Only a reddish stencil of her features, the graphic mask of an expression, can be made out. Similarly, in “Mom Caught in Curtain” (44), she is wrapped in a translucent green fabric, so that only the shape of her shoulder and torso is detectable, and in “Reading in Bed” (48) both parents’ faces are obscured by magazines—Sultan’s mother’s is replaced by a woman in a cosmetics ad. Sultan writes, “I realize that beyond the rolls of film and the few good pictures, the demands of my project and my confusion about its meaning, is the wish to take photography literally. To stop time. I want my parents to live forever” (17). Perhaps the concealment of the pictures’ subjects could be like a protective cloak, but we cannot observe the details of a face turned away from the camera or hidden in shadows, and so it is as though they are disappearing before our eyes. The work only highlights the fact that photography does not preserve anything but images, and reinforces the failure of the image to substitute for its referent.
What Is and What Was

Robert Adams’ *The New West* is a collection of black and white photographs depicting the advance of suburban sprawl in the area around Denver, Colorado in the early 1970s. The pictures are divided into five sections based on subject matter: “Prairie,” “Tracts and Mobile Homes,” “The City,” “Foothills,” and “Mountains.” In his brief introduction to the work, Adams writes that the subject of *The New West* is “not tract homes or freeways but the source of all Form, light” (xii). In many of the pictures, the landscape is vividly illuminated by even, unsparing sunlight, which creates extraordinary contrast in the shapes and lines of houses and pick up trucks and the textures of the mountains, plains, and roads. But there are a number of pictures in which the sun is not so bright. “Colfax Avenue, Lakewood” is one such photograph (65). The lower and upper thirds of the frame are dark gray pavement and middle gray sky. On the right side of the middle third several cars parked in a row recede from the camera, and behind them a number of signs stand up against the sky, crossed by wires. We can read “Buick,” “Service Dept. Entrance,” “Used Cars,” “Bill,” “7999,” but there are more words that are obscured by tall halogen lights, as well as other signs behind the ones I have mentioned. On the left side there are mountains in the distance with more, smaller signs superimposed upon them: “Davidson,” “Mobil,” “Lakewood Grill,” “Motel,” “Gas”. We see here quite clearly what Adams calls “the eschatological chaos of signs” (63). So long as they are in a language that the viewer understands, words in pictures tend to attract the viewer’s eye away from other elements in the same picture. A word is something to grab onto; it can be immediately read and usually offers an apparent meaning, even if that meaning is not representative of the entire picture. The signs in this image are incoherent, but it is only after reading them that the viewer settles upon the car in the center of the frame whose headlights, so bright that they register as pure white spots on the page, are pointed directly at the camera. The picture looks to have been taken at dusk, but we
are still blinded. The language imprinted upon the new landscape offer no intelligible message, nor does the light make sense.

The short blurbs that Adams has written to preface each section of the book express clear distaste, even anger, about the changes in the landscape that he has chosen to record. However, the pictures are actually quite nice to look at; although they are occasionally mundane, they are certainly not ugly. They are so precisely composed, and often taken in such brilliant light, that instead of remarking upon the myriad ways in which modern societies intrude upon nature, one is entranced by the dazzling tones and the careful arrangements of structures and signs, clouds and shrubs, mountains and plains. The most striking pictures are often quite simple, but the incorporation of natural and man-made features as equally rendered graphic elements complicates their meaning. For example, the second image in the series, “Grazing land with pines. Near Falcon.” is completely changed by the wires bisecting the sky. The four lines are so thin and perfect where they are that at first the viewer might not even wonder at their being there. They parallel the slope of the hill before us and balance the composition. We do not see the poles from which the wires are suspended and the effect is somewhat disorienting, but were they not there, the sky would probably be too empty to occupy so much of the frame. There is a similar effect in the following image, “Along Interstate 25,” in which an illegible, rusty sign is flattened into an expanse of prairie. Without the sign, there would be no picture. Adams writes, “[p]aradoxically [we] need to see the whole geography, natural and man-made, to experience a peace; all land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty” (xii). Rather than signaling a bitter indictment of suburban development, Adams’ book represents an attempt to calmly approach the bewildering changes being made to the landscape and to fashion something steady out of the seemingly irreconcilable tensions of modernity.

These pictures are both a display of what is and a record of what was. The
influential critic and curator John Szarkowski writes in his foreword to the book that Adams has made the “dumb and artless agglomerations of boring buildings” that he has photographed “look not beautiful but important, as the relics of an ancient civilization look important” (viii). This notion is reflected in Barthe’s statement that photography “decrees notable whatever it photographs” (Barthes 34). Szarkowski’s evocation of relics or ruins is especially astute because where these homes have been built more will certainly follow and later the pictured structures will be replaced.

Marita Sturken notes, “[a] photograph represents the what-has-been […] once a photograph is taken, its moment is situated in the past” (Sturken 191). Adams’ photographs are monuments, not to tract homes or highways, but to a fleeting moment in his own ever-changing milieu.
Passing Figments, Fleeting Visions

What affects me most when looking at Mark Steinmetz’s work is the luminescence that he draws out of his black and white negatives. The tones in these prints speak. Their description of the subjects can be read like the lines of a poem. Steinmetz’s pictures are restrained and don’t clamor for attention, but the light makes everything seem wondrous and the viewer is captivated by the depth of the total range of gray, which is subtly punctuated with pure blacks and whites. The door on page 9 of Greater Atlanta, one in a series of three volumes containing various pictures taken in the southeastern United States throughout the 1990s, glows, the wall behind it shimmers, but the real magic is in the shadows, in the areas of black where the details are almost impossible to see but are still there. The work grants us a heightened way of seeing the ordinary, the overlooked, and the forgotten.

The picture of the cats on page 11 of Greater Atlanta looks to have been taken one fall afternoon. In its vertical frame we see a driveway leading up to a house (only partly visible) and an old Dodge truck. There are eight cats in the driveway. Two sit upright, two are bathing themselves, and the four closest to the camera are sitting compactly with four paws and their bellies on the ground. It seems impossible that all of these cats, particularly the two closest to the camera who are so similarly posed as to appear nearly identical, would have all been found together in this driveway, but the fact that Steinmetz has captured them on film with his Leica proves to us that they were so—so long as we trust in his working methods and believe that he did not somehow manipulate the picture. Really good photographs are rarely taken of cats, so for me this image in particular is representative of Steinmetz’s mastery of the medium. My admiration here has to do with what I’ve sometimes thought of as the athletic nature of photography, the photographer’s ability to immediately manipulate the machine in a precise and purposeful way in response to what they see. Steinmetz found these cats and reacted to them with quiet poise, extracting from his
surroundings an image that appears to be a mirage, a figment, a vision rendered so precisely that it seems as though every element were placed where it is by the artist. Looking closer, we notice an impression left by a truck tire in the driveway. The tire track, echoed in a later picture that shows the names “Ann Anna Annie Ana Anne” drawn in cement (16), as well as in other pictures of footprints and more tire tracks in pavement (58-9), makes this photograph an example of the thematic juxtaposition throughout the book between the lasting and the ephemeral. Those imprints will be there long after the cats have moved from their miraculously similar poses. It is as if Steinmetz is looking to the world wondering what will remain when the living beings in his pictures are gone, a particularly resonant question in a medium that is fundamentally concerned with issues of documentation, evidence, and archive.

A poem by Linh Dinh called “Recent Archeo News” is printed as an epigraph to Greater Atlanta. It lists a number of future archeological discoveries, such as “13 January 3006—Chubby male mummy / With lots of loose change, buried erect / In well preserved peep show cubicle” and “24 December 3005—Tire tracks, chewing gum, / Bolts, pegs, screws, pins, nails and human hair / Detected in ancient asphalt driveway” (5). The poem, which makes a joke out of our civilization’s demise, foregrounds Steinmetz’s interest in the traces that society leaves behind. His pictures of abandoned structures and lonely objects are excellent images of what might be considered somewhat clichéd subject matter, such as the deserted gas station on page 35. Small in the background on the right, the sign that should announce the price of gas is blank and has been stripped of the logo that once sat on top of it. The bare station structure juts into the frame on the left, but there are no pumps where they should be, and the round supports are surrounded by weeds that have sprouted up through the asphalt. In the center of the picture, a bush with white buds glows fantastically white. It is not an especially splendid plant, but rendered with such unbearable detail in this barren space it appears wondrous and wild. Steinmetz
acknowledges that much of what we wish would last is fragile and fleeting, but he does not lament loss. Rather, he finds beauty in the passing of impermanent things, which is not the end of everything but the beginning of something else.
Works Cited


