

## Shadow Projects

In the process of doing their work photographers inevitably generate archives. Their projects, however well edited, are haunted by shadow projects in the form of images that fail to make the final cut. Some are simple mistakes; some may be digressions or accidents which, interesting in themselves, point in other directions sometimes spurring new projects. Others are orphans. Negatives, contact sheets and test strips fill three-ring binders and file folders sometime swamping whole studios. Their digital versions occupy screens and take up valuable space on discs and hard drives. Often ignored they sometimes return in a way that questions or qualifies a project's meaning. In the process, they initiate an inquiry into the relation between intention and accident, making and taking, inside and outside.

Robert Frank once wrote " I am always on the outside, trying to look inside, trying to say something that is true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what's out there. And what's out there is constantly changing. " Frank expresses something here of the frustration and ultimate impossibility of making the outside world speak the language of the self, especially through a medium which seems to privilege documentation over expression. Moreover he asserts the essential impermanence of the world, its mutability a barrier against arriving at any satisfactory truth. Parallel changes on the inside result in a flux of subjectivity that prevents both photographer and viewer from returning to the same document twice. In his practice this slippage has played a major role as Frank's work. Images recur in different contexts; photographs from one series may show up in another or they may appear within new photographs; moving images may be frozen into stills or well-known stills may play a role in a film as in the brilliant *Conversations in Vermont*. For Frank the archive is a fundamental tool for exploring the tension between inside and outside, past and present.

In some of his later works, Frank has used texts to bridge the gap and to explore the complex tangle of subject and object. A text, either supplementary to or coextensive with the visual image, can explain and illustrate or, in a more suggestive register, complicate and problematize the image, adding rich ambiguities while simultaneously honoring the qualities of the image that escape or evade conscious intention. It suggests a consciousness lurking within the gaze and haunting what we might call the photograph's bias toward the outside.

In the works of James Lockett and Rebecca Holbrook the text and the personal archive address photographic meaning and the role of subjectivity in a seemingly objective medium. Both photographers rely on the written word to reveal the initial circumstances of their images. In some sense the artist's statement as explanatory device is problematic, implying a failure of the work to communicate meaning on its own. Yet a more interesting take is to consider the statement as an essential component of the work, and as such not an explanatory aside but an active element in the production of meaning.

James Lockett underscores the disparity of word and image in his sequence "The dog, the pond, the foundation, the boy, the crystalline forest and the house." "What do the photographs want?" he asks referring to the sequence. A curious question it underlines the distance between the photographer and his intent by both hinting at and evading the specific circumstances of his piece. Who after all is the boy? Or the dog? Why is the forest crystalline? As we search the sequence we encounter some of these objects: the dog looking back towards its master in apparent anticipation, the foundation of a demolished home, trees covered with ice. Most notably Lockett suggests both a "series of pathways" and a set of obstructions. In some instances the route is straight forward seemingly cut through the forest. In others it is suggested by the shadow of trees leaning into a distant vanishing point. In between we see various obstructions. Whether these are simply elements of the scenery or blocked-off alternate routes is uncertain. And at the end of the sequence stands the home, waiting like a gingerbread house partially obscured by trees that make any approach uncertain. There are elements of the fairy tale here, perhaps an echo of CS Lewis in the title of the sequences. Even the deep focus, the contrasts, the overall crispness of the images which might ordinarily signal a variety of realism here take on a quality of the hyper-real, well beyond what our eye sees, virtually "crystalline" in the words of the artist.

Lockett's statement tells a story that complicates the image while also exploring the nature of photographs and language. Revealing something of the compunction to take the photographs that the photographs in themselves, by necessity, ignore, the writing becomes a supplement that adds the weight of personal meaning and raises the question of a messy subjectivity in relation to the polished surface of the photos. The images as a fairy tale sequence as suggested by the title, already have a mildly sinister undertone. Supplemented by an autobiographical text they gain a further set of nuances, suggesting mythical connections and childhood memories juxtaposed to later domestic tensions.

At the same time, the objects in the photographs remain obdurately themselves, contributing to yet beyond any image we or the artist imposes on them. This autonomy allows the photos to look back, estranged and distanced from the limits of intent or circumstance and to encourage the photographer to ask what do they want? At the same time they serve as a relief, a reminder of an external world that persists outside of his head. And ours.

If Lockett's work suggests a fairy tale Rebecca Holbrook's *Hidden Archive* has some affinities to Samuel Beckett. Her photos are in-between-images, practically declaring themselves as throwaways taken at odd moments in the midst of a crisis. Nothing happens here At least nothing outward, nothing measurable. Yet by exploiting the limits of photography and its inability to directly access her emotions, the work paradoxically gives us a glimpse of the photographer's psychological weather.

The initial photo seemingly sets the stage for the sequence by depicting an unpromising scene casually shot. The technical flaws alone suggest a reject from a contact sheet. And the subject itself is curious: an undistinguished house, some trees, a yard, what looks to be a rural mailbox. As the sequence progresses the vantage point shifts and the lens moves in and out of focus in an imitation of distraction itself.

We witness the passage of time on several scales as day gives way to night and summer to fall. We also intuit the camera itself as a timepiece displacing one photograph for another and registering various changes in exposure, and focus. The technical inconsistency of the shots suggests the very quality of anxiety and distraction that characterizes waiting. At first seemingly objective, neutral and more than a bit boring, the repetition of the scene progressively calls attention to the figure behind the lens, forcing us to ask questions about her obsession with a mundane setting and her compulsion to record it, along with her indifference to technical finesse. The scene approached as a relief from anxiety becomes an emblem of anxiety.

Moreover, the reality she avoids recording ironically returns in nocturnal images where reflections and harsh light obscure the exterior while revealing the interior where most of the actual situation plays out. The window through which we have been gazing at the scene becomes a mirror and the exterior scene gives way (at least partially) to a domestic interior, the actual scene inhabited by the photographer. In an interesting overlay the interior lamps mirror the streetlights outside creating an ambiguous dream space. This conflation of spaces points to an intermediate zone occupied by the artist in a state of distraction that is haunted by trauma, a veritable dream space constructed of commonplace objects that take on a sense of vague foreboding. .

Most surprisingly, Holbrook implies a remarkably human story in a sequence in which no people appear. We intuit a mind and a set of emotions behind the lens mirrored less by an outside object than by the position and characteristics of the camera itself including mistakes that are common to the apparatus. It becomes clear that Holbrook's sequence is less about looking than looking away.

Both Lockett and Holbrook address the passage of time through movement, physical transformation, or waiting, where time hangs heaviest and reveals itself most cruelly. And it is a time that proceeds on two tracks, the time of the outside world and of the human observer. In Lockett's case this is implied as a movement along a path whether one of the paths he depicts in his photos or the unsuspected movement of his life. In Holbrook's the movement in the form of seasonal and diurnal changes takes place around an essentially static figure, forced into inactivity by circumstances over which she has little control

“No ideas but in things” wrote William Carlos Williams. As photographers know the correlate may well be “Things have their own ideas.” They intrude uninvited into our images, in excess of our intent. And they often show up unsuspected in our archives. This is a good part of the excitement of photography, its willingness to accept and even court accident even as we try to impress specific meanings on the world. As we speak we simultaneously invite the world to speak, however mutely. These two photographers think their way with and through the things of a world that is aloof yet simultaneously available to our perceptions, our curiosity and our projections.

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