

SELECTING A SUBJECT

*They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."*

Wallace Stevens,
The Man with The Blue Guitar

Bill Jay: *When we were discussing some definitions you remarked that photography's core characteristic was to show what something looked like. I think this is an important point because many photographers seem fascinated with the medium yet have no idea what to photograph.*

David Hurn: That's true. The fundamental issue is one of emphasis: you are not a photographer because you are interested in photography.

Explain what you mean.

Many people are interested in photography in some nebulous way; they might be interested in the seemingly glamorous lives of top fashion or war photographers; or in the acquisition and admiration of beautiful, functional machines, the cameras; or in the arcane ritual of the darkroom processes; or in the persona which they could adopt if only they took pictures like... whoever. But these interests, no matter how personally enjoyable they might be, never lead to the person becoming a photographer. The reason is that photography is only a tool, a vehicle, for expressing or transmitting a passion in something else. It is not the end result. An analogy would be to buy a car for its status appeal, for the idea that it will improve your sex-life, for the smell of the new upholstery, for the fascination with its beautiful engineering, and so on. But it is useless unless it actually takes you somewhere.

The destination of photography is to reveal what something or somebody looked like, under a particular set of conditions, at a particular moment in time, and to transmit the result to others.

Right. However, a word of caution should be inserted here. Although what you just said is true, it does not imply merely bland records of anything. Some pictures are obviously more interesting, more beautiful, more inspiring than others, even of the same subject matter. More than that, they are indelibly stamped with the unique style, for want of a better word, of the individuals who made them. So what transforms these simple records into pictures of lasting merit?

How would you answer?

It comes down to the choice of subject. The photographer must have intense curiosity, not just a passing visual interest, in the theme of the pictures. This curiosity leads to intense examination, reading, talking, research and many, many failed attempts over a long period of time.

I'm intrigued by this idea: it seems to me self-evident that in order to photograph with any degree of continuous passion, you must have a fascination for the subject, otherwise you cannot sustain an interest in the act of creation for a long enough period of time in which to make any insightful or original statement about it. And I had to learn this lesson from you. After you had told me in 1967 that my photographs were "boring," as I related in the opening pages, I could stop the struggle to be a photographer-like-other-photographers. It was such a relief. I began shooting anew, with a simple concentration on the subjects which most interested me, with no thought of success, prestige, or reputation, but with a joyous liberation — which continues to this day.

I'm pleased that you raised the issue of your own photographs. I was a bit concerned that we had left the reader with the impression of you being a failed photographer — which was not an encouraging idea for a joint-author of a book on the practical issues of the medium! I was disparaging about your images 30 years ago because they were derivative of the work of others whom you admired. They were not your own. But since then you have been intensely involved with your personal subject matter — particularly portraits of photographers — and produced a huge body of work which not only contains fine single images but also adds up to a major historical record.

Let us make the point clear: when the subject takes precedence, you not only start the journey towards a personal style but also you discover the sheer joy of visually responding to the world. It solves a lot of doubts, clears away all confusion.

The reason for a young photographer's confusion is that most teachers, classes, workshops, books, whatever, imply that how the picture is made, what techniques were employed, why it looks different and artistic, is more important than the subject matter. Yet the photographer is, primarily, a subject-selector. Much as it might offend the artistically inclined, the history of photography is primarily the history of the subject matter.

So a photographer's first decision is *what* to photograph. Your curiosity, fascination and enthusiasm for this subject can be communicated to others through the pictures you take of it.

This reminds me ... Ralph Steiner, the late, great photographer, would occasionally write me a funny, provocative letter after he had read one of my published articles. He would end with the words: "But you still have not told me in which direction to point the camera — and this is what matters." And he is right. So let's get down to brass tacks, as the British would say, and give specific advice on the choice of subject matter.

Garden gnomes!

Only kidding. My guess is that giving specific advice on what to photograph would not be appreciated even if it was possible — and it's not, because how could I know what excites the curiosity of others?

True, but we can talk about the basic principles of subject selection.

The first thing to do is carry a notebook and during quiet times or as the thought occurs to you, compile a list of anything that really interests you. In other words, write a list of subjects which fascinate you without regard to photography. What could inflame your passion and curiosity over a long period of time? At that stage, make the list without any regard for photography. Be as specific as possible. After you have exhausted the list, you begin to cut it down by asking yourself these questions:

Is it visual? You can safely eliminate such fascinating (to you) topics as existential philosophy or the Old Testament or the existence of intelligent life on other planets.

Is it practical? You can cut out topics which are difficult or impossible to photograph at your convenience on a regular basis. For example, if I were a photographer of limited means living in, say, Denver, I would have to eliminate the topic of Japanese pagodas, at least as far as photography is concerned. Or I would cut out an interest in famous film stars — the subject must be not only practical but continually accessible.

Is it a subject about which I know enough? Eliminate those subjects about which you are ignorant, at least until you have conducted a good deal of research into the topic. For example, you are not contributing anything to the issue of urban poverty by wandering back streets and snatching pictures of derelicts in doorways. That's exploitation, not exploration.

Is it interesting to others? This is a tricky one, but it is worth asking yourself: if you have several remaining topics all of which are equally fascinating, which one is interesting to others? This is tricky only in that it ignores the issue of your intended audience, which might be a small, specialized one, and the issue of pandering to public appeal.

I would like to interject a note on this last point. I know, as a professional lecturer, that it is difficult to transmit information (in say, my own passion for topographical photographers of the wet-plate period) to a bored, disinterested audience. I must engage and hold the audience's attention before the content can flow. On the other hand, I am not a professional entertainer. So there is a very fine line between pandering to popular appeal and a respectful consideration of viewers'/listeners' attention-span or interest in the content. It is what I call a respect for the bum-factor — just how much is the audience aware of the seats on which it is sitting? You are talking about a similar fine line between your interest and the interest of the viewer.

Yes, if all of the final selections interest you equally, it does not seem like a compromise to select the topic which others are more interested in viewing. The state of being human dictates that some things are more interesting to look at than others.

But we could discuss this gray area *ad nauseum* and thereby forget the essential point: the subject matter you select must: a) fire your enthusiasm and curiosity for at least the length of time it will take to produce a meaningful body of work; b) lend itself to images, as opposed to words and; c) remain continuously accessible so that you can return time and again to the same topic whenever you wish or have time.

I want to add a few remarks about your exhortation: be as specific as possible. It is invariably true that a list of interests will include topics which are far too broad to be useful. In my seminars on research and writing I have to spend an inordinate amount of time on the student's choice of topics for precisely this reason. Every time a student proposes a topic for research it is a book-length theme not an article. The difficulty is to encourage a small, specific do-able project. He/she will propose "Victorian portraiture"; I suggest Lewis Carroll's images of Alice. He/she will propose "The Photo Secession"; I suggest the members' use of a glass ball as a motif. He/she will propose "Latin American photography"; I suggest the digital imagery of Pedro Meyer. These are not specific cases but merely examples of the need to cut down a vast, general topic into manageable segments.

It is the same when selecting topics for a visual essay. When I say "be as specific as possible," I mean: take on a project which is containable and can be completed within a reasonable period of time. Also, the more precise the topic, the easier it is to conduct research. Now let me give some general examples. If your list contains an interest such as *education*, make it "My Life as a Student at so-and-so campus"; "Flowers" becomes "Plants That Relate to Architecture"; "Portraits" is reduced to "Cleveland Sculptors In Their Studios." Anyway, the point is taken...

For many photographers this list-making might seem an overly pragmatic, too coldly clinical approach to subject matter. I'm sure many will be thinking that it destroys the pleasure of the visual adventure.

Maybe. But the fact remains that it works, and just wandering around looking for pictures, hoping that something will pop up and announce itself, does not work. Sorry about that, photographers, if it offends your fantasy of how a photographer behaves!

All I can tell people is that for forty years I have talked to many of the best photographers in the world, in various areas of the medium, and there is a common denominator among all their approaches to the taking of pictures: they are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their subject matter and they plan ahead of the actual shooting.

We will return to this idea of planning ahead a little later. But I can foresee another objection to this issue by an aspiring photographer. That is, all the talk about emphasizing subject matter indicates we are only advocating a strict, straight recording of faces and places. It is important that we state, categorically, that we are talking about starting points, for all photographers. In fact the idea is not restrictive at all; it offers more scope for a continuing evolution of complexity and, hence, a greater latitude for personal interpretation.

That's true. The narrower and more clearly defined the subject matter at the start, the more quickly identified is the "direction in which to aim the camera," as Steiner said, and the more pictures are taken. The more the shooting, the greater the enthusiasm and knowledge for the subject. The greater your knowledge, the more you want to do it justice and this increases the scope and depth of the pictures. So the process feeds on itself.

There is an analogy which I like to use: When I landscaped my garden I needed to plant trees. I could have obtained an instant tree by collecting an assortment of trunks, branches, twigs and leaves and assembling the bits. But the tree would be dead; it would never grow into something else. So the starting point was a sapling which, by careful nurturing, and a good deal of patience, will grow into a tree, often into a form which could not have been predicted. It seems to me that it is the same with a body of work, of any merit, in photography. The greatest scope for deep-rooted, organic growth begins with the simplest of premises: the direct visual encounter with a selected subject.

As you know, I find it useful to answer problematic questions by turning the issue upside-down, such as the issue of honesty, that can be solved to my satisfaction by knowing what is dishonest when taking pictures. It is the same here. What is the alternative to an emphasis on subject matter? It is a frantic grasping for instant gratification which all too often leads to works displaying visual pyrotechnics but of dubious depth and resonance. Photographers become pressured into a search for different-ness, a quest for newness which usually means an unusual technique: your dead-tree syndrome.

There is another problem here. If the images are not rooted in "the thing itself," to use Edward Weston's term, then the photographer has not learned anything about the real world. He/she can only justify the images by reference to self: "This is how I felt." Before long, this leads to incredibly convoluted psychoanalysis in a futile effort to justify the most banal, superficial work.

How I shudder at the interminable, self-indulgent, often incomprehensible photo-critiques I have been obliged to attend. My response to all those words about self is that the photographers are inviting judgment on themselves as people, not photographers, and that's foolish. It seems an extraordinary presumption that every photographer has a depth of character which demands

revelation! And if the self is shallow, narrow, superficial and inconsequential, then, they are admitting, so will be the resultant photographs.

And there are no standards. What I mean is there can never be any objective benchmarks against which to measure the success or failure of these images. If a person says, "This is how I feel," you cannot respond, "No, you do not feel that way."

Mind you, I have no objection to anyone using photography for personal therapy. That seems a valid use of the medium. I guess what we are saying is that these images will have an audience of only one, the person who made them. Rarely will they have any resonance or value to a larger audience.

Most photographers would do the world a favor by diminishing, not augmenting, the role of self and, as much as possible, emphasizing subject alone. I'm not being facetious. Such photographers would be members of an august group — the majority of photographers throughout the medium's history, most of whom remain unknown as personalities. However, the emphasis today is on a cult of personality and individualism, and I presume that the majority of photographers who encounter these words are anxious to assert self, as well as subject. Do you have any words of encouragement?

In today's art-photography environment any one who asserts the prime importance of subject matter will automatically produce distinctive, different images!

Now I am being facetious. The fact is that all photographs, even of the most prosaic records of things, are subjective. They are made as a result of various decisions arising out of the mind of an individual. So inevitably that self will intrude on the picture-making process. It would be impossible to keep it out. But it is not the primary aim of the images. A unique style, which is what we are talking about, is the by-product of visual exploration, not its goal. Personal vision comes only from not aiming at it. Over a long period of time and through many, many images, the self re-emerges with even greater strength than if it were the end-product. Ironically, by starting with self, it is missed; ignore it, and it becomes evident.

Like walking back to my cabin in the forest by starlight: you can only see the direction, the track, by not looking directly at it. Or back to my tree analogy: the living entity, the visible thing we call a tree, is only sustained by the root system which is not only out of sight but must be kept underground for the sake of the growth and to prevent the tree blowing down during the next wind of change. I know the analogy is being stretched to breaking point, but I was struggling to link the idea of a clear, intense examination of "the thing itself" with the hidden self, the photographer's life, which sustains it.

Bad example, but I know what you mean. I think the answer is very simple — and is intimately connected with the choice of subject matter. No two people will make the same list, or edit it down in the same way, or for the same reasons. Therefore, by the simple act of choosing a topic to explore photographically, you are asserting self. Then, the more this topic is a concentration of your whole focus, the more you become a mini-expert

in it, the more chance there is that it will spread and deepen into an intrinsic part of your total consciousness.

I once watched a television interview with a great violinist. The interviewer asked him to describe a typical day. The musician said he read scores over breakfast, then composed music in the morning, thought about music during a walk, practiced the violin in the afternoon, played in a concert in the evening, met with musician friends to play together, then went to bed dreaming of the violin. The interviewer was aghast: it seemed such a narrow life. "Yes," said the violinist, "initially my life was becoming narrower and narrower in focus. But then something extraordinary happened. It is as though my music passed through a tiny hole in an hour-glass and it has since become broader and broader. Now my music is making connections with every aspect of life."

In a real sense photographers are photographers one hundred percent of the time. Everything connects. On my way to see you I read on the plane four essays by Michel de Montaigne and constantly saw links between his ideas and photography — even though the essays were written in the late 1500s. I always find it fascinating to see a movie, for example, with photographers whom I respect. Inevitably, their later conversations reveal all sorts of useful observations that they have made, sucked out of the plot, dialogue, acting, camera angles, pacing, whatever, which can be applied to their own work. Every event becomes grist to the photographic mill. And scores of learning events are occurring daily. All this new insight is fed back to the subject of the pictures, so it is no wonder that who a photographer is becomes revealed through what he/she photographs.

The ultimate aim is an oscillation between self and subject with the images being a physical manifestation of this supercharged interface between the spirit and the world.

Yes. But let us take a reality check. What you said is right but it sounds profound. The reality is much simpler, and can be explained with an everyday occurrence. Take a mother on a beach watching her child build sand castles. She suddenly sees an expression which tugs at her heart-strings. Without thought, she dips into the picnic basket, aims the camera, and presses the button. The moment has been captured — and will be treasured for the rest of her life.

Eighty-five percent of all the ingredients of photography are encompassed by this simple act. The mother has an intimate knowledge of her subject; she is the expert on that child. She is enthusiastic in her love of the subject. There is no thought of self or creativity, although both are intimately present. The snap was made without concern for technique. These are the ingredients which should be present in the acts of all photographers, no matter how sophisticated, yet they are the very ones which are too often ignored.

Mum, the photographer, has no interest in fancy tricks or style or special visual effects. Her job is simply to record the moment, and the place. Both the taker and potential viewers expect to recognize who is in the picture and the circumstances of it. When put into the family album the photograph might have a simple, factual caption to help: "Brighton Beach, first pair of shorts on Jimmy." The mother/photographer unconsciously uses the

probability factor. It is probable that the connection between the visual appearance of the event and the resulting photograph will be identifiable with the relationship between herself and her subject. And it is probable that the end product, the photograph, will convey to the viewer enough of the same message to make the exercise useful, satisfying and even meritorious. It will not give total accuracy of the message, not all of the facts, not all the feelings, but enough to make the exercise worthwhile.

Now the trick is how to convert the 85 percent to 100 percent; how to transform a record of the event into a satisfying picture; how to make the particular, universal...

And that will be a major topic of conversation in a separate section. But before we leave this theme of subject matter, I wanted to hear your thoughts on an issue which occurred to me when you were describing the mother on the beach. She not only had an interest in the subject of the picture, which we agreed was essential, but, more than that, a love of the subject, the child.

I see where you are taking that thought. It is the difference between a thought and feeling, an intellectual idea and an emotional attachment. I think a photographer can make a wonderful set of pictures of a topic which is purely intellectually or visually based without having a deep, abiding love for the subject matter. Let's think of some examples.

Most of the time, unless we knew the photographer very well, it would be impossible to know the depth of emotion compared with intellectual knowledge. But I would guess Francis Frith was not particularly in love with the pyramids of Egypt during his trips between 1856 and 1860. He certainly knew a great deal about them. Did Eugene Atg t love the sculptures at Versailles? I do not know, but they do not give that impression to me, although they are wonderful images. On the other hand, I do think he loved the back alleys and shop-fronts and cobble-stoned byways of old Paris which were to be destroyed — and I think it showed.

But then I could be projecting my own feelings for the subject matter onto the images.

I was thinking of Alfred Stieglitz's cloud pictures because we know he said that they are the equivalents of emotional states. I read what he says but to me they remain pictures of clouds. His portraits and nudes of his wife, Georgia O'Keeffe, seem so much more intimate and full of love. And there are Harold Edgerton's experiments with his invention, the strobe or electronic flash. They were made to show off the abilities of a new piece of technology, dispassionately perhaps. Yet they are visual marvels. The one depicting the flight of a bullet through an apple is one of my favorite images in the whole history of the medium.

Personally, I have always had trouble with this concept, which is why I raised it. There's an implication that emotion and intellect are adversarial, that one precludes the other, that the rational is antithetical to emotion. Yet my own experience is that opposites always work in conjunction. If I am intellectually stimulated by a topic it is not long before I am emotional about it; if I am emotional about something or someone, then I want to know more about the subject of my affection. So perhaps this is a false issue. The word "interest" especially accompanied by an adjective like "intense" or "enthusiastic" covers the spectrum about a subject, from cold rationality to hot passion.

The more I think about it, the more I am inclined to believe that individual pictures can be very important even when rationally, intellectually made but the bodies of work, the lifetime achievements of a photographer, which impress me the most are those based in love as well as knowledge.

I remember the first time I saw a large number of photographs by Stephen Dalton of insects in flight. Immediately I could sense that Dalton loved these little beasties! He was also extremely knowledgeable about them, a fact which is underlined by his learned texts accompanying the images. In addition, it was evident that he carefully planned his photographs in advance, even to the extent of designing and building specialized equipment to achieve the end results. So it seems to me that his work employs all the elements we have been discussing.

A more familiar name, because he appears in the major history textbooks, would be Lewis Hine, and I am thinking particularly of his work for the Child Labor Committee in the first decades of this century. His pictures of children working as slave labor in dangerous environments ooze passion and outrage, yet he had to plan the taking of the images with cool detachment, even employing subterfuge, otherwise the owners of the mill or mine would not have given him access. He did not seem to mind that his pictures were badly reproduced in poor halftones because the subject matter was more important than his reputation as an artist. As far as I know, he never received a single exhibition of his work while he was alive. Now, of course, his prints are taken out of context, overmatted and, rightly, exhibited as art.

I could go on — and on. The point is that all photographers of stature whom I admire seem to share this fundamental characteristic: a deep and long-lasting respect and love for the subject matter.

The best pictures, for me, are those which go straight into the heart and the blood, and take some time to reach the brain.

I agree.