University of North Carolina at Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
December 2013

Artifacts

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Abstract

Artifacts is a series of documentary photographs that explore how the photographer utilizes the medium as a method of collection and preservation. Motivated by the desire to collect and preserve, this body of work contains narrative windows into the traditions, interactions, and relationships of everyday life in contemporary Southern Appalachia. Drawing influence from turn of the century family photo albums, philosopher Roland Barthes, and photographers William Gedney and Duane Michals, *Artifacts* puts forth two assertions: firstly that the photographic medium facilitates collection because it satisfies a need to circumvent the passage of time by preserving a perceived reality. Secondly, it is important there is fair representation of the subjects and cultures in the collection upon the submission of those perceived realities into the public archive.

1. Introduction

The act of collecting can be interpreted as seeking comfort through tangibility. *Artifacts* posit that collection through documentary photography transforms the temporal into something tangible with the capacity for preservation. Furthermore, that ability to hold on to those significant moments provides an archive of visual histories with the power to share and shape perceptions about a person, place or culture. Influenced by photographers Edgar "Jake" Whanger, William Gedney, and Duane Michals, I have compiled a collection of documentary images that speak to the importance of connection through preservation and to the legacy of documentary photography in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

2. Collection as Preservation

Each photo in this series is motivated by a devotion to preservation. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal assert in the introduction to *Cultures of Collecting* that the themes of collecting itself are "desire and nostalgia, saving and loss, [and] the urge to erect a permanent and complete system against the destructiveness of time."[1] Photography is an ideal method of collection and preservation because the photographic document is a bastion against time's consumptive nature. It was human's eagerness to preserve something exactly as it was at a specific juncture of space and time that led to the invention of photography. From the eighteenth and nineteenth century art of tracing silhouettes to the camera obscura, which allowed for artists to produce an accurate likeness of their subject, to Joseph Niecephore Niepce's use of the camera obscura in 1826 to produce the world's first photograph, people have long felt the need to keep the past tangible. By acknowledging our awareness of our temporality, the photographic medium occupies a dichotomy between the eternality of the photograph and its role as time's memento mori. Since the photograph is an inherent indicator of the passage of time, the open and close of the shutter signal the death of a moment and its simultaneous preservation.

Duane Michals demonstrates his understanding of this disunion of purpose in the piece *This Photograph is my Proof* (Figure 1.). The photograph itself feels nostalgic, but it is the text on the image that points to the importance to the photographer of what *has been* rather than its loss. Like Michals, in *Artifacts* I employ the use of text as a way to provide context and proof that I was a participant in the experience. The text is incorporated into the titles of the images as either quotes from the subject or if there was limited verbal interaction, observations from my experience. Like a card catalog, they provide a way to reference back to the collection at a specific juncture of space and time.

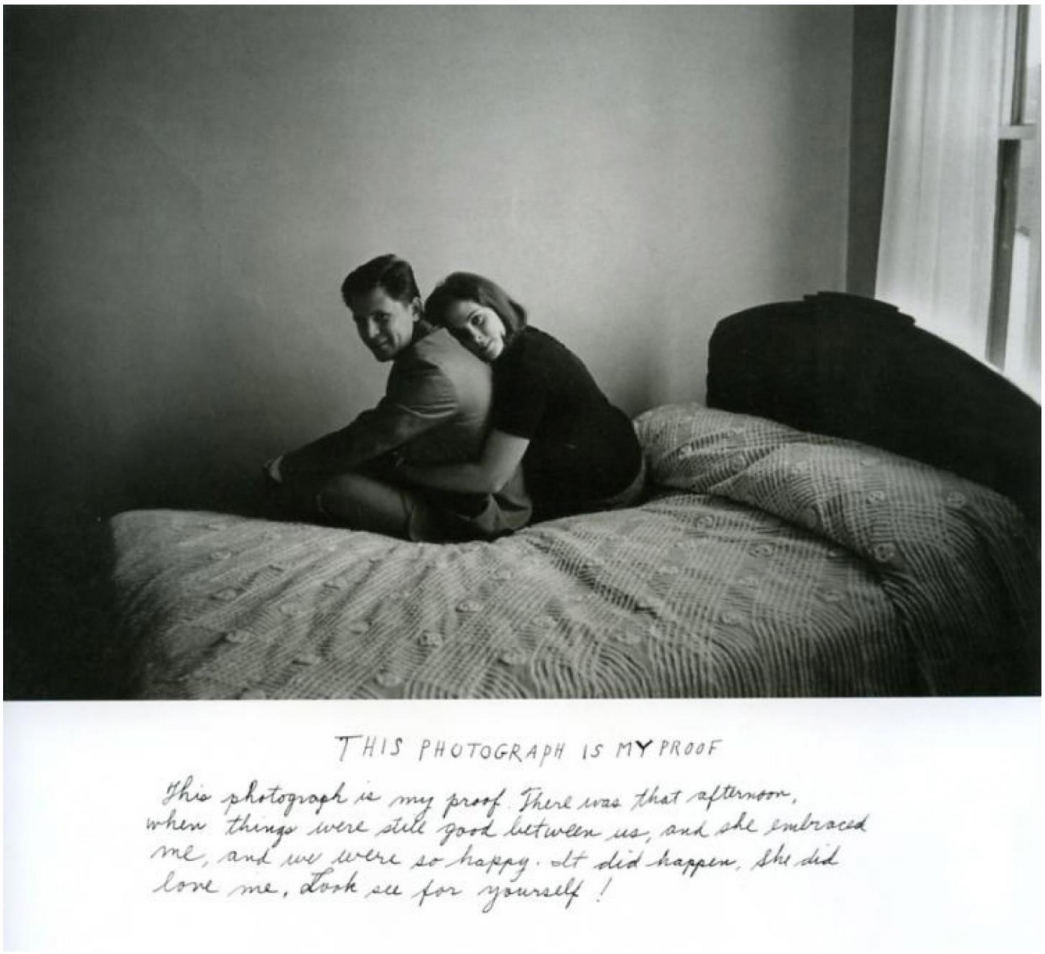

Figure 1. Duane Michals, *This Photograph is my Proof,* 1974. Silver Gelatin Print.

The collection of photographs that has had the greatest influence on my understanding of photography as a method of preservation was taken by my Great- Grandfather Edgar "Jake" Whanger and carefully arranged in two albums by my great-grandmother, Catherine "Peg" Noel. The photos document the life of my mother's family in a small train town in the mountains of West Virginia between 1916 and 1923. The arrangement and preservation of these albums by my great-grandmother exemplify the singularly human instinct to collect photographs as a way to outwit the passage of time. Because Peg preserved the West Virginia albums I bore witness to 18 year-old Jake falling in love with her through the lens of his Kodak camera. Though a teenager, it is clear from the photographs that Jake was keenly aware of the ephemerality of gestures and interactions and the camera as a mechanism for permanence. My great-grandmother would leave for school in Battle Creek, Michigan; he would continue to work for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, but Jake would always have the smiling and radiant Peg in West Virginia (Figure 2). When I look at my great-grandfather's photographs I recognize his sense of urgency to assert some kind of permanence over those moments when the harmonious correspondence of light and body language perfectly embody an experience. I am compelled by this urgency to raise the camera to my eye when I notice my Grandma Jane in the midst of laugh (Figure 3.). It is a rare moment when she is unaware of the camera, and I know this moment will not come again.

Figure 2. Jake Whanger, *Peg*. From artist's personal collection. Hinton, WV, 1918

Figure 3. Louisa Murrey, *Grandma hates having her picture taken,* Boone, NC. 2012.

Roland Barthes began writing *Camera Lucida* after the passing of his mother, and much of the book is a reflection on the *Winter Garden* photograph, which depicts his mother as a young girl.[2] He intimates in *Camera Lucida* that "it [*Winter Garden* photograph] would tell me what constituted that thread which drew me toward Photography"[3] Like Barthes, I feel that the West Virginia Albums provided me with a vocabulary to articulate my attraction to the medium. They have come to serve two major purposes during my own process of photography for this body of work. First, as an artifact of my bloodline, they are testament to a tradition of collection and preservation in my family history. The second purpose of the West Virginia Albums serve is of an example of photography in Appalachia that does not conform to stereotypes perpetuated by documentary photography in the region.

3. Sharing Perceived Realities and the Legacy of Southern Appalachian Photography

Southern Appalachia has a long, torrid relationship with collection and preservation of its culture. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw the "re-discovery" of the culture and resources in the Appalachian Mountains. Most of the collecting that was done in the region fell in to one of two camps: evidence of the need to preserve the last remnant of "Pioneer America" or evidence of the need for industrialization. Thomas Robinson Dawley utilized selective photographs of families in Western North Carolina and East Tennessee in his government report turned book, *The Child that Toileth Not*, to highlight the ignorance, lawlessness, and immorality of the mountain people as a justification for industrialization.[4] Northern missionaries and educators flooded into Appalachia with a steadfast determination to preserve and enhance the lifestyle of the hard-working, hand-hewn, simple, and independent lifestyle lead by the people in Appalachia.[5] Simultaneously, Local Color writers like Mary Noailles Murfree and John Fox Jr. were characterizing the people in Southern Appalachia as uneducated moonshiners and hillbillies for the entertainment of their urban readers.[6] The two movements resulted in two polarizing styles of documentary photographs that have continued to represent Southern Appalachia; that of the

wizened but simple mountaineer on the verge of extinction and his brother the poor uneducated (sometimes dangerous) hillbilly.[7]

Bayard Wootten's photographs for Muriel Early Sheppard's 1935 book, *Cabins in the Laurel* are an example of how the people of Southern Appalachia were presented as a poor, uneducated, and unindustrialized people. History Professor at Appalachian State University, Ralph E. Lentz writes in his book *W.R. Trivette, Appalachian Pictureman: Photographs of a bygone time*, that while *Cabins in the Laurel* was well received by critics outside of Western North Carolina, the subjects of the book were less than pleased to be presented as "backward, illiterate, drunken hicks."[8] Wootten's portraits and Sheppard's writing omit any evidence that industrialization or American culture had ever reached Southern Appalachia. Jake Whanger's photographs from nearly a decade earlier than *Cabins in the Laurel*, shatter that notion. For example in the photograph *Dick and Dad, 1921* (Figure 4), the subjects are dressed in what would have been considered the fashion of the era; the photograph could easily be from any part of the country instead of the mountains of West Virginia.

Figure 4. Jake Whanger, *Dick and Dad, 1921*. From artist's personal collection. Hinton, WV. 1921.

On the other end of the spectrum, the second image commonly associated with Southern Appalachian photography is that of the dignified, wise but simple mountaineer, the last of his kind. Photographer Doris Ulmann's portraits for the 1937 book, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* echo this sentiment. Ulmann would consistently ask her subjects to go change out of their normal clothes and into their woolsey-linsey[9] to look the part of the "Appalachian Mountaineer".[10] Lentz writes "Ulmann consciously sought those people who fit the Appalachian stereotype because she believed they were a disappearing species in modern, 20th century America."[11] Ulmann's desire to collect and preserve the traditional Appalachian mountaineer, while certainly well intentioned, produced a problematic popular

archive of regional culture. Wootten and Ulmann's images are rooted in elements of truth, but they fail to consider the people living in Southern Appalachia as people with a full spectrum of emotions and experiences, who are united by a strong tie to the geography of the region. The goal of the photographs in this series is to document and preserve an accurate representation of the culture, where progress and tradition coincide on a day-to-day basis (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Louisa Murrey, *The day Governor McCrory came to town,* Watauga County, NC. 2013. Digital Photograph.

Throughout the process of working on *Artifacts* I have found that the photographer's level of immersion in the community throughout the process of collecting photographs will determine whether the images feel voyeuristic or exploitative. The documentary photographer William Gedney's approach to his images of the Cornett family in eastern Kentucky from 1964 and 1972 has been greatly significant to my photographic process. Gedney, like Doris Ulmann, was a New York native, unlike Ulmann, William Gedney moved in with the subjects of his Kentucky series and became a beloved member of the Cornett family as evidenced by the many letters exchanged between Vivian Cornett and Gedney in subsequent years. William Gedney's Kentucky photographs do not conceal the poverty of the Cornett family, but neither do they showcase it. Instead, he prefers to focus in on the personalities and interactions of Vivian and Willie Cornett and their twelve children. In a diary entry from 1974 William Gedney wrote "In order to 'give meaning' to the world one has to feel oneself involved in what he frames through the viewfinder."[12] Evidence of Gedney's total involvement with his subjects can be found in the obvious comfort the Cornetts felt in the presence of Gedney and his camera. An example of this in Gedney's photograph *Boy and girl sitting together smoking,* (Figure 6.) he catches the subjects in an intimate moment. The girl is relaxed into the boy, their faces tilt towards one another… their countenance does not suggest that there is another person in the room, much less a camera.

Figure 6. William Gedney, *Boy and girl sitting together smoking,* KY, 1972. Gelatin silver print.

Like Gedney, I attempt a similar strategy of objectivity through immersion throughout my photographic process. When it comes to this series of images, my status is not solely "the photographer" I am also a member of the community with a vested interest in the preservation of the culture in which I was raised. William Gedney writes at the end of the aforementioned diary entry, "one must always take photographs with the greatest respect for the subject and for oneself."[13] When photographing subjects in my community, it is my kinship with my subject that engenders my respect and begets my devotion to accurately representing my subject.

In accordance to my desire for immersive objectivity, the decisive act of "going out" to shoot photographs has never been a part of my process. Rather, to be able to capture a more natural and honest documentation, I prefer have my camera close at hand at all times. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes writes about his awareness of being in front of a lens, "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: The one I think I am, The one I want others to think I am, The one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."[14] By always having a camera on my person, I find that I am often able to avoid this schizophrenic hyperawareness and uneasiness in my subjects. The familiarity of associating the camera with the photographer and the photographer with the community allows the people I photograph to become accustomed to the camera and the intentions of the photographer. When that kind of familiarity has been established I, as the photographer, am able to move more seamlessly between participating community member and observing documenter. Henri Cartier-Bresson famously told the Washington Post in 1957

> Photography is not like painting, there is a creative fraction
> of a second when you are taking a picture.
> Your eyes must see a composition or an expression of life itself offers you,
> and you must know with intuition to click the camera.
> That is the moment the photographer is creative,
> Oop! The Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone forever."[15]

I use a digital camera because the digital format concedes to the photographer a greater power to act on the decisive moment. The photograph "*I want your grandfather to mistake me for the redhead he dated in Paris"* (Figure 7) is an example of a moment that would have been lost by taking extra time to configure the settings on my film camera. The moment in time that I clicked the shutter is pertinent to the photo; if Jessi had turned away from the camera, the image would suggest a much more sinister inclination towards stalking. That Jessi is facing the camera refers to the

presence of the photographer, but since I was able to take advantage of that fraction of a second where she is glancing sideways, she remains unaware of the shutter's release.

Figure 7. Louisa Murrey, *I want your grandfather to mistake me for the redhead he dated in Paris*, Canton, NC, 2013. Digital Photograph.

4. Conclusion

Recognition of the momentary is the backbone for the collection of the documentary photographs. *Artifacts* is a testament to that recognition and my determination to establish an archive of images that allow the viewer to engage in the various visual histories of my community. Delving into the previous collections of visual narratives from Southern Appalachia enforced how critical it was for me to accurately represent the people I photographed. Furthermore, my research of the use of photography as a mechanism for collection and preservation led to the discovery that using said method is a part of my own history. The realization that through my great-grandfather's photographs my approach to photography had been passed down as a tradition, reinforced my intent to use the medium to create an archive for the stories and traditions in my community.

5. References

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[5] Ralph E. Lentz, W.R. Trivette, Appalachian Pictureman: Photographs of a Bygone Time, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2001), 72.
[6] Loyal Jones, Appalachia: A Self Portrait, (Frankfort, KY: Gnomon Press for Appalshop Inc, 1979), 13. (Placeholder1)
[7]Lentz, W.R. Trivette, 73.
[8] Ibid
[9] Woolsey-Linsey is a fabric woven from a blend of cotton and wool and was used by colonists in America.
[10] Charles Alan Watkins, "Why Have There Been No Good Appalachian Photographers?" *Now and Then: Appalachian Magazine* 14 Summer (1997): 21-25.
[11] Lentz, W.R. Trivette, 80.
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[15]Henri Cartier-Bresson as quoted in Adam Bernstein, "The Acknowledged Master of the Moment, Washington Post (Washington D.C.), Aug. 5, 2004. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A39981-2004Aug4.html.