Gesture and attitude

Stephen Piper

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GESTURE AND ATTITUDE

by

Stephen Piper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
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THESIS PROPOSAL

THESIS TITLE: Gesture and Attitude

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PURPOSE:

I intend to explore, with a small format camera, people's gestures and physical attitudes and the way in which these are enhanced by their relationship to the environment.

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE:

I am interested in observing and photographing people, who are alone or in groups, in everyday situations. Certain gestures reveal personal characteristics, state of mind, and cultural conventions, and within the appropriate environment, their meaning and significance may be further intensified. The photographs that result from my interaction with this condition may also become a reflection of my attitude toward the circumstances I photograph.
I have found the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank influential and inspiring. Both make use of framing and photographing at a decisive moment to depict gestures that are interesting in themselves and enhanced by their relationship to the environment.

PROCEDURE:

I will work with small format cameras, probably 35mm exclusively, because of their portability and inconspicuousness.

I will photograph in any setting that is appropriate to the work. This will include the Rochester area and, probably, other locations.

The work will result in a thesis exhibition of 30-40 prints to be held in the MFA Gallery at Rochester Institute of Technology in the spring of 1980.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

SOME BACKGROUND

My father was and still is an amateur photographer, although he no longer maintains a darkroom in the basement as he did when I was very young, where he processed and printed his own black-and-white negatives. He owned several cameras—including a Kodak 35mm rangefinder and a twin-lens 2 1/4 by 2 1/4 Kodak. It was probably from him, then, that I first became aware of the process of photography.

My earliest memories of being conscious of photographs as fascinating objects concern being at my grandparents' house, spending hours by myself in the afternoons and evenings pouring through a set of old encyclopedias kept in a little-used bedroom. They were illustrated with reproductions of photographs from the late 1800's and the early part of this century. Many of these fascinated me—there were finely-detailed scenes of natural formations in national parks—the Grand Canyon, the Painted Desert, the Garden of the Gods in Colorado; there were photographs of important events—the completion of a railroad, a world's fair; there were monumental man-made structures—railroad bridges, dams in deserts, pyramids, and steamships in drydock. I remember a strange sensation I felt when I looked at these pictures: they were somehow different from paintings and illustrations I had seen—they seemed more real and, at the same time, more mysterious. There were often people in the photographs, some posed or posing, some seemingly with no awareness that they were being recorded, making gestures that may or may not have seemed important to them or the onlookers but that seemed to me
significant in the context of the theater created by the photograph. This seemed amazing: someone, the photographer, had actually been there and seen this and all its obviousness and subtlety, and in a quick moment, clearly recorded it all as it actually was.

My father was the documentor of all important gatherings of family and friends, and the snapshot is a tradition in our family as it probably is in most American families of this era. At some point, I began to make an occasional snapshot, and by the time I was in eighth or ninth grade, I began to use my dad's darkroom a little. I made several flash pictures of school basketball games, and, with a friend, made several photographic experiments, including the photographing of a lunar eclipse, using a tripod and opening the shutter on a single frame at regular intervals to show the gradual darkening of the moon's surface by the earth's shadow.

In the summer of 1965, at age 18, I toured Europe as a clarinet player with the School Band of America and came back with approximately 200 color slides, made with my father's 35mm rangefinder, which in retrospect are largely unimaginative documents.

After several years, during which I used a camera only occasionally, I became interested in photography again around 1970 and entered several pictures in a regional photo contest, several of which won prizes. Feeling excited and encouraged by this success, I began to feel more serious about photography. I got a job photographing for the campus newspaper at a local college, and, after teaching English in a high school for a year, got a job as a full-time photographer for the local daily newspaper. This was terrific experience, as I was
responsible for different types of shots: sports, news, advertising, and features.

I lived in St. Louis for several years after that and seldom made photographs until I met someone who was photographing a lot and working hard at photography and I began photographing again. I became familiar with the work of Paul Strand and Edward Weston and tried to work in a slow and deliberate way, but it often seemed that the best things I did were done quickly, without careful setup and deliberation. When I became more familiar with the work of Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, I began to feel that this style was more appropriate to me and I started to feel less frustrated that my favorite pictures were the ones that I had made quickly.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

All of the photographs in this thesis were made using Kodak tri-x film developed in Kodak D-76 developer diluted 1:1 for 7 minutes at 75 degrees. All exposures were made without the use of a light meter, although I would suppose an e.i. rating of approximately 200 to be appropriate to my exposure methods. My practice has been to give enough exposure to yield lots of detail in shadow areas, and I would imagine many people would think that my negatives are too dense. All of the prints were made on Ilford Ilfobrom glossy paper, air dried. Probably 70% of the prints were made on contrast grade number 1, and the remainder on grade number 2. My experience is that Ilfobrom is contrastier than Kodak papers when compared grade-for-grade. The prints were developed in Edwal Platinum developer in varying dilutions. According to Edwal's information, a 7 parts water to 1 part developer ratio will give normal contrast; using a proportionally greater amount of water will decrease contrast, and using a proportionally greater amount of developer will increase contrast. I found this to be so, and used dilutions of the recommended 7:1, and of about 4:1 for greater contrast. I also tended to extend the developing time beyond the 1 1/2 to 3 minutes suggested by Ewal. I exposed the paper so that a developing time of 3 to 6 minutes at 65 to 70 degrees would give the print I desired, with about 4 minutes being the most common. All the prints were toned for from 45 seconds to 3 minutes in a 1:15 selenium toner solution.

Three different cameras were used in my work during this time: a
Nikon F with a 35mm lens, a Canon GIII17 with a 40mm f:1.7 lens, and a Leitz-Minolta CL with a 40mm f:2 Leica Summicron lens. There were significant differences between these cameras that affected slightly the work I did with them. The Nikon is very rugged and of high quality, mechanically and optically. Because of its bulk and the noticeable noise it makes, however, it was a bit conspicuous for many situations. I also find single-lens reflex cameras to be more difficult to focus in low light conditions than rangefinder cameras. In these situations, usually indoors, the rangefinder cameras, the Canon and the CL, were much quicker and easier to use. The rangefinder has another advantage over the single-lens reflex in situations that require a very slow shutter speed: since there is no mirror to move out of position as in the single-lens reflex, this source of vibration and resulting unsharpness is avoided. Also, because the Nikon is certainly noisier than the other two cameras, I would have felt reluctant to make some of the pictures I made with the rangefinders had I been using the Nikon at the time.

Another significant difference between the Nikon F and both of the other cameras I used is in the accuracy of the viewfinders. The viewfinder in the Nikon is extremely accurate--the image seen is the same as that registered on the film. This is not the case with the two rangefinders I used. Both had frame lines in the viewfinder that indicated an image smaller than that actually recorded. I would expect this from the inexpensive Canon camera, but was surprised that it was also the case with the Leitz-Minolta, which is made by Minolta for Ernst Leitz. The result of this was that I could not be sure exactly where the
edges of the frame were. In a way this was helpful as it "loosened up"
my photographing, causing me to react quickly to events in an intuitive
and emotional way, and discouraging me from over-analyzing the
arrangement of elements in the photograph, causing me to lose sight of
the original impulse that caught my interest. It seems that much of the
work that I have done that I like has been done very quickly—that
something happens within a certain setting, and if I wait too long, the
"right" moment passes. In most well-lighted situations, of course, the
Nikon is just as quick to use as the other cameras, and there can be a
positive sense of more control from seeing the full image in the
viewfinder. After the thesis work was completed, I purchased a Leica M-2
rangefinder, which has a very accurate viewfinder, and seems ideal for
the type of work I did for this thesis and have continued to do.
During the process of working on the thesis I kept a diary in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings about the work and some incidents that occurred while I was working. Following is a transcription of portions of this diary.

"Among twenty snow mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird." ¹

--Wallace Stevens

12/1

On visit to midwest to spend Christmas with family. Shot about 16 rolls in last 2 weeks. At first it seemed "regressive"--doing mechanical arrangements in viewfinder, conservative. "What to shoot?"--this feeling, these thoughts are often on my mind, particularly when I haven't been working much. I think I want to do something better, something different, perhaps, sometimes, but more often there is the thought that I want to "improve" on things I've done before. I often think in terms of doing something radical, and want to set out and make pictures that are unusual in arrangement, to come up with fresh-looking arrangements that include unusual things (visual elements) in meaningful ways to me. Often when looking at my negatives the first time I feel frustrated if the pictures aren't striking and, in comparison to what I've done before, radical, less traditionally structured.

Became most involved, with least awareness of the feeling that

there was a problem to be overcome, conquered, while making pictures of the family. Shooting at the Plaza in Kansas City felt like a good "warmup." Some thoughts of imitating other work I've seen that was done in similar surroundings--Bresson, Frank, Kertesz (to a lesser degree); some feeling of the stiffness and anxiety that comes to me when thinking of using my time to best advantage to get the "good picture." I assume this is a common problem to people working towards an exhibition, working with the sense of an audience that one wishes to, in some way, impress.

12/10

All 20 rolls from last of quarter and quarter break are done--2 good negatives I think--Corin and Julie/Krug. Lots of shots (Plaza, etc.) seemed "literate"--contrived, as if doing things I already knew how to do over again--making the same photographs again with different props--doing certain gimmicks that I have done a lot--putting two disparate elements together, finding a patch of light, a framing device, a particular composition, and perhaps waiting for an element to fall into place--someone to walk by, etc.

When I shot pics of sister, wanted them to be precious, special, unique, individual, but they aren't very interesting--what else can I say?

Looked at 20 rolls for the first time--too much to look at! As often I looked for ready-mades--identifiably good imitations of Frank, Kertesz, etc. The second time through I was more accepting of less stereotyped (more personal?) pictures.

Shot downtown Rochester with the 105mm lens. Was good because I
often concentrate on faces and this lens helps solve the background problem.

12/18

Bought Canon rangefinder—the viewfinder seems to make it difficult to play with the edge of the frame. This is sometimes a thing I try to do—allow just a bit of something or someone to poke into the frame on a side as if the frame were a stage—often seems a bit humorous, or mysterious.

Less anxiety about getting good shots for the thesis wall. "People looking over my shoulder as I work." Also, though, felt as if I were trying to get what I knew—not adventurous. Downtown today was first good fluffy snowfall and people do look different—more sense of urgency, and less sense of set in old ruts, with the snowfall. Had a time when I felt very excited—like I was seeing a lot in a direct way. There are often times when I feel this kind of motivation—working quickly—or more correctly, doing the photographic manipulations—focusing, adjusting exposure, thinking of framing and ways of arranging—quickly. Not worrying about being in the right place at the right time. Although I may be conscious of thoughts about the photographic things I'm doing, they pass away pretty quickly and don't seem to stop the process of seeing and making pictures. An experience similar to watching without a camera—I've long enjoyed watching people and what they are doing—as if I were watching a play sometimes.

Saw some curved reflections on glossy plastic sealing of some paperback books in the Super Duper Market this evening. They were
beautiful, and I thought about whether it is worth my while to try and
record visual pleasures, but, as often, decided not to think about it.

Is the fast horse the best? The slow plodding way is as good--no
need for anxiety about work and what it represents or transmits.

There is a fear of recycling others' work in mine--mimicking others
in a superficial way. This sometimes leads to an old feeling of being
afraid of "missing the point" in my work--or my life.

12/21

Should I relate to the people I photograph more--detachment seems
often necessary because of the desire to get "natural" pictures--people
by themselves--why? This is the state I like best and the state in which
I see myself best. Difficult to do while relating to other people.
Also, relating and photographing seems a false relationship? I often try
to photograph friends as I do strangers--no recognition of me
photographing.

12/26

8 rolls from pre-Christmas mostly downtown yield 5-8 interesting
negatives. Picture of boy and father pissing? Interesting, but what
would people say? Humorous pictures happened as fast as
others--instinctive (?) response to subject/scene. The way I like
it--all at a glance.

Problems? Worry about enough pics, worry about same groove, rut,
engineered to produce 35 good pics by April. But work still seems to
happen by itself, no way I know of to predict or program it--just work
and go through things. Like 20 rolls over Thanksgiving--conservative?--I
really don't know--it's as if often I'm not sure what the pictures will convey until I see them. Am I getting more understanding about 1-pointed vision and how it is different from the more spatial 2 eyes? These are not important questions to me. I see pictures that "say" what I want--the "way things are" to me.

Want to get out and shoot some tonight or tomorrow and keep seeing. 105mm negs not appealing to me, seem flat and no involvement.

1/2

Made proofs from downtown, around, New Year's Eve. Some interesting stuff--again, I didn't think so at first. I put a lot of stock in successful product--a lot of buildup to seeing proof prints (approximately 3 x 5 inches)--shoot, develop, look at negs--often disappointed. Then proof prints usually make me feel I'm doing some good things--if not a lot of exceptional pics--but ones where it all comes together, more or less, the way I think I want. I want an ideal of well integrated composition where it all works well together--darks, lights, lines all reinforce each other without seeming artificial, constructed. Perhaps I should not be afraid of carefully composing although I think this may be a problem with the Nikon at times--a dark black box with such a definite border, such as well-lighted surgical theater. That is, I sometimes become hyper--critical of the picture before it is made, dissecting until no life is left. The rangefinder is more a "target shooter"--the target being the initial feeling. Still I think the seeing should be first. I'm getting to the point where I can pre-visualize where the borders are with the 35 and 40mm lenses.
Would like to do more strikingly well-organized shots, maybe along the way. Right now I'm enjoying the freedom a bit.

1/11

No rangefinder. The Canon I've been using isn't working properly, so back to using the Nikon.

1/14

A difference between making pictures with attention to and involvement with the situation/subject and with attention to the way the picture is composed and will look as if "already framed and on the wall." Yet sometimes interesting pictures happen while I am framing a scene--it isn't easy, or important to classify, predict, talk about--the best things happen from working--the talking about hasn't been fruitful for me in most endeavors, particularly in photography. Thinking of Charles Ives and his disdain for "nice" music. The nice photographs seem to be the ones I "know how to make"--yet this definition is lacking and maybe deceiving. Perhaps it's the ones made without strong feeling or thought--but involved prethinking seldom seems to enter into the stuff I think is best of my work.

I'd like the show to be a variety--some humor--direct humor, some more subtle, that comes from "reading" the items in the picture, some subtle in a visual way, some "weird"--a fairly meaningless category for me--comes from feelings of separateness, superiority, maybe.

1/15

Thinking of working more again with reflections--take me out of ruts in thinking and seeing.
Looking at Cezanne reminds me of desire to paint—but airier than Cezanne, clearer without anxiety.

A fear of war—talking with several friends about the situation these days—Iran, Russia, Afghanistan.

A deep-seated, long-time anger and fear about war—about nuclear destruction of most/all of world, poisoning, fear for myself—and of my resolve/beliefs being tested—when would I fight—never, I suppose—but fear of complete brutality against family/friends. Afraid of being amid people possessed by blood lust, dumb anger. Economic factors could force war—a placing of self first, refusal to share that is fed by capitalism, materialism. Miss the light weight of the rangefinder. I feel much bolder and less encumbered with it—looking forward to the arrival of the Leica CL.

So outrageous, the national news—national pride to be defended, but more the talk of defending ourselves against the Russians. Longstanding feeling of guilt about not hating, fearing "the Russians, the enemy." The only personal option seems to be to work on myself.

A feeling that close observation/empathy with people isn't enough—there is a desire to be radical/far out—have a radical point of view. This gets in the way of working perhaps.

Going back to photographing reflections seems to sharpen observation and, also, returning to same few places helps to look at
different details--different scenes appear at the same locations--looking
at proofs, then going back avoids the same "failures," the same
distractions that interfere with the process of making pictures--sounds,
sometimes colors, and the little details that are fascinating but don't
always come across in the photograph because of being too far away for
the focal length or depending upon other things that can't be shown in
the same frame with enough impact. Repeated visits help reduce being
distracted by the unusualness of the place and reduce anxiety--I know the
place will still be there later and things will happen again--if not the
same way, as they don't, then in another interesting way.

The pictures are more interesting to me than the words--I often
feel no need to write about them.

I have a charmed existence in some ways--being able to move about
and observe the stage and the insanities and small sanities.

2/10

Reflections are difficult to refine. Aware of ability to tune in
to what will look good--ignoring rest of the rhythms of life, etc. Want
to see other things, softer things--the fold in a piece of cloth--not
formulas. These are things I feel I'm learning as I work--how to look at
things--and sometimes "how to shoot for the thesis proposal"--this
dictating work. Want to work in more relaxed, less directed manner.

Went to recreational vehicle show at Dome Arena. Anger at the
commericalism and the salespeople selling "useless" products to people
that don't need them. The sexist structure of the sales teams and their
approaches, the stupid approach to experiencing the outdoors. Used my
presence with a camera as an irritant at times—a polarizing way perhaps, but a personal political statement and fun in a perverse way.

"World as polishing stone."

2/14

In a bar on Exchange Street, waiting for a tottering guy to leave the john. On the t.v. behind the bar—"Iranian hostage—Khomeni has approved in principle a proposal..." Bartender stood at attention with towel around his waist. Two men at bar—"That's it, they're freed now," one said, and turned to get up from the stool, chunky guy. The other guy, thick droopy hair, mumbles, "send 'em back to Africa." At the other end of the bar a young guy in a union-type cap, facing 45 degrees toward the dark away from the t.v. lit a cigarette—lots of smoke. A black guy in watchman's uniform sat in the sunlight from the window. Another small wiry guy intermittently pops around corner of the room to the bar and looks at t.v.

Next door at the White Tower for a cup of coffee, quiet—a tired foreign-looking waitress and a pigtailed gray woman in her late 50's setting in more sunlight than next door. A workman came in, "Another one did it. Jumped from the bridge. Cop tried to sneak up behind, but he said 'so long' and jumped."

I finished the coffee, and left for bridge—two blocks away—thinking how I would have approached the guy if I were in the cop's place, imagining the traffic, the look of the street pavement, the distance to the railing where the guy would be standing—on which side?—the breath in wisps in the air, like the bus exhausts make.
Lines of people along the banks--like bleacher sections--across the river. Sun shining down on streets. Buses crawling up the hill--cars slowed and double-parked. A few people on bridge who were looking over the edge looked back at me. I made a few exposures of boy crouched as in guilt and prayer on shelf of ice. An intense figure--center of stage--I imagined an intensity, a strange burning sense of self. Heard--"What happened?"

"Someone jumped, they're o.k."

"Shoulda waited till June...never in that cold water."

"What happened?"

"Musta been nuts."

Across the street a woman asked me "What happened?' and I explained that a young guy must have jumped but he was up out of the water on a ledge of ice and huddled there. By then a fireman had gone over the edge carefully on big ropes, lowered to the ice, approached the guy, grappled with him, fallen through the ice with him, bobbed in the ice and water, pulled back up on the ice and made the way up to the street level with the guy. Then the woman asks me how to get out of here--downtown I guessed she meant. I thought for a moment. "Where you going?" I asked her.

"Victor, Canandiagua."

"Ok, ah, 490 East."

"Yes."

I started to tell her how to get to the highway from there, but she looked off down the sidewalk and ran off to the east to join up with
another woman who had walked onto the south side of the street from the
jump side.

2/18

Tired of downtown. More interested in human relationships for a
while maybe.

Sometimes I like to privately think of myself as naive in the
photographing, using the power of direct observation, not colored by the
other photography I've seen, but I think what I do is influenced a lot by
things I've seen and things I've read.

Began doing some physical exercise yesterday--feel much less
constrained.

Been wanting that "great" picture from reflections in the bank
window downtown where I've been returning to shoot--maybe I've already
done enough good ones. It may or may not be a good place to integrate
office surroundings, office workers, and public randomly passing. This
is one thing I like about the place--people displaced, in transit, out of
context, superimposed in nonspecific multilayered space, like ghosts,
with the drama of sunlight. Still a lot of possibilities there--maybe go
back with Nikon--I still get a bit nervous about parallax with the
rangefinder in situations like this, wanting precise lineup of objects.
Thinking about getting a passport.

2/20

Very nice 45-50 degree day. Enjoying being by myself and no
shooting pressure--avoiding downtown. Sitting having coffee and a bite
to eat in diner by the lake. A feeling that spring is stirring about
somewhere under all this afternoon. Blue light, 30% chance of rain, clouds in the east look like far-off wet cotton. The waitresses joking with each other behind the counter surprised me—playful beneath their teased-up hairdos. And the seams on the ass of a young girl’s jeans as she passes!

2/25

Tired of depressed people, quiet desperation. Photographing reflections makes this more tolerable and gives distance and bizarre quality to what I see people doing—less painful, specific and "real." I see people as if on a stage and don’t feel I’m isolating or criticizing them—only their role—life is weird, people not so weird. The pictures are descriptions of the way people are and how life seems.

"All the world's a stage, and the people merely players."

"I've had enough of living/ I've had enough of dying/ I've had enough of smiling/ I've had enough of crying/ I've taken all the high roads/ I've squandered and I've saved/ I've had enough of childhood/ I've had enough of graves."²

Might want to avoid town for a bit, be in quieter and slower places.

3/12

Shooting done!

Some thoughts from past weeks—the difficulty in looking at negatives—I sometimes start out looking for something—a type of

arrangement, etc.—not seeing some of the more interesting shots—e.g., the man smoking/the woman holding the mirror outside department store in Kansas City. Anxiety about printing—I want work to be most effectively presented.

I see some pictures as people on stage/screen—in a symbolic relationship to each other, presented in physical terms. I sometimes have a feeling about the distances and space between them and the surrounding objects. Some pictures look like things easily observed are going on—I like these sometimes for and sometimes in spite of the obviousness of the situation or of the arrangement of elements in the photograph—a reflection of a face in a window that might seem like a surrealist cliche, maybe. I don't always consciously look for and think of juxtapositions of unrelated-looking elements—it may be a reflex, a habit. But I like this kind of play—the thought that things are not what they seem—not what people seem to think they are. This has been my experience, in some respects. The complexities of feelings, the awareness of several "selves," of roles or thought patterns that are not the me or the you or the him/her, but only the drama.

How to photograph the real person—is there no one there? Can only show the actor. The photograph is the momentary universe—the private (to me and to them) stage.

3/14

I sometimes dislike the writing—no desire, often. I seem very prejudiced in what I say sometimes—less free with thoughts. Often the problem with writing these thoughts down is that I've heard them
before--from myself I mean. Sometimes I feel I'm showing holes in seams that people pretend are not there--a type of reporting. An artist explained to someone who asked why he was doing the type of work he was that "God doesn't know this version of the truth."

I am doing this work to satisfy an "itch" in me I guess. I love to see the drama--how things look to me--what the sights and distortions peculiar to where I stand suggest to me. I think I identify with many of the people in the pictures--maybe all?

3/27

Anxiety about printing--what size, etc. Wanting to get it all done soon and not have to take a day to do only 2 or 3 finished prints.

It seems that it's the work that is important--like Steinberg calling his drawing "reasoning on paper," Leonardo's "thinking with the eye." For me I feel the progress comes with doing rather than thinking a lot.

Carier-Bresson once remarked that he doesn't think about photography when he photographs.
CONCLUSION

The completion of the work for the show and the hanging of it went well. I had allotted enough time for the few minor setbacks that occurred and things went at a reasonably comfortable pace. I felt good about most of the work in the show, and now, several years later, I still have positive feelings about many of these photographs.

I feel that the thesis experience, as a whole, was a positive one. My proposal allowed me to work in the manner in which I wished: it allowed me to work in the style I felt best suited me and develop my ideas and skills without imposing artificial restrictions. The thesis project was a continuation and development of my ways of working and my interests rather than a "new" endeavor.

It was helpful for me to be disciplined at something I greatly enjoyed doing. I felt it was important to set the thesis show date and have the work done in time to meet it, as I didn't want the photographing for the show to stretch out over a long period of time, perhaps resulting in diffusion of my enthusiasm or in the thesis ideas becoming unfocused. The result was that I worked on photographing at times when I "didn't feel like" working: situations in which I might not have pushed myself to work had it not been for the commitment I had made. I feel I learned a lot from this: sometimes I found a lot of involvement and enthusiasm would arise after I began working: other times I felt little enthusiasm while I was working, but found positive things in the work that resulted. It was an intense and rewarding project.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


