People as the ultimate subject matter

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PEOPLE AS THE ULTIMATE SUBJECT MATTER

by

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Title of Thesis: People as the Ultimate Subject Matter

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THESIS: PEOPLE AS THE ULTIMATE SUBJECT MATTER, WIDELUX PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MY LIFE

Introduction

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to my thesis. While there are too many to be named individually, they all contributed their time and thoughts. I would like also to thank the members of my board: Charles Werberig, Martha Leinroth and Don Bujnowski for their support and ideas. Thanks to Duane Hanson for arranging a way through the bureaucracy to use a color printing room without which this show could not have been done, and showed the way for graduate students who came after me. I wish to acknowledge my appreciation and gratitude to Prof. Andrew Davidhazy, who opened my eyes to panoramic photography and was also available to discuss and answer questions about photography. I also wish to thank these people for their illuminations: Daniel T. Knapp, Babette Augustin, Edward Kinney, Philip Jackobowski, George Haupt, Judy Levy, Steve Sarnow, Mikol Kolvhenbach, Jacqueline Bridge, Mike Hager, Robert Bretz, Debra Richardson, Clifford Norton, Diane Ball, Wynne Ragland, Walid Raad, and last but not least, Ellen Hurwitz who put up with my late hours and work that seemed to never end.

When I arrived at R.I.T. my background in photography was already extensive and I was heading in the direction of adapting my photography to printmaking. My images were screenprinted portraits, large and expressive pieces. I had originally hoped and been led to believe that I could follow such a direction at R.I.T. In my first year it became clear that such a course of
study was not possible. My response then was to express my concerns by continuing to make the best images I could and explore new areas of imagemaking. I took an elective survey class offered by Professor Davidhazy, in which he showed us all kinds of photography. It was another dimension. We were shown time lapse, slit-shutter, turntable, peripheral, high speed, stroboscopic, etc., etc. ... I was amazed by the visions he showed us. These dimensions were for him tools of scientific measurement, but for me there was a strong visual aesthetic that could be explored. I began to use a panoramic camera in my exploration of life around me and I found that this enriched and illuminated my subject matter in a new and exciting way. I realized that this was the vehicle for my thesis: panoramic photographs of people and places the subjects of my personal and subjective photography.
MY THESIS AND PROCEDURE

My thesis briefly stated is that "Art is an unconscious experience externally represented, in this case by images made by the artist." For me the sources of visual imagery that affect me, the visual image maker, come from in the midst of life. I allow myself to be open and to look under what some have classed as "banal", and find the most extraordinary affirmations of human interaction.

Indeed, human representation in art is quite an old, distinguished subject. That photography, a recent medium in that tradition, has provided so many examples, should surprise no one at all. People, human activity, everyday life, is a perfectly valid, subject matter. In fact I once commented in a core class critique, "People are the ultimate subject matter."

The thesis project, People as the Ultimate Subject Matter, encompassed about one year's activity. I began with the purchase of a Widelux panoramic camera and began shooting with color film as often as I could. I took my camera everywhere and literally "lived" with it. I soon became quite relaxed and came to understand its strengths and weaknesses. I traveled around New England and as far south as Washington, D.C., photographing everywhere I went. In the course of my shooting I took pictures of relatives, friends and quite a few strangers. Being a tourist with a camera was a perfect entry into many places—people were remarkably open, sometimes even completely oblivious of the camera.

I regularly filed my negatives and contact sheets, reviewing the images I had taken, before going out again. In the course of thesis work I shot about
200 rolls of 35mm for the thesis; this amounted to roughly 4,000 negatives. I intended to have 25 prints for my show. This was a sizeable edit which I conducted with some apprehension. I rejected many fine images that I felt were unsuitable or outside the boundaries of my thesis. I adopted a narrow interpretation so I could set limits for my time, energy and money.

I called an end to shooting in July, went through a rough edit and then made work prints for a first rough viewing and selection. My work prints were about 8" x 20", which was a rehearsal for the finished prints at a larger size. I ultimately decided all show prints would be 15" x 36", mounted in 20" x 40" mattes for my October Thesis Show.

To get this work done, I obtained permission to have a color darkroom (F-II) set aside for just the printing of my Widelux negatives. This involved turning an Omega Enlarger around and weighting the base as a counter balance. I printed on the floor using a door as my easel base and cut a black matte for my image size of 15" x 36". I worked off of rolls of Kodak "N" professional paper in 100 foot rolls.

Richard Norman filed out a negative carrier I purchased to allow me a full frame image of the Widelux negative (24mm x 54mm). This greatly facilitated my work, because I had all my own tools and supplies.

I spent a lot of time printing in the color center. I seem to have become a permanent fixture for about two months. It was a simple procedure: wait in line, and then up to three minutes feeding one full size color image into the printer. It meant that I had to work around many of the other people using the color machine, but in general things worked well.

At my first big edit of finished prints, I had 50 images and Charles Werberig and Martha Leinroth came up and viewed them in Studio 23, 24. After this and another edit, I came down on the 25 images for my show. This
last edit was very hard. Every image was personally related to me. I chose pieces that showed people in a pose that suggested a strength that comes with self identity, taken in a moment that seems thunderingly still. I had been working very hard for eight months at that point, even hardly taking time off for unexpected knee surgery. But behind all this drive for work was a quiet anxiety about "would the images be any good?" I slowly realized that the images I had apprehended were now to be comprehended, and they were good, better than I could have hoped.

Working on the thesis was a solitary activity. I felt it necessary to cut away the unnecessary and listen to myself, clear my mind and become ready to "receive" what might happen, particularly when I was photographing. Those were the times when I came back with some of my best images. I look at this as allowing myself to be open and see, rather than a dogmatic intention about producing art.

I explored the history of panoramic images and found that panoramas and panoramic cameras have been available since 1844, when Fredrich Van Martens designed the Megaskop.1 Actually, there was a taste for panoramic painting from the 1780's on, and Prevost, who was Louis Jacques Daguerre's teacher, painted vistas of Paris.2 Throughout the 19th Century some of the photographers who produced panoramas were: H.H. Bennett, George Barnard, Felice J. Beato, George Laurence, Edward Muybridge, William Shew and Fox Talbot.

There are four ways to make panoramic images. Broadly speaking, they are:

1) Made up of pieced together images;

2) Made with a camera with a moving lens and a fixed film plane;
3) Made with a camera where both the body and film moves; and
4) Made with a camera with a fixed wide-angle lens and a fixed film plane.\textsuperscript{3}

The first panoramic views were of the first category, made by piecing images together. Calotype panoramas of London were made in 1842 by A.J. Claudet\textsuperscript{4} and in 1846 by Fox Talbot\textsuperscript{5} (see Illustration C). Others, like William Shew, used Daguerrean plates to assemble the panorama as in his five whole plate view of San Francisco.\textsuperscript{6}

In 1844 a panoramic camera was developed by Fredrich van Martens, who called it the "Megaskop-Kamera." The camera (Diagram A) had a hand-cranked slit shutter lens, covered $150^\circ$, and had a curved plate 4.7" x 15".\textsuperscript{7} Martens produced a series of rooftop views of Paris. Later his nephew, Ludwig Schuller, modified the Megaskop to use curved wet plates.\textsuperscript{8} According to Philip Condax of the International Museum of Photography, while 10-12 panoramas attributed to Van Martens exist, none of the Megaskop cameras have been found.\textsuperscript{9} If one were located, it would be a valuable find.

In 1860, Thomas Sutton marketed a camera with a water-filled wide-angle lens covering a $120^\circ$ field of view with curved glass plates.\textsuperscript{10} This style has its modern day counterparts in the Linhof Technororama and the Fuji 6 x 17cm. It is still one of the most common panoramic camera styles (see Diagram D).

In 1862, Johnson and Harrison received a British patent for their Pantascopic Camera. The camera rotated by a wind-up motor, and by gears, the plate holder moved in opposite direction, both synchronized together. The plates were 7.5" x 12"\textsuperscript{11} and coverage was $110^\circ$. This camera was the predecessor of modern cameras like the Globuscope, the CirKut and the Alpa
Rotorama. This type of camera is used for measurement and illustration because of its unusual film perspective.

The Widelux was introduced in 1963. The camera has a 26mm lens with a slit shutter. A viewfinder and lens markings allow the photographer to judge the amount of coverage in the picture. The camera covers 140° horizontally and 46° vertically, producing a negative 24 x 56mm. The thirty-six exposure roll of film produces only twenty-one widelux images. The lens is preset and focused from five feet to infinity. By stopping down the lens it can be reduced to approximately three feet. The wide angle lens on this camera gives weight to the foreground in the images made. These images are long and narrow as opposed to the regular or more common photographs as squares and rectangles, 8 x 10 or 11 x 14.

The Widelux is a modern version of Van Martens' Megaskop. Both cameras have rotating slits with fixed curved film planes. Instead of rigid metal plates, the Widelux uses 35mm roll film and is light enough for hand-held work.

I looked at the images I was producing and they were different. I had to release notions about emphasis merely upon size or shape in a photographic image. I found that the images I was producing were large and complex, and more like the range of vision of two scanning human eyes. We see dynamically on a wide scale, not just at the center of field of vision, and the large photographs I was making allowed for one to go back and look at the scene, examining closely details that may have escaped notice. In looking at panoramic images made with the Widelux, it becomes apparent that the camera produces a different kind of vision, involving space and time. A very complex visual experience can be attained with the visual scan of the camera.
The slit shutter traveling vertically the entire length of the frame records the image across the negative from left to right in a specific amount of time. Movement in the frame may not be recorded if the lens has passed by or not yet reached that part of the frame. Movement across the frame produces elongation if moving with the lens and compression is caused by moving across the lens path. I realize after using the Widelux for over a year that certain images contain elements that are not quite like the stop action of a traditional print or the movement seen in a motion picture film, but have a rather disturbing quality about them. I find it hard to explain. There is a kind of animation and depth in the prints that makes them come to life for me. I am in the presence of charged personal spaces that enact intensely emotional events for me.

Consequently, as my thesis evolved my work became less objective and more deeply subjective. At the beginning I had thought the opposite would have been the goal. In fact, by the time I was shooting my thesis all of those processes; visual selection, time, and printing became instinctual.

After a certain point all of these actions are done in a split second or less. They say we receive on the order of 100,000 sensory impressions per second and 80% of those come through the eyes. Within that flow I record a series of seconds 1/10, 1/125, 1/250 out of millions of fractions of seconds and out of my contacts sheets a selection process filters out even more. The final presentation of prints represents about 1% of what was shot. They are a material rendering of a corner of life illuminated by a temperament. From then the show that I put together assumes what has been called extrinsic qualities: narrative, realism, description, subject matter, or drama. The qualities are revealed in the response to the question I asked James Enyart, “Is a work of art apprehended or comprehended?” Answer: “Apprehended!”
Following the exhibition comes the aftermath (Posterior Process), which is a facing up to some sort of judgment, analysis, understanding, and critique of the work. It was in the time after the printing and hanging of the work on the wall that I devoted a lot of thought to it and listened to any comments from the people who visited the gallery during my thesis show.

The work seemed to take on an independent life. After I helped to make it and present it to be viewed, it came into its own as an extension of myself, an assailable self. It wasn't exactly like feeling naked before mine enemies, but it was a very open and vulnerable moment. I thought I would share some of my own feelings and thoughts about the work from the point of view of the photographer (midwife).

In this gallery of memories of the work, it continues to live and change.

Image #1. Marty at Jay's Diner

I had a lucky opportunity to take Marty to Jay's for a cup of coffee and photographed her there. It was a challenge. I wanted to see how the camera with such a wide view worked in an enclosed space. Marty had Southern charm, a great reconteur who livens up life. We talked about school, photography, life and art. In this case I looked at this image and it is the transitory nature of everyday life rendered in a photograph of a woman in a diner booth with coffee and cigarettes. It's that seeming ordinariness that gives the image and understatement (banality) of subject matter that for me makes it more powerful. The depiction of ordinary life in contemporary time seems to me to be the project of art at any time. So, my people, my subject matter, is contemporary and ordinary, just human beings, living life with grace, courage and style.
**Image #2. Danny and the Batmobile**

Dan Knapp was never ordinary in any way. He seems larger than life at any time. The Batmobile was Dan's Volvo that was spray painted with words and a picture of a bat on the hood. It made solid citizens shudder and police ask questions like “May I see your license?” I came out to the parking lot and took the time and care to record the most loathed and feared automobile in Rochester. I see in this picture an unusual vehicle and its colorful owner, at that time and place. Danny's moved on and now the Batmobile is history except for pictures.

**Image #3. Mara and Ronnie in D.C.**

It was in Washington, D.C. on a hot afternoon where I first saw this aberration. For $5.00 you could have your portrait taken by Polaroid with a cutout of Ronald Reagan, President of the United States. This was a thriving small tourist industry. I had one taken for my collection. I talked to the woman who was doing the Polaroids. “Mara” was doing this as a summer job. I convinced her to let me photograph her and Ronnie for my own work. It was a wonderful moment. Mara and the cutout looking at me while tourists come walking past, hardly paying attention at all. In Washington people taking photographs are almost invisible because the activity is so ordinary. I found that it made me very unobtrusive.

**Image #4. Dwight Metzger**

This is the image of a friend. He was the someone who just came along and made you laugh and found a special spot in your heart. A friend, and in that time and place a good one. We shared our common experiences and
matured from the exchange of our different perspectives. He reminded me of the past, when you are young and sorting out values, living them instead of letting them just slide by. At the time this picture was made he became involved in environmental politics. Later he became a full-time employee of Greenpeace. Dwight was more than just fascinated by Greenpeace, he made it part of his life, so much so that he does without and is willing to be arrested to get his message across. I feel privileged to know him.

**Image #5. Jacqueline on Her Wedding Day**

A wedding is a festival of union in which both are changed. I look at the bride flanked in the background by the groom and guests. She seems illuminated on this day. I feel some of that radiance comes through in the picture, as an affirmation of the joy of that day for the bride and groom as well as the guests. Whether in the course of life the marriage lasts or not, the memory evoked by the moment in the picture remains a testament to love and hope.

**Image #6. Mikol and Jackie Kissing**

I began exploring the idea of using two or more people in the frame instead of focusing on only one. I decided to do a series of Mikol and Jackie as a going away present. This was their apartment in Rochester before they went to New York. It was a place with a lot of laughter and good memories. I set up the camera and table and blueberries and photographed the interplay between a couple in love. I looked at them and did a confrontational view trying to capture that moment and the sensual quality of that kiss.
**Image #7. Hannah**

A young girl looks at the viewer, surrounded by a crowd on the deck of a boat. The crowd seems oblivious, with a lot of interactions. In the corner a couple embrace, a child cries out. People stare out into space, looking expectantly at some unseen point of interest. It is a very dramatic and happy picture of a trip to the Statue of Liberty. Edward Kinney said of the picture that he saw in it the three stages of woman portrayed across the frame: childhood, adolescence, and maturity.” It is one of the most poetic and insightful responses I have heard to my work.

**Image #8. Sandra on the Balcony**

There are times when the light in Rochester becomes really splendid. This was one of those times when for about five to ten minutes in the afternoon a rich, warm light from the West was on the balcony. I had wanted to photograph Sandra for a while. She has a touch of the high fashion about her and could be a good model. I took her to the landing and directed her into a corner. This was one of her first gestures to the camera. I find afterwards that the picture plays to other levels. Down the stairs a person sits reading and to the right the buildings and swamp. It is a picture that raises questions—who is this person, and what is she about? Is this submission, allure or avoidance? The sense of almost confrontational space to the receding distance of the trees and stairs produce some wavering in the photograph.
Image #9. Self-Portrait in Boston

I was walking in Boston when I realized that I could take self-portraits with this camera and without a selftimer or modifications. I could hold the camera in my arm at a 90° angle and not have my arm appear in the foreground. So I began to experiment with myself in the frame. Sometimes I'd like to have a future show that was of self-portraits with the Widelux. The self-portraits are an exercise that seems very unreal to me. I look at the image, who is that person in the image? I try to see a glimmer of recognition that is supposed to be me, or at least my image. The image is stuck in time, but I had to keep moving because I'm alive. These self-portraits are curious signposts of where I have been and who was there.

Image #10. George and Jo Anne on the Beach

It was a Labor Day weekend just before school would start again. Several of us went to Hamlin Beach on Lake Ontario. I wandered off to photograph the beach scene, bathers, sun lovers, lifeguard, kids. Jo Anne and George were doing a camera shot with objects thrown in front of the camera. I was really struck by the fun and vitality of this couple at that time. I was photographing and this was one of the last images I made before stopping to prepare for my thesis.

I look across this image and its strong diagonals and perspective. JoAnne appears very large on the edge, the camera is mid-size in the frame and then a small George is bent over picking up plastic fruit. Now this is an image with questions all over it—if you look for a narrative in this.
**Image #11. Clifford Norton**

It was not easy to deal with a subject like Cliff. He is very responsive to the camera and in the company of others will clown for the camera. I felt that I wanted to take him to a quiet natural space and let him interact with the space. He enjoyed the challenge and from his pocket he produced a flute and in the bushes he found a photograph and then he began to play and interact with it like he was a snake charmer. It was an astonishing performance that lasted only a couple of minutes and was not planned. I feel the picture is very close to my state of mind, that my art if it is anything at all, is then a representation of life illuminated through my temperament.

**Image #12. Sonia**

It's late at night and the lights are low; it's a jazz club in Cambridge. I've been enjoying the music with my friends. I've been talking to a classmate, Sonja and I wanted to capture some of the feeling of the club and the moment. It's a harsh, moody light, she's looking at me, not exactly close or too distant, but the questioning look of a friend. I became interested in the ability of the Widelux to record low light scenes that a more conventional camera could not and that became the direction my work followed after my thesis show. For this kind of low light work I began to use Fotomat 1600 ASA color negative film. It gave me a cold grainy image that I particularly liked. In this kind of work it is very hard to control the lighting across such a wide view and so I just accepted that I would be getting some very unusual kinds of lighting, like fluorescent and tungsten in the same image. The key was a decision that I could work with that kind of randomness and use it as an enhancement rather than a problem and the pictures flowed out easily after that.
Image #13. Melida

I was interested in certain indoor spaces and the interaction of people and places. It was in this spirit that I did this portrait of Melida Wagner in a cafe. As it turned out the two women behind her alternated on the contact sheet in this very animated conversation and they almost take away the viewer's focus from the figure in the foreground. The tableau is full of such detail and depth that there is more than can be read in one look at the picture. I have been trying hard to work on images that build up so much detail that they are not easily glanced at and must be looked at for some time studied, enjoyed, maybe even savored. Well, at least I hope it describes more than just a blonde having a beer in the late twentieth century.

Image #14. Vinnie's Photo Booth, Battery Park

The itinerant photographer still lives and the tintype and print have given way to the Polaroid instant print. People can be photographed as the Statue of Liberty or with a current president. The images act as magical reminders of times and places we were and that they really happened and we want to remember them. These people as tourists and this too is an old theme in the history of photography, a commercial enterprise gratifying a human desire. I felt that I captured a bit of the excitement of that moment, the subjects looking at the camera and the spectators looking back too, the smiles and laughter, all captured in 1/125th of a second.

Image #15. Danny and Pam

This is a shot of my brother-in-law Danny, Pam, his wife, and their children Elliot and Hannah. It was late on a hot, steamy August day in New
York City. We had come as a group to see a pair of gates built and cast by Danny for the National Park Service and placed on the island where the Statue of Liberty stands. Danny was having a glorious day. He really was enjoying his good fortune. Pam is enjoying the trip and handles the kids. Hannah is easy, Elliot is a little more difficult. Hannah gets attention, Elliot wants attention. I felt this picture captured that moment quite well, even if you did not know the people in the picture. The picture illustrates a story and sets a mood depending on the individual temperaments. I find this image whimsical, balanced and frozen in time.

**Image #16. Statue of Liberty**

There it is in the distance appearing quite small among the large shapes of the people who are looking at Liberty. I found that this image of viewing the statue combined with the woman preparing to take an instamatic shot informative. They are a group of people heading out to one of the most visited places in America. It’s like being at Niagara Falls or the Vietnam Memorial, a public space and only your thoughts are private in the crowd. The Statue is dedicated to liberty and draws thousands every year. I felt in a very philosophical mood as the ferry came closer to the island. Maybe this image is another footnote to myself of places I’ve been; beyond the kitsch and glitter, a symbol of an ideal that isn’t very well understood and society could easily lose.

In the end having my thesis show was a lot of anxiety and work. I enjoyed my show enormously; the opening was validation from friend and classmates. I found that there was a lot more to explore in panoramic photography and I found that a good direction to go in ... I found peace and interest in working
my way through in projects I set for myself. So that is the direction I will continue in now that school is over.
1845. Megaskop-Kamera
Fredrich van Martens
Plate Size 4.7" x 15"
150° View

Source: Auer, p. 262.
DIAGRAM B
140° Coverage
Widelux — Modern 35mm Scanning Camera
Negative
24mm x 54mm

The Widelux Scanned Image Format
150°
Martens' Megaskop
Daguerrean Plate
120mm x 380mm
4.7" x 15"

Source: Auer.
1846. Composite Panorama Of Fox Talbot's Printing Shop at Reading. Fox Talbot Appears in Center and his Manager, Henneman Appears at Right.

Source: Buckland, p. 83.
DIAGRAM D

Sutton-Panorama Camera von 1860

DIAGRAM E

The Pantascopic Camera. 1862.

Johnson’s and Harrison’s Pantascopic camera of 1862 was rotated by a clockwork motor, which was wound by a key (a) and was controlled by a vane governor (b). As the camera rotated on its base (c), a string-and-pulley system drew the sensitized plate in its holder (d) past a slot in the camera back.

Source: J. Willsberger.
CHRONOLOGY

1839  Simultaneous discovery of photographic processes by Fox Talbot and Daguerre.

1840

1842¹  A.J. Claudet — Panoramic series of London — the pieced together print was 36" x 50".
1843  Fox Talbot’s composite panorama (June, 1843) of Orleans.
1844²  Marten’s camera The Megaskop designed in Paris with 150° coverage with a rotating lens.

1850

1859⁴  Thomas Sutton granted patent for a camera with a wide angle water filled lens with curved plates. 120° coverage.

1860

1862³  September 1862 — J. Johnson and J. Harrison granted patent for the Pantoscopic camera. The camera rotated and film plate moved in synchronization. It covered 110° of angle.

Chronology of the panoramic developments in the first twenty years of photography representing discovery of the four ways to produce a panoramic image:

¹Made with pieced together images.
²Made with a camera with a moving lens and a fixed film plane.
³Made with a camera where both the body and film moves.
⁴Made with a camera with wide angle lens and a fixed film plane.

Source: Coe.
ENDNOTES

1. Eder, p. 256.
2. King, catalogue essay.
4. Bayer, p. 27.
5. Buckland, p. 83.
8. Coe
10. Willsberger, p. 23.
12. Leverant, Photograph Notations, p. 12.
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#13 Melida.

#14 Vinnie's

#15 Dan and Pam

#16 Statue