Desk copy. 1984

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DESK COPY. 1984

BY

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Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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

June, 1985

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Permission Statement

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Date 6.16.85  
Addison Thompson
Student Orientation Services
Rochester Institute of Technology
83 The Official Student Handbook of Rochester Institute of Technology
FACTS
The dedication of *Desk Copy: 1984*, as it appears in the book:

1. Money
2. Show
3. Ready
4. "Bingo" Baker

is a combination of a phrase that my grandmother said when I was a child, specifically, "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go", and the nickname of my friend, Steve "Bingo" Baker, who published his book "Phrases: A house of cards.", right before my eyes.
"Look at a meeting-house, or a courthouse, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they will all go to pieces in your account of them."

H.D. Thoreau

"Where I Lived, and What I Lived For."

Part I

I came to Rochester, N.Y. and the Rochester Institute of Technology a scared hoosier. The year before I came, I purposely unhinged myself from a closed attitude so that I could start all over when I arrived in Rochester. I had worked myself away from photographing in the manner that had made me feel like a photographer.

A number of events and circumstances helped me to settle on the Desk Copy idea. I was used to wandering around outside in urban areas to take pictures. My car had broken down and it was impossible to seek any alternative to what was right in front of me at the institution. The Rochester weather coupled with the remoteness and sterility of R.I.T. forced me inside. In addition, I had money pressures which forced me to work 20 hours per week. So I began to use photography to acclimate myself to the circumstances of my new, foreign environment.
I had a work/study job as film projectionist and it took me all over R.I.T. Since the only time I had to take pictures was between work and school, I began by taking pictures of the cars in the parking lot. This is the first thing one sees when approaching R.I.T. I hitchhiked to school and back for two months. The car interest mediated between the urban environment and R.I.T.

The car pictures weren't received very well by my Master of Fine Arts classmates, nor by the second year M.F.A. students who comprised a Black and White Work-shop taught by Rodger Mertin. Everyone felt that the car pictures were too obscure. I persisted in doing them through the Fall of 1983. At the close of Fall Term, both Dory Thanhauser and Rodger Mertin insisted that the pictures lacked a lot of the "meaning" that I was ascribing to them. This was instrumental in breaking my conviction to continue making them.

Meanwhile, I was also experimenting with long time exposures of people using the microfilm files at the library. This idea was related to an earlier project I had explored briefly and then abandoned. I had taken a slide of an old photographic mural of the statue of Chief Muncie at the local Muncie, Indiana welfare office. The Indian, seated on a horse, has his arms upraised in a pathetic gesture. A file cabinet had been shoved in
front of the mural, below the central figure. The results were vague and unexpressive. In the R.I.T. "files" pictures long time exposures of 1 to 30 seconds caused people to appear as a blur. These pictures depended upon the "ballet" created by the animation of the human form in relation to the harsh rectilinear order of the files. A couple of weeks later while walking past the bursars office complex, I noticed that the individual work spaces interspersed amongst rows of files and shelves generated quite a bit of personality. I received permission from the bursar to take pictures in these offices. I photographed there everyday for two weeks until it was decided that I was a nuisance and was asked to bring my work to an end.

To keep my activities quick and unobtrusive I gave up my tripod and shot hand-held with a $10 Braun "Hobby" flash. The flash gave the pictures a garish and evidential quality, which I softened, for extra detail, with Microdol X developer in a 1:3 dilution. I used Plus X Pan film developed for 13 minutes.

The bursars' office offered a lot of good picture opportunities. It became a stage in which human disorder contrasted with the strict organization and architecture of the office furniture. The very first day I shot there I got pictures that I ultimately used in my thesis project. I even included six prints in an exchange exhibit at the
Rhode Island School of Design. This was only one week after the final critique in Mertins’ class where I had suffered a personal defeat and been thrust into a self-critical confusion. Fortuitousness rather than a calculated encounter with a unique environment had helped resolve my dilemma.

I showed the first of these pictures to Elliott Rubenstein and my core group the week before Thanksgiving break. They could tell I was onto something. One picture particularly (one which would finally appear in the book) was of a New York City skyline poster rolled into a cylinder and placed on its end next to a room divider. It appeared to be leaping forth, blasted nearly white by the flash which sent a harsh shadow precisely at the dividing line between two file cabinets on the other side of the divider. Elliott gave me great encouragement as he pointed to little details in my pictures, acknowledging how well I had increased their significance by reducing them to an inference, to the level of a subtle hint.

The tension that I felt when asked to leave the bursars’ office inspired me to think of myself as a spy with a secret mission to perform. The pictures I made were secrets about the clandestine machinations of the institution, revealed! In core class I would talk about what a great social effect my pictures would have when
society had visual evidence of how its direction was misaligned. I had been driven to make pictures with cutting sarcasm. It often felt as if my pictures were ridiculing people. They pricked my conscience when I printed them and my sense of ethics felt challenged. The conflict between elation and doubt confused me. I photographed in the presidents' office. But those photographs revealed too much about individual personality. I wanted to make broader, more universal statements.

My next breakthrough came shortly after Christmas when I was sent on an errand to the copy center. At the back of the room was a paper window which the employees had fabricated. It was a joke about being stuck in the basement. I asked for permission to photograph the "window" but the woman in charge had to ask her boss. I went back twice before she was able to tell me that her boss said it was O.K. to shoot. Initially just the window attracted me, but the paper handling orientation of the center and the cramped space where shelves of paper became walls, occupied me and my camera for three visits.

My job as projectionist was taking me all over the institution, and as I perpetually carried my camera the distinction between working and "doing my work" began to blur to the point where I wasn't functioning too well as a projectionist. Fortunately, the job included weekly
stints at the language lab and equipment maintenance responsibilities over holiday breaks. These responsibilities were minimal and therefore allowed me to explore new picture territory. Also, I was relieved of projectionist assignments and given instead the job of color xerox operator. When work on the color xerox machine was slow I would wander around and photograph in the Instructional Media Services Graphic Arts Department. This action produced the following situation which I transcribed directly from memory a day after it occurred.

LARRY SAID. 1984
I was taking pictures over in graphic arts.
She said, "Have you asked Larry if you can do that?"
I took the picture of the wall covered with a beige and ochre checkerboard of construction paper rectangles. Directly below them were variations of a cube rendered in illusionistic space.
"I work for Larry, he is my boss.", I said.
"I don't care, you should ask before you take pictures over here."
Larry always played games during lunch so I knew where to find him to ask.
"Hey, Larry? May I take pictures over in graphic arts?"
Cheryl chimed, "The usual, Addison?"
"I don't know why not, Addison.", said Larry, in deep concentration with his game.
"Yeah, institutional clutter.", I said in response to Cheryl.
"I don't think so.", was the rapid fire response from Larry.
"O.K.", and I went away.
Later they told me that Larry was looking for me.
When I found him he marched me to his office.
"I wish I could have been aware of this earlier, Addison. It is our policy to not allow anyone to take pictures in this department. Furthermore, if you were to publish or display any of these pictures you have taken, it could reflect poorly upon our department. Now this is not censorship, but, if you do publish or display any of the pictures you have taken here, or if you take anymore pictures, you will loose your job."
"My purpose is not to reflect poorly on our department and you may have misunderstood when Cheryl and I refered to the pictures as depicting institutional clutter. The pictures aren't that and I would be happy to show you some of the prints."
"I don't care about seeing the pictures. If you present something about our department to the public and they don't understand what we do and if you show something out of context and they get the wrong impression that this place is messy, then they'll get the wrong impression. Now if you show any of the pictures or publish them you will loose your job. And if you think this is censorship
you're wrong."
"Ok, I don't want to lose my job. My intention is not to disgrace our department. I won't take anymore pictures and I don't have plans to exhibit or publish them."

The equipment maintenance portion of my job was during spring break and involved cleaning out the projection booths, inventorying their contents, and checking the function of classroom opaque projectors. This gained me access to the graphic arts building basement classrooms where the printing laboratories are housed. This was my second clue to the importance of paper with respect to the function of the institution. These classrooms were an inspiration. The book form would be the natural repository for that gregarious stack of pieces of picture paper I was making with my camera.

The main source of information about the process of making a book came from Chris Losee, an M.F.A. classmate. He had brought a book that he was having printed to core class. I questioned him about gaining access to the R.I.T. presses. He explained that he had taken a class in the printing department and had become friendly with a printing major who was doing work for him to fulfill part of a class requirement.

At the end of February I had scheduled a show at the R.I.T. Wallace Memorial Library. It was to consist of
pictures I had made before leaving Muncie, Indiana and cumulatively titled: "Hoosier Harvest #3.", the third in a series of pictures about "my" Indiana home.

The process of assembling this show proved to serve as both a dry-run and an informative stimulus to my work. Charles Werberig helped me sequence and edit the pictures. His influence and opinions began to establish themselves as both an inspiration and a challenge. I had to be careful to differentiate what I liked from what he liked. He edited what I considered to be thirty strong pictures down to a skeletal eighteen for "Hoosier Harvest #3". It wasn't that his selection or subsequent cross-word puzzle type arrangement was unrelated to my intention, it was more that I stood by while he did it for me!

The other important detail in relation to this show was that I had halftone posters screen printed to announce the show. (They were very popular. Two students that I met later had taken posters from R.I.T. bulletin boards and put them on their bedroom walls.) The cost for the excellent work that the screen lab rendered was minimal. It also represented the establishment of a connection with another process for reproducing my photographic work.

After spring break I had narrowed my alternatives as to the style of pictures that I was making and had freed myself from any specific environmental constraints,
allowing myself to amble aimlessly throughout all of the major buildings of R.I.T.

I continued to get a warm response from my photographic core class when I showed them my prints. Charles Werberig would constantly try to deflate me and for the most part I would ignore him. Because of the strength of the commitment I felt toward these pictures he finally had to relent and proposed that they were like a catalog of a social-anthropological inventory.

I became more and more certain that I wanted to structure the pictures into book form. I had been photographing in our core classroom and came across the R.I.T. Student Handbook on Dr. Zakia's graduate assistants' desk. It was labeled "Desk Copy". And one day in core class I announced my intention to publish my own "Desk Copy".
Part II

I entered the Student Honors' Show 1984, at the end of spring, with two pairs of pictures crammed (they slightly overlapped) into two 16X20" frames. The prints were rejected but formed the basis for how I would sequence and assemble the book.

Charles Werberig had encouraged us to avoid placing unconventional work into a conventional context. The example that he used, which is still clear in my mind, was an exhibition he had seen where photographs of the Greek civil war were displayed behind archival mats. The civil war was being waged in the countryside and the mats emphasized the picturesque greek landscape. I had been printing my pictures with a voguish black border, consistent with the norm of "Art" photography, and centered neatly within the rectangle of the paper frame. I changed that by blowing the print up as large as practical within the paper frame and removing the black border from the picture edge. I wanted to use as much of the negative as possible to insure that the pictures had a maximum of clarity because the small details, in the pictures, were as important to me as the major forms within which these details were placed.

Over the summer I had a job as photo instructor at Belvoir Terrace, a girls camp in Lenox, Massachusetts.
I was fortunate to have the opportunity to display some of my institution pictures. I was also given a supply of paper and film to continue my photographic work. It was confusing to make new pictures of the girls' camp, print my institution pictures for reproduction, and teach photography. The result was that this confusion and pressure enhanced my picture making activities by giving my images a paranoia which was reflected in what I looked at and responded to beneath the surface of the guise of cheerfulness which was supposed to prevail at the camp.

However, the quality of the prints that I made for the R.I.T. project were mediocre. This was the result of unsuccessful experiments with RC paper and a fluctuating electrical power supply. The essential accomplishment was a serious evaluation of the institutional pictures that resulted from making contact sheets and editing 2,000 negatives down to 90.

I displayed some of my institutional photographs on the bulletin boards at the camp and received many honest compliments. I often feel over-insulated in a photographic community and it is nice to find out whether I'm just talking to myself with meaningless pictures. The camp folks enjoyed the clarity and directness of the pictures. One woman assumed that they were all double exposures and super-impositions. She inquired as to my special technique.
I showed the pictures to three photographers that I happened to meet that summer. The first was a member of a film crew hired by the camp to make a promotional video tape. He had given up photography and gone into film making for reasons related to his tribulations with having "success" in photography. So he was fundamentally critical of my intentions to make such a conceptual book, but he enjoyed the strangeness of the pictures. I took a selection of prints to a local photo gallery owner and freelance photographer in Lenox. The quality of the garishness of the flash disturbed him and he couldn't relate the pictures to one another. The last person that I showed the work to was a professional photographer hired by the camp to photograph camp activities and to critique the pictures that my photo students were producing. He felt the institution pictures were over-critical of the culture and that I should inject an element of hope into the despair he was experiencing.

By this time, I was strong enough in my convictions, to want to separate an honest opinion from a prejudice. For this purpose I have found that it is usually better to show my pictures to non-photographers, as they rarely avoid confronting the image directly. What I want to know from them is if something's there in the picture. I want to circumvent my tendency toward being overly conceptual. I'm still directing my work toward people and I want them to penetrate the ambiguity that I impose and finally "get something". It's too easy to be obscure.
I came back from the summer on a train from Albany and Duane Michals was sitting across the aisle. I asked him if he was a photographer? He put his finger to his lips and whispered, "Don't tell anybody."

During the Fall term I took three printing classes hoping that they would make some sort of connection for me. I told each instructor that I was intent on printing a book. For the most part I was discouraged. They informed me that my project was outside of the framework of the class. In addition, use of the equipment was limited to instruction and not production.

My offset printing instructor suggested that I speak to the people in the Technical and Education Center. The T&E Center is a production facility within the printing department which produces promotional material for the institution and does testing of printing processes and materials. I spoke with Carl Service about the possibility of having my book printed. He was the assistant director and highly committed to the real purpose of the institution which is its students. It took several visits to remind him to ask the director for a price on the printing of my project. During one visit a pair of office workers put a 3M gummed yellow label on my ass when I was talking to Mr. Service. The note said, "Kick Me". This is the attitude that I had to ignore with respect to dealing with people that think that art is nonsense. I kept the note on the wall above my desk and it strengthened my sense of purpose. I told Mr. Service about this incident
and he suggested that I ignore it. A couple of days later the person that had tagged me asked to speak with me in private. He insisted on telling me that he wouldn't do something like that because it was so immature. I didn't let him talk his way out of it and insisted that he had in fact done it. He finished by telling me that he wouldn't do something like that because the purpose of his job was to serve students and that they were the reason that he was there. At this point I let him off the hook and he treated me with respect thereafter.

After two months of waiting I went to Mr. Service and informed him that I had to know something about my job. He said, "Addison I have bad news for you the director said we'll print it for free. You supply the paper and binding." I was overwhelmed and set to reprinting the pictures for reproduction. I explored one suggested alternative printing process, Screenless Lithography, by asking Frank Cost, the plate making instructor, his opinion of this process. He informed me that it was overly complex and that if I could manage the printing of a photo book in 150 line screen halftone that it would be a considerable accomplishment. My reproduction photography instructor, J.C. McCraken, told me to print my prints as flat as I could print them to preserve their detail. He also advised me to have the halftones made by the staff of the T&E Center. He said, "The best halftone is the one that prints best on a specific press"; and
that the people at the T&E Center had made the necessary tests on their press to establish this criteria. I talked Mr. Service into making my halftones. He explained that he could handle it if I could have the prints ready by December to give him plenty of lead time on the project.

I returned in early December to find that Mr. Service had quit his job with R.I.T. The director said that he would have to reconsider whether they would still do my job. I had a fit in his office. He told me that getting mad at him wouldn't do me any good. I told him I wasn't mad at him, but that I was upset that a promise had been made to me which now threatened my whole M.F.A. thesis. He turned and asked Mr. Service's secretary whether she was familiar with this agreement to do my printing? She explained that she knew about the arrangement. He said that they would honor my agreement.

However, this was only the beginning of a desperate struggle with the "free" printing of my book. The T&E Center put the project off until the last minute of spring vacation. I had made arrangements with Gene Eckert, Bookbinders, Inc. to have the printed sheets to them no later than one month prior to my show in April.

Through January and February I checked the progress of the project each week. My prints remained in the same boxes and on the same shelf until the last week of February. Finally, the halftones and plates were hastily
made and the first impression was printed on Monday, February 25, 1985. The press broke down the next day. I went back and forth to R.I.T. daily until it was finally working on Thursday evening. The printers' son came in to relieve his father that night and had so many problems that I asked him to let his father finish the work. The next day I went in early and told the printer that I got too nervous watching the work being done and told him that I would not return until it was finished. I returned Tuesday, March 5 and delivered the finished sheets to the binders. I was happy with the soft quality of the reproduction. I had never intended Desk Copy to look like an artbook. However, when I showed it to Charles Werberig he felt it seemed to lack contrast. I went racing to Joan Lyons at Visual Studies Workshop to get her opinion. She felt it had a nice quality and suggested that I was being over-critical. She said that I should accept it for what it was. It took a couple of weeks before I could feel proud of what I had done.

The binder had his own set of complications and the book was delivered in installments. Thirty books the day before my show and the remainder a week later. It turned out the binding was defective and I had to return the entire edition to have a gap sealed. The hardbinding was essential to me as I rarely purchase paperback books. When I buy a book I buy it to use and that is the quality that I wanted my book to possess.
The opening of my thesis show was April 6 at the Wallace Memorial Library at R.I.T. I had hung the show April Fools Day and subtitled the exhibit as such on the poster. I had the show at the library so that I could leave it up for an entire month. Also, the pictures were about R.I.T. and for R.I.T. and I wanted them to be easily accessible to this community. It was a marvel to stand and watch people stop and examine the prints in the course of their normal day. For the opening I had live music by Steve "Bingo" Baker, of Chicago, and a local art ensemble, "Health and Beauty". It was a real happening.

I have distributed the book through Writers & Books, Rochester, N.Y. and Printed Matter, New York, N.Y. I have submitted Desk Copy. 1984 to Afterimage for review in their Summer 1985 issue.

(The R.I.T. Wallace Memorial Library has a copy of Desk Copy in their archives.)
Desk Copy 1984, by Addison Thompson
(473 Caroline St. #3, Rochester, N.Y. 14607)/28 pp./$13.95 (hb). In Desk Copy 1984 the viewer is presented with what seems like completely arbitrary snapshots of the administrative offices of the Rochester Institute of Technology. Upon close inspection, one can detect what seems like "themes": reams and reams of paper in all forms from desk calendars to reminder pads; the kind of decor one would expect from such

From Desk Copy 1984, by Addison Thompson.

RECEIVED AND NOTED

an environment. There is also the unavoidable presence of telephones, wires, wastepaper baskets, desktop memorabilia—the sort of landscape that goes so completely unnoticed in our day-to-day activities precisely because it is so close to us. Upon even closer inspection, the viewer notices various texts: notecards with comforting aphorisms, art posters, pep slogans, file labels, etc.

These sardonic and defiant black-and-white flash images have a negative capability reminiscent of the readymades by Marcel Duchamp. Recalling the structural interpretation of the readymades, Thompson's photographs only take on meaning in relation to each other, in much the same way Duchamp's readymades did. In being so negative, they act as magnets for meaning and, consequently, invoke all kinds of photographic niceties such as "New Topographics," or "Conceptual Photography," or even the worn-out "Snapshot Aesthetic." That they are all confined to the local environs of the R.I.T. campus may be the only relief from these interpretations. Thompson may at the same time be offering a glib critique of bureaucracy as it takes hold of the educational process, or all institutional processes for that matter. As Thompson has just received his M.F.A. degree from R.I.T., Desk Copy could be read as an ironic parting shot—his way of saying "have a nice day."

—ALV

Contributors to this section are Lorraine Kenny, Mark Kingsley (a Rochester artist and critic), Andrew LaValle, and Samantha Clark Whitney.