Tract

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TRACT
by
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I was born into a suburb. At the time, Mt. Clemens General Hospital was flanked on one side by rows of new houses, on the other by temporarily wild fields and young woods. I was taken home to a new middle class house. Young hedgerows grew along the edges of the yard. A young willow in back was quickly becoming taller than the surrounding houses and trees. Dad took care of the pigeons and the lawn, and Mom tended the many small gardens. Detroit was twenty long miles away.

My family went camping every summer in those days. Typically, we'd spend a week up north along a Great Lake. I never really learned to swim much, but I learned fast how to walk, wade, and skip stones, and to enjoy freedom and open spaces.

Dad was an engineer for the Army, designing tank turbines. He was filled with practical jokes, and kept the cars sparkling. Mom was a housewife. She made a lot of hamburgers, spam with butterbeans, and brownies, she painted when she could, and she played piano and cello. I remember my brother reading books and playing with me. He was four grades ahead of me, and a couple of grades bigger and smarter, too. Middle class.

I climbed the willow, caught bees in pill bottles, created my own small garden in the shade, and watched helium balloons disappear into the sunny blue sky. (Dad said they would pop, eventually, but we never saw that.)
I discovered, by thinking over the years, that I was a critical introspective person. I developed a fascination with the species, and with myself as a representative of the species. I began to look at the reasons for how we work, why we're alive, and what death implies about life.

In a vulgar sense, I'm a byproduct of a chance parentage, habituation, and education. That is, most of the influences on my personality and interests were, from my point of view, fortuitous. I received a modest, concerned, gentle, independent, and fairly typical upbringing.

Gradually I began to form judgements on my own. Between the red Sunliner convertible on the driveway and the weeping willow in the back yard, I instinctively chose the willow. While camping, I learned to love the basic smell of pines, the bright shafts of peeling paper birch, the wash of Lake Michigan on sand and stone castles that invariably eroded away during the night, the intoxicating rhythm and flow of light and color, texture and space and things, all through my clear eyes. Just as powerfully, the recesses in elementary school were intense, sensual experiences: running, panting, feeling muck slip under the heels of my hands, and sliding on frozen puddles on my shoes.

I am no stranger to muddy fields strewn with motorcycle tread marks, nor to droning cars and trucks on the highway, nor to wind in my unzippered coat, and the cloudy sunny blue
and white days of the eastern middle west. The two windows in the apartment here look into a very young woods, and I know all of the bends of the creek beyond that, and the old pear tree, the great mythic slab of rusty iron, the string of planted century old oaks at the edge of the flats, and the smell of wet rotting leaves after the last spring thaw.

Rochester's suburbs are not far removed from those around Detroit. In them, I continued to know myself, and to sense and eventually realize the influence of this environment on me. The local external world, I understood at last, was an integrated part of my internal self. My photographs embraced the suburban tract where I was living. It was here I came to realize and understand the suburban wilderness as a preserving, dynamic quality of the city's edge, and as a colorful gravity for my seeing and being.
Development

My involvement with wilderness and science led me at first to photographing nature. The Kodachromes from the years before entering graduate school are about beautiful things and places. They are exuberant in their affirmation of life and good things. Even my later urban photographs of puddles and bricks made a strange beauty out of the plainness there. The pictures in Tract are a growth from this approach.

I sometimes find myself sifting through my old photographs. I remember clearly the snow covered day I first took pictures with my own camera, when I was seven or so. Rather than quickly snap off a roll of film on the first things I saw, I struggled to find something worth recording. It took all morning to take a couple of snapshots.

My sophistication toward photography has changed a bit since then, but I still have the attitude of seeing first, taking pictures second. Photographs simply relate or transfer my processes and ideas, and my feelings. Words can do the same (so can glances, scribbles, songs, and so on), but Tract places an emphasis on detailed visual pictures.

So, in the autumn of 1982 I arrived in Henrietta, a suburb of Rochester, New York. Having to live in an apartment complex within walking distance of school, I was concerned about
being stuck in a space where I'd have trouble making successful photographs. I flip through old contact sheets and journal notes and relive my evolution through the year leading into Tract. This development, really my first committed involvement in a long term (16 month) photographic project, is outlined below in four parts. The excerpts from my journal roughly represent the four stages I went through.

1) **On photography.** At first I was struggling to understand what photography meant. What was special about a photograph, and why? What could be done with photographs in the way of expression? My clearest lesson was that the mystery of both the photographed and the photographer should not be resolved within the picture. The essence of each would otherwise be destroyed. I had to make photographs about things beyond the subject of the image.

"Photographs need...innuendo."

19 Sept late eve (1982)

"We have museums of photography; do we have museums of watercolor, of Crayola?"

7 Oct afternoon (1982)
"If one enters a subliminal element in a picture or several pictures, so that the thing is felt more than realized, then a further picture without that element will seem transformed."

7 Oct afternoon (1982)

"Photography is closer to the art of seeing, rather than creating. The photograph is the proof."

1-11-83

2) On being a photographer. As I absorbed the peculiar aspects of photography, I tried to make them work to my ends. The effects photography had on my thinking were sometimes as strong as the effects of my thinking on photography. I began wanting to make success. Now it's more clear that a made success is an empty one, and that meaningful recognition will come from my work, not my marketing. Success is not to be a goal.

"I need a vision, something to set me apart. This ties in with the terrific inconsistency (eclecticism) that many see in my work. I need to slow down and reflect and enter something permanent and intense into what I'm photographing/seeing."

29 Oct noon (1982)

3) On being a person. After a while, my journal started to include ordinary thoughts, related more to just life than to photography. Graduate school at first made photography a thing
separate unto itself. It took months to incorporate photography into the rest of life. But as soon as I started to make this incorporation, I was relieved. My frustration began to disappear.

"...but how is all of this important to living? How does this resolve the agony of being a temporary, non-transcending phenomenon?"

5-15-83

"Sometimes I want to reexperience that strange feeling I often had in high school. I had sort of a wonder and innocence for the world, the natural and the urban world. I can picture going back to an old friend's house to see if that feeling lies there still.

"But I wonder if what I lack is simply youth. To that there seems no return."

11-16-82

"I ran to school this morning, the temperature somewhere around 8° F. I felt exhilarated, the cold fluid air in my mouth and lungs like Schnapps, the hot plosive exhaling clouds, soft."

17 jan 83

4) On creating an integrated thesis. The thesis began subtly. Then a stray thought, recorded quickly during a walk near the apartment, became the seed for Tract. I didn't know photographing my local environment would become my thesis until much later, but now I see it was inevitable. I was making pictures for myself, and had found a significant pleasure in the fields and
scrubby woods around here.

"I've been thinking more and more seriously of my idea of searching out the significance of this local area. I used to despair about the meager environment I've been forced to live in and coincidentally photograph. The longer I live here, the more I see. Quite the opposite of becoming boring, the landscape is becoming multilayered, multiangled. The light is never quite the same, my walking route varies a little, my aimless promenades take me into a different parking lot, through a different field, along a different ditch each time."

21 dec afternoon (1982)

"Parameters for thesis:
1) professionalism
2) popular appeal
3) possible publication, or further use
4) extremely fascinating and pertinent
5) extremely unique
6) other. probably the most important category...not yet formulated"

4-6-83

"I was going to call this series 'photographs of a preurban wilderness,' but it strikes me now as too pessimistic. Just walking-riding home, I thought of myself as a suburban naturalist."

"The natural remnants of this area are vital to the character of the land, and the health of its inhabitants."

5-23-83

Soon I began sketching out a thesis proposal. My "parameters" proved more absurd than I intended. I began to concentrate on exploring my environment, and I discovered the forces at work there.
Visual and historical precedents to "Tract"

Books have been written on the perception of wilderness, on artistic interpretations involving landscape, and on wilderness and suburban photography. Only a few key ideas are worth briefly pursuing.

Wilderness as we know it, land of great scenic and aesthetic value, is a recently understood category. The mentality that all of nature must be respected was rare in Western civilization before the 19th century. Until then, people tamed, cultivated, mined, and removed nature. A wide variety of events, occurring in quick and overlapping succession in the 1800s, led to an awareness that wilderness was valuable after all. Prime among these events were:

1) the almost complete cultivation of England, so that the great forests were gone and increasingly missed.

2) the advancement of health, weapons, homes, trains, and safety devices, removing many people from the direct tyranny of a real wilderness, while they still resided in it.

3) the spread of theories of evolution and ecology.

4) the growth of Rousseauian and Trancendentalist thought.

T. Cole and the Hudson River School painters sought to represent the sublime, beautiful, and awesome aspects of nature and nature's grandeur. Early photographers in the American West (1860-1810), though appreciative of the beauty of the scenery, were largely documentors, working for larger impersonal
concerns such as railroads. The first wild parks, meant to save areas from habitat destruction, were set aside in the middle to late 1800s for purely economic or water shortage reasons.

At the same time, for the reasons listed above, a growing concern, voiced by Thoreau in mid-century and Muir by late century, aroused concern for the environment itself. As populations increased in the cities in the eastern U.S., the proportion of urbanites to pioneers grew. Those not in contact with the wilds were generally the ones, at first, who wanted to protect them. Photographs, incidentally, served as the sole visual source of information about many lands destined to become parks.

The sentimental, romantic attitude toward nature that grew around the turn of the century is well conveyed in Pictorial work. The 1920s and 30s introduced straight landscapists such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, who both sought to express (in different ways) the beauty of nature. Landscape expanded with each decade, bringing us the work of Minor White, Elliott Porter (in color, finally), Wynn Bullock, and Robert Adams.

Most of these photographers concentrated on the untampered, wild aspects of the landscape. Robert Adams is an exception because he often subtly included the effects of civilization on the broad landscape. Other photographers such as those in rural areas (the FSA workers, for instance) usually used nature
incidentally, or as ornament to the real subject of the photograph. My own work, while concentrating on the wilderness aspects of suburbia, also concentrates on the artificial traces within the suburban wilderness. The particular niche I have carved as a photographer appears to be unique in at least this respect. I carry the history of landscape photography with me, and I have a good sense of the urban aesthetic. I find myself on the border. The landscape I've been working in has led me to a new working definition of wilderness, which follows.

The more untouched by humans, the more "wild" an area is. An area never substantially changed from its original state (virgin land) or an area changed long ago (lumbered, for example) but now fully overgrown again, is a true wilderness to most people. A classic example of wilderness is some pristine stand with roaring streams and snowy mountains, say in Yellowstone Park. The lost and overgrown fields around the apartment where I write at this moment are far from being in their original state. They have been left to their own devices for years, however, and are therefore wild. I draw a distinction here, calling traditional wild land primary wilderness, and calling wild but recently altered land secondary wilderness. After many decades, through a process called succession, a secondary wilderness left on its own would essentially become a primary wilderness of some sort.

I have a great love for primary wilds. It is here that the species evolved, becoming what we are. It is in the wilds
that our basic influences are still to be found, and felt, given a chance. But in my wanderings around here, in this secondary wilderness of the suburbs, I came to feel those very same forces. Most people dismiss suburban lots as wasteland, just as the pioneers dismissed the Rocky Mountains when they first saw them. In both places, the same primal actions are at work: growth, decay, erosion, sunlight, moving water, fresh air, randomness, wildflowers....

A tangential concern in my work has been the preservation of wilderness of all sorts, for many reasons including just having a place to wander and feel the essential forces of nature. Perhaps the first bits of secondary wilderness will be set aside for practical reasons such as watershed or tourist concerns, but I hope eventually the ecological, psychological, and ethical benefits of such areas will be appreciated.

Since my approach to the land is a personal one, my photographs take a close, more intimate look at the landscape. Formal elements, such as the use of space, color, and form, are important in the pieces because they are important to my seeing. But the things I photograph and the way they are photographed speak more about the environment and my own mental processes than about simple aesthetic and formal concerns.

Throughout the body of work, an emphasis is placed on the natural forces that pervade wilderness. The constant flux between artificial and natural things, and the blurring of any distinctions between the two became prominent. Sensing the
processes of nature exposed in such raw, obvious ways made the photography simpler. The issues of my own decay and growth were then emphasized.
Time and again

In ecology, among the basic principles known are that nutrients cycle, and energy flows. The water cycle, nitrogen cycle, and carbon cycle all illustrate the circular (and complex) paths of the compounds. Considering the entire ecosystem, there is no real loss or gain of any compound, just a series of new locations. Energy, in contrast, comes almost purely from the sun. After solar energy reaches the earth, it is eventually, if not immediately, sent back into space. And it is continually replaced by fresh solar input. Energy is progressive; it flows.

Ecologists seldom have a need to assess the nature of time, but physicists currently contend that time, like energy, flows. (Perhaps we can say that we flow, through time.) It's a one way river. There is no getting what is lost, but fortunately there seems to be an essentially unlimited supply of both solar energy and time.

I have described, briefly, and with great tentativeness, the basic physical qualities of the universe on the human scale, the scale where things are sensed directly by the human organism. Space, time, and energy (in its many forms, including substance) seem to encompass all physical processes, and perhaps all processes. Life can seemingly be explained in the same way, but thoughts and feelings are so far removed from
raw physical processes, it's just as well to consider them separately. Our thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on are important for us largely because we have become aware of them. Therefore I make a new universal category, giving us space, time, energy, and **consciousness**.

Having reduced things this way in one level of my mind, I feel strangely close to all things, especially those that I am in immediate contact with. I am a very sensory person, perhaps because my hearing and sight are extraordinary. I sometimes have the strange sensation of **being** everything, where my kinesthetic self expands infinitely. Such moments are brief, perhaps just mistaken synapses, setting the navigation awry. But the effects linger and mix with the clear rational way of living I have gradually adopted, and my gut feelings are cleared and intensified. I feel myself increasingly as a physical element in the flow and cycle of nature.

Coming to experience a visceral sense of time has made me perceive time as both enemy and seductor. Here at the age of 26 I already fear death. It's beyond mere tragedy to put so much into our lives, as most of us do, only to lose it all in the end. Consciousness loses its grip in the flow of time. The body reenters the cycles of nutrients. Disorder sweeps through every system until there is nothing but other memories and perhaps a written or photographic memoir. And all of these things are transient in the end, too.
Ironically, once I realize all of this, I want to fill life ever more fully. It's as if the faster I go, the slower time goes, which is a sort of victory.

*Tract*, an exhibition and investigation into suburban wilderness, placed an underlying emphasis on the changing, tentative aspects of my area. Because of location and history, the secondary wilderness I have been exploring is in constant flux between the synthetic and the natural, between construction and erosion, growth and decay.
Bibliography

The list of books includes those I could think of that were particularly memorable or pertinent to the thesis. Some seem peripheral at first, but I think they contributed greatly to my ideas and my general sense of art and expression. The innumerable magazine articles and published photographs cannot be listed, but they were also very important.


Appendix—Technical note

I tried to make my equipment as simple as I could. I didn't want any interference with the process of walking, seeing, and making the experience meaningful. All pictures were made with a manual 35mm camera and a single wide angle lens. The color negatives were printed on Ektacolor glossy paper.