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Around me: a photographic journey

Jean-Paul Debattice

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AROUND ME - A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

by

Jean-Paul Debattice

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
July, 1984

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AROUND ME - A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

by Jean-Paul Debattice

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Jean-Paul Debattice, July 17, 1984
Acknowledgment.

I want to express my gratitude to Charles Werberig, for his concern and involvement in the MFA program, for the time he devotes to the graduate students and the attention he pays to their work.

I am particularly thankful for his help with the development of my own work.
Dedication.

The first piece of my show contained a dedication. I feel it is relevant to quote it here and now.

"This show is dedicated to my photographically everlasting shadow, and also to the photographically repeatable first step I made in the American landscape".

I wanted to make a point. The point is still valid, but it isn't a proper dedication.

To Agnes.
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Illustrative Material Index.

The illustrative part of this thesis report is 29 pages long and contains 47 prints. Sometimes, an accompanying map shows where the work hanged.

It is conceived as a walk through the Photo Gallery, and comprises both a documentation of the thesis show and of the work exhibited.

The walk begins page 20.
It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish (sharks, I think, according to Michelet) which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive (I didn't yet know that this stubborness of the Referent in always being there would produce the essence I was looking for).

Roland Barthes, "Camera Lucida".
Introduction.

When I arrived in Rochester to join the MFA program, I was, in a way, photographically innocent.

I had been a commercial photographer in Europe (ten years in Brussels and two in London), but that activity is as removed from fine art photography as advertising copywriting is from literature. However, in the course of my occupation, I developed an interest in photography as a fine art. I acquired quite a collection of books on the subject, which matched my eclectic taste.

Before I came here, I had been exposed to the work of many photographers, but had had no time for readings, nor to become seriously involved with personal work.

My intent when starting my graduate studies was to see if I would be able to produce a body of work that I would recognize as worthy, that would be original and an expression of myself. In addition, I wanted to study the aesthetics and the history of the medium, so that I could understand it and assess other people's work. I didn't have any preconceived idea about fine art photography, nor about what I was going to do. I had very little knowledge about the program and what it was about.
Discussion.

Beginnings.

My thesis work grew out of what I had been doing since I arrived in Rochester. It wasn't about a restrictive subject that I had selected or set myself to do. It resulted from a long and slow process whose objective wasn't clear to me.

To describe this process, I am bound to take short cuts and make a few chronological errors. It is impossible to reconstruct the exact sequence of insights, approaches and reasonings that contributed to its unravelling.

I started to question my work at the time I was writing my thesis proposal. Prior to that moment, I relied on my intuition and on the notion that practice comes before theory. I obviously had to produce some work before I could understand what I was doing, and at the same time trust myself to produce work that would make sense. It was not unlike a Catch-22 situation.

When I had quite a bit of material, I examined it and tried to determine how it came about.

I first looked at how I take photographs.

Although I don't often take photographs, when I do, I operate very quickly. The activity may be prompted by some thought that occurred in a casual manner, or by something I noticed over
and over before I suddenly want to make a record of it. I do not question what I am doing or why. I just do it. A mechanism is then triggered, that is best described in a piece of writing by John Berger, entitled "Field" (from About Looking).

"The first event leads you to notice further events which may be the consequences of the first, or which may be entirely unconnected with it except that they take place in the same field. Often the first event which fixes your attention is more obvious than the subsequent ones. Having noticed the dog, you notice a butterfly. Having noticed the horses, you hear a woodpecker and then see it fly across a corner of the field. You watch a child walking and when he has left the field deserted and eventless, you notice a cat jump down into it from the top of a wall.

By this time you are within the experience. Yet saying this implies narrative time and the essence of the experience is that it takes place outside such time. The experience does not enter into the narrative of your life - that narrative which, at one level or another of your consciousness, you are continually retelling and developing to yourself. On the contrary, this narrative is interrupted. The visible extension of the field in space displaces awareness of your own lived time. By what precise mechanism does it do this?

You relate the events which you have seen and are still seeing to the field. It is not only that the field frames them, it also contains them. The existence of the field is the pre-condition for their occurring in the way that they have done and for the way in which others are still occurring. All events exist as definable events by virtue of their relation to other events. You have defined the events you have seen primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) by relating them to the event of the field, which at the same time is literally and symbolically the ground of the events which are taking place within it.

You may complain that I have now suddenly changed my use of the word, "event". At first I referred to the field as a space awaiting events; now I refer to it as an event in itself. But this inconsistency parallels exactly the apparently illogical nature of the experience. Suddenly an experience of disinterested observation opens in its center and gives birth to a happiness which is instantly recognisable as your own.

The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life."

I use a 35mm camera, almost exclusively. My rationale for using it is that it is unobtrusive, expedient, and the film is inexpensive.
When shooting, I feel I am covering my subject like a reporter would cover an event. To further free myself from any technical delays, I set my camera on automatic exposure, and do not record any data, not even those concerning the lighting conditions or ratios.

With such an approach, it became apparent that I wasn't interested in the "Fine Print" aesthetic (though it was a concern of mine when I first joined the MFA program). My work didn't even seem to be about the singular image, though I exposed every frame as an individual image. If there was a thread that linked the frames together, I was unaware of it at the time I was shooting.

The next step in analyzing my working procedure was to look at how I was working in the darkroom.

I was printing like I was shooting: restlessly. I produced large amounts of prints, never questioning what I was going to do with them. Though I paid attention to print quality, it did not quite conform to the standards of the "Fine Print".

I did not make any contact sheets the first year because I thought they were a waste of time and materials. Instead, I would make small prints, and when the size of the paper started to annoy me I printed four small images on a single 8x10 sheet. I discovered that it established some relatedness between the images, even when the subjects were not identical (though they often were).
Looking at my individual small prints, I noticed that there was a serial quality about them too. I first recognized them as "groups" and "variations". But because it seemed obvious that if I kept shooting the same subject, the prints would automatically relate, I didn't find much value in this.

At about the same time, I started to make extensive series of prints from one - sometimes two - negatives, introducing variations through the exposures, the grades of paper, the toners, bleaches, and experimenting with multiple exposures.

Because the dictionary does not make a difference in the definitions of "series" and "sequence" (a concept I am about to introduce), it seems necessary that I now articulate the difference those terms have for me.

I would call "series" a collection of photographs that are unmistakably related, that have an overwhelming similarity either in their content (what they depict) and/or in their treatment (how they depict it). While there are differences in some of the visual elements that are presented in the pictures, some other elements remain the same and thus insure the transition (like variations on a theme).

On the other hand, I would call "sequence" a collection of seemingly unrelated pictures that are connected, but where the connection is not obvious. Because different subjects are brought together, the viewer is forced to use his/her imagination to give it some meaning. The transition may not be achieved by some visual elements presented in the pictures (though it may be), but is
achieved by the active participation of the viewer.

At the time I was exploring series, I naturally developed a few sequences, even integrating short series in some while others acquired a narrative characteristic.

I reviewed my stockpiles of prints constantly, trying to find other frameworks in which they could function together: superimposing structures that would give them a stronger coherence (even though the prints already displayed a consistency of concerns); looking for systems that would integrate and synthesize them into a larger, more complex image.

My first attempts to make composite pictures were unsuccessful because of the parameters I was using. The results looked like samples of fabric or patchwork quilts. Instead of enhancing one another to make a sort of musical piece, the individual components were destroying each others, producing a visual cacophony. For months, I put the issue at the back of my mind, resuming my efforts to tackle it only shortly before my show.

Having examined my procedures of working, I finally looked at the subject matters of my photographs. For the first nine months I had been living on campus in a student housing. For that length of time I took pictures through my bedroom window. It had a fly-screen affixed to it so that I couldn't even lean out. There was a piece of road, two sign posts, and a bit of landscape. I kept shooting that throughout the seasons.

I ended up with a surprisingly diverse collection of black
and white images. I had series dealing with the screen itself, with its interference with the clouds, with the scenery, series with the weather conditions, a specific portion of the road, etc...

I also made two long and elaborate pieces which were originally conceived as books. The original project involved a third one. The first book, tentatively entitled "Last Trip Down My Jeans" was about an old pair of jeans I was going to throw away: it was used as a metaphor for myself. The second book, temporarily entitled "Sometimes, Not in a Dream" was supposed to talk about intimate relationships, while the last, "Restricted Circulation", would deal with my environment.

The jeans' book remained close to the original idea. There was a photographic series about my jeans, which paralleled an interior monologue. The text was handwritten in blue ink and the images toned in blue.

The second book was meant to have the same structure and design, the images being copper-toned, the handwritten text in brown ink. I was never satisfied with the writings, constantly changing them. Also, I didn't want to expose myself anymore. Slowly, the legible writings turned into scribbles, crossed out additions, cancellation marks, nervous obliterations. In doing so, I freed myself of the tight matrix I was working with. The whole aspect of the book was affected and the finished product looked quite different from my first book.

I had all the elements to make the third one, but because of the evolution of the second book, I could not use them. I didn't
want to resort to the matrix of the first book and didn't have the time to devise a new one, or to make a new set of components.

It was only when I was writing my thesis proposal that I found the link between the different subjects that I photographed. They related to what was around me. They also were what mattered to me most. It seemed natural to title my proposal, "Things Around Me: An Exploration".

The works.

The proposal was helpful because it forced me to see my work not as a collection of separate projects and disconnected pieces, but as one coherent whole, making one cohesive picture.

Feeling more secure, I exposed more film, printed more paper and, finally, began to make contact sheets. I was printing my images slightly larger too, on 5x8 (half an 8x10). Soon, my series became unmanageable, some amounting to well over one hundred pieces.

I then began to print color. I was pleased to see this work showing the same concern for texture as my black and white did. There is an automatic abstraction in black and white. The mere fact that we don't see in black and white causes us to perceive color work as more literal. I think I not only sustained the abstract quality of my work in the color prints, but accentuated it. It seems more obvious in color that my images are not pictures of trees or bushes, but intricate arrangements, excess of information, anarchic complexity. To enhance that point, I would sometimes resort to multiple printing to destroy or cancel any recognizable
information. The print would then become merely a network of streaks, marks, lines, colors, values. It was not a representational photograph, but a surface which, by the high concentration of visual elements, attained a textural, tactile quality. Some of my prints have a painting-like characteristic and make me think of Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey, Paul Klee, and to a lesser extent, Wassily Kandinsky and Joan Miro. Some other prints evoke to me some complicated maps of cities, of networks of public transportation, roads, electrical cablings. Others still bring to my mind images of a cosmos in turmoil, patterns of nerves, traces left by the particles of a disintegrated atom.

I printed my color work larger than the black and white because of the added dimension of color: the palette seems to be so much richer that it needed to be larger. I also used $2\tfrac{1}{2}x2\tfrac{1}{2}$ negatives and a tripod to achieve a better definition, a sharper separation between the seemingly infinite number of colors and values.

At the time of the proposal, I had moved off campus, about a mile from RIT. There was a large semi-wild space at the back of the house. In the middle of it was a nice field. I photographed there in Summer, Fall, Winter and at the beginning of Spring. Most of the work I displayed in the thesis exhibition was shot there.

It was a natural space, as opposed to the artificial and fabricated spaces of the cities I had once lived in. It wasn't an imposing space; there was nothing grand, pretentious or
extraordinary about it. But, to me, it was an inviting space. It was quiet and restful, yet intensely alive and constantly changing. It was untamed, unattended and untidy; yet there was harmony, an organic and "beautiful" logic for everything to be there. It was unspoiled, free from human tampering, and because of that, it was unrestrainedly prolific.

It was also a space where I could find many juxtaposed textures of different qualities: soft and firm, subtle and bold, minute and thick, sparse and dense; here contrasting with one another, there smoothly blending into each other.

It was a space I was curious about, that I wanted to leisurely explore. In doing so, I discovered an affinity with it which never failed to grow each time I returned.

I knew I would be around this space - or that it would be around me - for about a year. Maybe because of this, I didn't feel pressured into a hasty and unsatisfying exploration. Yet while working, I couldn't restrain my impatience. I wanted to record too many things immediately. I wanted to exhaust the subject as if I needed an instant catalogue of my findings. This explains the roughness of many of my black and white pictures. They were not carefully planned and selected images leading to polished prints, but quick notations devoid of any technical mastery. With the exception of my color work, they are not meant to be greatly enlarged.

Maybe because of my method of working, I was able to render the essence of this space in some of my photographs and arra-
gments. At least, I want to believe this.

When it was time to hang my show, I modified the title of the proposal. I got rid of "Things" but kept "Around Me". I also changed "An Exploration" for "A Photographic Journey". It seemed more appropriate and broader. "Journey" has a metaphoric connotation and I feel it also includes the concept of exploration.

The Exhibition.

About a month before my show, I still had no idea of how it was going to look. I had masses of prints that I kept loosely sequenced in boxes, a substantial quantity of color prints, a long piece with writings, another with scribbles.

I had to devise some way to present it all. To make the matter worse, whatever material I would select had to be used as it was. I couldn't afford the time nor the expense to do some reprinting, not to mention the impossibility to duplicate truthfully the toned prints, the multiple printing and the bleaching. I was still producing new stuff though, trying to resolve the problems I had encountered when I first attempted to make composite pictures. I printed a lot of contact sheets. This gave me the freedom to experiment multiple imagery at an affordable cost. I could cut the contact sheets and re-assemble them any way I wanted to. I began with minimal arrangements, pasting only a few frames on a large 16x20 mat board. Those gradually became more complex, finally covering the entire surface of the board. This time, I was satisfied with the results, and I put about
twenty of those pieces in the show.

I made a large color piece (52x38 inches) specifically for the exhibition. It was an enlargement in nine pieces that I reassembled in an illogical manner. It was a 4x5 shot of a few square feet of grass. The point of reconstructing the image this way was to hopefully make people aware that one reconstruction would somehow be similar to any other.

I finally devised a way to present my half 8x10's (5x8's). I did some vicious editing and made a one hundred and two print piece. It measured over seventeen feet long and was the first I hung in the gallery.

I made the best of the space that was allocated to me. Every wall, every partition was efficiently used. I could not have put more work in the show without crowding it.

Because of the abundance of the material, making the show was not unlike composing a bouquet in a flower shop or a salad in a restaurant. During my first year in the MFA program, a few people attributed a musical quality to the work I displayed in critique sessions. Some pieces appeared to have a development in time, a sense of flow and continuity, a rhythm characteristic of the repetitions and multiple printing. I think this could be said of my show as well.

In the procedure described in the proposal of July 1983 I wrote that the exhibition as a whole would hopefully be structured as a large sequence made of all the series within. I feel
it would have been a fair description of the overall view of the show that opened mid April 1984.

**Conclusion.**

Within the same space and with the same material to choose from, I could have made many different shows. They somehow would be about the same thing, and to a certain extent, look alike. So, I believe I did develop a style that is my own.

I also have developed a skill to integrate large and small numbers of images, neither creating confusion or boredom.

Over one thousand individual images went into the making of the pieces that were displayed in the show. It required thirty-five 16x20 sheets of glass, and sixty-six 11x14's.
I have strong reservations to establish a bibliography.

It is not that I have the pretension to think that my work has not been influenced by someone. On the contrary, I believe that everything I look at, or read, has some effect on me, however minute. I am a compulsive viewer, indiscriminately looking at a variety of man-made visual materials: magazines, books, television programs, movies, exhibitions of all kind.

To name any book, artist, work of art or performance piece in particular would give them a preponderance they do not have. To list them all is meaningless and virtually impossible.
Appendix
Thesis Proposal

THINGS AROUND ME : AN EXPLORATION

by

Jean-Paul Debattice

July, 1983

Charles Werberig, Chairman
Associate Professor
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Elliott Rubenstein
Assistant Professor
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(Thesis Proposal/page 1)

Purpose

My premise is that however ordinary and banal things may seem, there is always something of interest in them. Maybe the interest doesn't lie with the individual objects (or their image) but in the way they relate to one another, in their spacing modes, in the connections established between them irrespective of the apparent restrictiveness and narrowness of their individual content.

Through sequences, series, pairings and other visual arrangements I will attempt to express the feel of my experiences of the things around me.

Background

I don't explore photography. I explore things around me through or with the help of photography. I don't have "picture ideas" anymore as I did when I was an advertising photographer. At that time it was important to demonstrate the extent of my technical skills in the pictures I created.

Getting rid of the studio, the 8x10 camera and the sophisticated lighting controls, I also got rid of my aesthetic concerns.

I was forced to become somewhat primitive when I again resumed picture making, using a 35mm camera, shooting black and white film only, printing my photographs rather small. I took pictures devoid of any technical pretensions. I photographed whatever was there, around me. But when I looked for new concerns in my work, I found very little. I couldn't even say why I was photo-
(thesis proposal/2)

ingraphing what I photographed, nor did I see any meaning in my work. A concern for texture, values, shapes... what is the meaning of that? The mere fact of calling my production "work" embarrassed me. Yet I kept shooting the same way - either because I didn't know any different, or because I have a tendency to trust myself blindly. I somehow grew to like what I was doing and just had to keep producing pictures.

However, having to show my photographs every now and then in critique situations, I noticed that I always arranged them in a certain order. I gradually became aware that they meant more to me when they were in groups than as single images. Through these arrangements emerged some sort of statements that weren't there when looking at the individual isolated photographs.

I began to establish some connections between my work and my life: both appeared to be ultimately meaningless and unexciting, but nevertheless comprised somewhat interesting small events. I connected my newly-found concern for arrangements with a personal need for integration. I started looking at my work as a collection of random small pieces belonging to a common, much larger picture, a bit like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Some of my work includes a verbal counterpart or contains visual elements other than photographs. It seemed natural to use the book format to integrate the two modes of narration. Having to display my work as part of the degree requirements and wanting some book work to be part of this display, it occurred to me that
it was both impractical and inadequate to exhibit books in a gallery space; the two vehicles have inherent qualities that are somewhat opposed.

One of my challenges will be to organize the display of my book work using the specificities of the walls of the gallery without hopefully sacrificing much of the qualities associated with the book structure.

Procedure

I will make many small prints (anything from about 1½x2 to 5x7 inch), mostly in black and white, producing several groups of images. In most instances, the photographs and images related to the same grouping will be linked in a concertina binding which will be displayed unfolded on the walls of the Photo Gallery.

To explore variations, some series and sequences might also be displayed in other arrangements yet to be determined, such as mosaic, montages, composites etc...

The exhibition as a whole would hopefully be structured as a large sequence made of all the series within.

Materials

Most of the images within each group will be made of conventional unmanipulated silver prints from 35mm negatives. Some will use multiple printing, some may be toned according to the subject,
(thesis proposal/4)
some might use color, and some unorthodox materials such as
thermofax copies, typed letters, used envelopes etc...

Presentation

Mid April, 1984.

Bibliography


Illustrative Material
about the year ago, I have a letter written in another language. I was unable to find it, but it was in a foreign language. I tried to find it, but I couldn't. It was written in another language. I tried to find it, but I couldn't.

I was unable to find it, but it was in a foreign language. I tried to find it, but I couldn't.

I was unable to find it, but it was in a foreign language. I tried to find it, but I couldn't.
At the time I documented the installation, a panel was missing (red area of diagram). On it was a 16x20 color print, part of a series of three. The two others hung on the blue area.