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East Hill Farm

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EAST HILL FARM

Stephen Kurtz

Canidate, Master of Fine Arts Degree
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

August 1983

Elliott Rubenstein, Assistant Professor Elliott Rubenstein

Theodore Prescott, Assistant Professor Theodore L. Prescott

Bekir Arpag, Professor Bekir Arpag

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THESIS PROPOSAL

Master of Fine Arts Degree
College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

SUBMITTED BY: Stephen Kurtz

THESIS BOARD:

Elliott Rubenstein, Assistant Professor (Chairman)
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Bekir Arpag, Professor
School of Printing
Rochester Institute of Technology

Theodore Prescott, Assistant Professor
Department of Fine Arts
Roberts Wesleyan College

Owen Butler, Assistant Professor (Special Advisor)
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

PURPOSE OF THESIS

To photograph at the Rochester Folk Art Guild's farm in Middlesex, N.Y., making images that reflect and explore the experiences I have recently been privileged to share there. The farm and craft commune provide an economic base and vigorous life style for approximately forty people, who constitute a spiritual study group. The work at East Hill Farm is under the guidance of Mrs. Louise March, and reflects the teaching of G. I. Gurdjieff.

SCOPE OF THESIS

In preparation for my thesis work, I have spent several days a week at East Hill Farm, for the past two months. An essential part of my experience has been participation in the work of the community. For me this has included gardening, construction, photography, and work in the iron shop. Other craft shops at the farm include glass, wood, pottery, graphics and weaving. The farm has grain fields, vineyards, orchards, livestock and vegetable gardens. Meals are taken together at long tables and most of what is served is produced at the farm.

My experience of the Gurdjieff system has been of a personal nature, centering around efforts to achieve greater awareness. It is my aim to share my experiences through my photographs. My intention is not to document East Hill Farm, but rather to reflect my own perceptions, making images that represent my understanding of the

experience made available to me at East Hill Farm. I am trying, as far as it is possible for me, to be free of preconceptions as to the nature of the final images, in order to remain open to new insight.

It is my intention to work in the spirit suggested by the following excerpt from John Szarkowski's Looking at Photographs :

"Photography, if practiced with high seriousness, is a contest between a photographer and the presumptions of approximate and habitual seeing."

It does not appear coincidental that I have chosen to photograph a group that approaches most of what they undertake with just such a seriousness.

PROCEDURES

My thesis will take the form of an exhibition of black and white prints. I intend to use several cameras including 35mm, roll film, and possibly a view camera. The number of prints to be exhibited will be determined by the nature of the final images (approximately 20 - 40).

I will continue to work at East Hill Farm for two days each week, setting aside approximately two hours each day for camera work.

I will try to be as receptive as possible to both experience and image in the hope that they will sometimes be as one and complete each other. I intend to make many proof prints in order to study my

visual progress, and to keep a journal in order to document my experience. From these I expect to extract the exhibition and report required for the completion of my thesis.

SOURCES OF REFERENCE

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MEN by G.I. Gurdjieff

BEELZEBUB'S TALES TO HIS GRANDSON by G.I. Gurdjieff

ZEN IN THE ART OF ARCHERY by Eugen Herrigel

MIRRORS, MESSAGES AND MANIFESTATIONS by Minor White

LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS by John Szarkowski

INTRODUCTION

The stated purpose of my thesis was to photograph at the Rochester Folk Art Guild's East Hill Farm, in Middlesex, N.Y., making images that would reflect and explore the experiences I shared there. I spent the better part of a year doing this, and considerably longer trying to understand what I had done. I have decided to structure the documentation of my work around an analysis of the photographs, describing my process and philosophy within the context of the images.

The capacity to create a feeling of the invisible through the visible lies entirely within the photographer. It is he who brings the photograph to life, who gives it meaning and value according to his experiences and beliefs. If he is aware of and related to the forces which generate life, then he has the potential to create orders within his photographs which express those forces. If he lacks that awareness or ability, there is the possibility to develop it.

-Barbara Bullock¹

¹Barbara Bullock, Wynn Bullock (San Francisco, California, 1971), forward

THE BEGINNING

It is early spring and I am driving south along the eastern shore of Lake Canandaigua. The road is new to me, and I glance frequently at the index card propped up on the dash. My mind is awash with expectations. The landscape is magnificent; I am imagining photographs. I am anxious about being on time. Bekir Arpag's directions are excellent. I arrive several minutes early, park my car in a space adjacent to the long driveway alongside the large white farm house, and step out into the morning, a box of prints under my arm, and vivid impressions from readings in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky coloring my thoughts. I am greeted immediately, by a young woman who knows my name and informs me that I am expected in the house.

I was there because I believed that my most satisfying photographs were made as parts of essays exploring communities or environments I found compelling. Friends, who had been to a Rochester Folk Art Guild craft sale, suggested that I might find the members and their work interesting. I was there because Minor White had been there. I was there because my work had opened me to new ways of learning.

I bring this, my portfolio of prints, and my personal assortment of mental baggage: preconceptions, pretensions and illusions, to my interview with Mrs. March. I am led through a large communal dining room, a kitchen conceived to nourish a hundred, a small exotically appointed meeting room, and finally into the small room in the

large farm house, which is her room, a private space, rich with a profusion of possessions, each an invitation to wonder.

Mrs. March is warm and gracious, I am given to believe Bekir Arpag has been kind in his description of me. She questions me about why I am here and I ramble on about RIT and my masters thesis, and sense with each successive word, that I am not prepared for this interview, that I do not really know where I am, much less why I am here. Mrs. March looks through my prints, indicates that they are not the work of a master, and shows them to Susan B., who has been present throughout. I am relieved when Mrs. March asks Susan to show me around and invites me to remain for lunch.

Susan takes me on a tour of the craft shops, farm buildings and grounds. Mrs. March has informed me that Susan, a former student of Minor White, has the responsibility for most of the photographic work done at the farm. I am hopeful and feel the need for a friend. We talk some about photography and I ask to see her work. She shares some beautiful prints, 5x7 contacts on printing out paper, exploring a partially decomposed wasps nest, which I notice is among her possessions. I am talkative and inquisitive. In time I will come to understand that this was tolerated in me as a visitor, but would soon be discouraged.

A bell, high atop a post, summons us all to lunch in the large dining room of the house. Mrs. March is seated at the head of a long table, actually two tables, set end to end, dividing the room, more or

less in two. Men line both sides of these tables on benches. The tables and benches are superbly crafted in a simple Shaker design. Members fill their plates from large trays and pots, set out on one of the tables, and take seats at other tables to either side of the central one. I follow Susan's lead and find a place next to her.

I have since taken many meals with this group, many of whom I now value as friends, but never without realizing once again, that I am at a very special place. Meals are rarely taken in silence, but should one wish to address the entire group, it would require no more than speaking as if around a family dinner table.

In time I would learn how to be at one of those tables; it is something akin to learning to be alone, with yourself, instead of alone with your reveries. It is being alone with others, aware that they too, are present, and with you. It is remembering to be there. At such times, it is never necessary to ask myself why I am there.

After lunch that day Mrs. March and I spoke again. I was invited to return and agreed to participate in the life and work of the farm as a pre-condition to my photographing there. This entailed spending two or three days per week at the farm, contributing to the community by working in the gardens, the iron shop, and the dark-room, under the supervision of senior members of the group.

My choice of East Hill Farm as a place to photograph evolved out of a search for a content based focus for my work. The decision was intuitive, based more on my need to explore the nature of my

personal response, than a preconception of the images I wished to make.

THE DOG AT THE POND

(slide no.1)

In the first weeks at East Hill Farm, I spent my mornings helping Susan B. to meet the photographic needs of the various Rochester Folk Art Guild shops. We photographed glass, pottery, wood, weaving and iron for craft fair applications and documentation. All of this work was done in marvelous makeshift studios, contrived for the purpose, and dismantled before lunch. The studio was usually the small unfinished room in the basement of the house, adjacent to the far better equipped darkroom, but location varied with the size and shape of the subject. On other mornings I worked alone in the darkroom.

Most of my afternoons were spent as an apprentice in the iron shop, where thanks to Jim's infinite patience, I learned something about the rhythm of work. On Sundays I was included in what was referred to as the little group, a small study group led by Mrs. March. These meetings were my introduction to the Gurdjieff Work. My photography during this period was limited to an hour per day, and I was asked not to photograph or otherwise distract other members.

I used this time to explore the early spring landscape, still bleak and scarred by the hard winter. It seemed somber and severe, often mirroring my emotional state. I found the work hard and revealing. I was often confronted by aspects of myself it would have

been easier to ignore. The unpeopled, quiet photographs I made were probably more expressive of my mood at the time than anything else. In time I would see this landscape differently. I would work in the gardens and fields and find myself in relation to the land. I would encounter the care and attention others had brought to their work, in a well plowed field, or the discovery of an unobtrusive artifact that charmed some unlikely corner of a shop, a shack, or even a vineyard.

The small pond, off to the side of the main house, is a very special place, both for its beauty and for the wealth of impressions gathered there. It recalls private meditations, public celebrations, sweet music, gentle clowns, and remarkable conversations. One particularly quiet afternoon I found myself alone at the pond with my camera, fascinated by its mirror smooth surface. Pretty as a picture. A photograph seemed obligatory, not inspired. As I lifted my camera to my eye, the dog strolled into the picture. So be it. I continued to fuss with my focus, and was about to make make my exposure, when he began to drink...

PICTURES OF PEOPLE

I came to East Hill Farm with the idea that I would continue along the lines of previous work, photographing people and places, in order to better understand who I was, and why I was there. In the past, the photographs of people were central. My subjects were typically flattered by my interest and eager to share themselves and what they cared about. Something of a style or work process was beginning to evolve. At East Hill Farm it would come to a halt.

Most obviously, it was disrupted by my agreement not to photograph people until I better understood the group. East Hill Farm is not a craft commune; it is an esoteric school for the study and evolution of man. All activity at the farm is intended to create the proper conditions for this work.

In time, I would use my own judgement about what and when to photograph, but portraits of others no longer seemed to serve my purpose. I made portraits of Mrs. March for friends, of wedding couples as gifts, of craftsmen for publicity, but these were made for others. They were not my work.

When I did include people in my photographs, portraiture was not the intent. These photographs were made to present a perceived order, or relation that gave expression to some aspect of the broader understanding I was trying to achieve. I did not photograph the children around the bonfire, (slide no.14) but their possibilities. At work on a compost heap, (slide no.18) I paused to document not the workers, but their daily heroism. I did not photograph George and Sterling

because they worked together on a roof, (slide no.12) but because they danced in the clouds.

THE MAN IN THE SQUARE HOLE

(slide no.8)

First, by way of introduction, a short digression for some deep thinking prompted by the subject of holes. It was brought to my attention one morning at the farm that in order to create something of permanence, great forces must be taken into account. If, for example, one wished to maintain the elevation and angle of the small raised porch in front of the Hall from season to season, one must take into account the effect of the winter frost. Experience teaches that supports thrust deeply into the earth will only have the desired effect if they are anchored below the frost line, which in the area of East Hill Farm means four feet deep.

The construction of two such supports was well underway by the time I arrived that morning. Such a project must begin with the digging of holes, and so it had. Mine was close to three feet deep and wide enough to provide ample elbow room for its occupant-digger. I spent all of that morning and a good part of the afternoon finishing it. I felt my resistance, I felt my softness, I felt my ineptitude, I felt my laziness, and I finished my hole with a strong conviction that somebody, who cared and understood a great deal about growth and change, knew what someone could learn in that hole.

The square hole is in the Iron Shop at East Hill Farm and was dug to provide a foundation for an anvil. The man emerging from it is David, a visitor from Scotland, where he is a member of the

community at Fendhorn. I entered the shop and found the scene precisely as it appears in the final photograph. I had only a small camera and knew immediately I would want a larger negative; the possibility of a rich expressive print already in my mind. I explained all this rapidly to David, asking him to change nothing, as I ran off after my Hasselblad and tripod.

When a photograph is about an ongoing activity or relationship between the subject and other elements in the image, it is often productive for me to make many exposures, exploring the relationship. This was not the case here. I had already seen exactly what I wanted, and was able to set up the camera, meter and make the exposure without adjustment or experimentation. Three negatives were made, out of concern for movement in the subject, as the exposure was long allowing for a small small aperture and the depth of focus I felt the image required.

It was my intention throughout the thesis to make photographs that could communicate the nuances of valued personal experience. In order to accomplish this it was necessary to make images that transcended their literal content and functioned to a greater or lesser degree, as a metaphor. Most of the photographs included in the thesis show were selected because they worked this way for me. As the photograph of David has been, in this regard, the most successful in the thesis, I will use it to attempt an analysis of how such a photograph might function.

The image seems to benefit from a certain ambiguity and mystery, which although not at a requisite, is probably an invitation to personal interpretation. The black diamond is not immediately perceived as a hole in the floor, the figure floats in its frame and the textures, lighting and space are all unfamiliar. This produces a visual tension amplified by the contrasting signals offered by strong diagonals (dynamic) and a centered subject (static). Symbols abound: light verses dark, arcane tools, the underworld, ascending and descending, a face in the shadows, etc. This all seems to suggest a certain intentionality or fabrication on my part which I have already denied. I decided to make this photograph in far less time than it took me to notice the qualities described above, much less contrive them, yet I believe the high degree of visual organization and symbolic content, were very much part of the excitement I felt in making this photograph.

For a photograph to attract and hold the interest of the modern viewer, who is typically inundated with well-made, attractive images on a daily basis, is indeed a challenge. It seems imperative that the image arrest the viewer's attention, all at once, if it is to have any chance of involving him at all. Visual communication is rapid and compelling in a manner quite apart from the reasoned persuasion of words. It came as no surprise, that the most successful photographs I had made, were those that I was already certain would be special before I clicked the shutter. Such photographs are celebrations of moments of insight and awareness. In acknowledgment and appreciation of his work and his influence, I quote Henri Cartier-Bresson:

To take photographs means to recognize - simultaneously and within a fraction of a second - both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one's head, one's eye and one's heart on the same axis.

-Henri Cartier-Bresson ²

The printing and display of photographs are, for me, activities of another type. They are considered exercises in synthesis and communication. Before the final printing of the photograph of David in the hole, a host of associations and insights had accrued to the image. I tried to give expression to these additional layers of meaning in the darkroom, and in the hanging of the work.

Living with proof prints, tacked to walls, and sharing them with others, does not change the images, but invariably modifies the way I relate to them. I am uncertain of the role played by the response of others in my work. I know that I do not photograph for others, this remains a personal process. But it is possible that I print for an audience and certain that I edit or display my work in the interest of sharing and communication. In the sharing of my work, I surrender control; it is recreated in each response, redefined with each interpretation. It is only in this process that the work has life; but is it then also true that it is only in the perception of others that work has meaning?

²Henri Cartier-Bresson, The Aperture History of Photography (Millerton, N.Y., 1976), p. 8

Susan B. left the farm only a few months after I came. We never became close, but I valued her criticism, which was not always gentle. One day, just before she left, she spent some time with me over a box of my proofs. She told me the work was disconcertingly uneven; occasionally imbued with magic, but more often ordinary. She singled out the picture of David as her favorite, and said "this is a picture of all of us, struggling to escape the darkness in a hole which we dug ourselves".

CONCLUSION

Photography, as is true for all art forms, is a means of learning. Given a receptive mind, photography can be a continual interaction between the development of the photographer and the things he photographs. As he explores the world within and around himself, he creates pictures which reflect and communicate this process. As manifestations of his experience, the photographs are not only expressions of what is, but also of what can be. They are catalysts and tools for discovery as well as symbols of ideas and beliefs which have already been developed. Through his pictures, the photographer not only says - this is what happened, this is real, this is what I feel and think; he also asks - what does this mean, why do I experience it this way, where do I go from here? In asking such questions, he is prompted to go out and test his ideas and beliefs, to open his mind to further experiences, to probe and search for that which is beyond what he knows and understands.

- Barbara Bullock³

I have tried to provide a context for the photographs by sharing some of the experiences in which they are rooted. It is more difficult to share what I have learned, as much of what is transmitted at East Hill Farm eludes verbal description. The Gurdjieff tradition is a direct transmission, passed on from master to student in the manner of Eastern wisdom. The student works at tasks, practices movements, and studies attention. As his powers of observation increase, his understanding changes. Although only a beginner in this practice, I am quite certain it has profoundly altered my values.

I owe a similar debt to photography. I began to photograph out of the same impulse that lead me to read and study in psychology

³Barbara Bullock, Wynn Bullock (San Francisco, California, 1971), forward

and philosophy; that is, to better understand my own nature, my values, my possibilities. To photograph is to explore, to reach further outside and deeper within, to seek relation and, in the final measure, to communicate.

In the year preceding my thesis work I encountered several remarkable books. The strongest impressions came from Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, and Zen in the Art of Archery. Both writers are trained in Eastern thought and tradition, and both books ring with an authenticity of experience I have rarely encountered. They are celebrations of awareness, invitations to effort.

East Hill Farm seemed to be the place where the diverse ideas and interests of the past year might be focused. It offered a fine context in which to explore and grow both as a photographer and a person.

The reality exceeded my expectations. Mrs. March and the family at East Hill Farm enriched both my work and my life. The photographs like the other work at the farm did not always come easily, but there was growth in the effort. I am not sure that I became a better photographer at the farm, but I am certain that I gained a great deal of insight into my relationship with the process. I saw the ego striving for recognition at odds with the seeker searching out truth. I know them both better now, and I can find them in my work.

The time came when the photography of the beginning was clearly over. I had spent almost a year photographing East Hill Farm and this work now required closure. There was a clear sense that to go on would require turning a corner, asking new questions.

I enjoyed making the prints and hanging the show. The opening, the sharing, the documentation : pauses to reflect and assimilate. The time spent earning my master's degree was a very special privilege, made possible by those I love. It is a gift I will always treasure.

TECHNICAL DATA

CAMERA AND LENS:

120 roll film slr

Hasselblad 500 CM

80mm f/2.8

50mm f/4

35mm slr

Minolta XE-7

35mm f/1.8

100mm f/2.5

LIGHT METER:

Soligor 1 degree spot meter

FILM:

Tri-X Pan: 120 roll film, 35mm

Panatomic-X: 120 roll film

FILM DEVELOPER:

Tri-X: HC-110

Panatomic-X: Rodinal

ENLARGER AND LENS:

Omega B-22 with cold light head

80mm f/5.6 Schneider Componon

50mm f/2.8 El Nikkor

PAPER:

Agfa Portrigo Rapid

PAPER DEVELOPER:

Kodak Amidol

T S T

PRINT AND MAT SIZE:

8 1/2 square

and 11 X 7

All matted to 14 X 17

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