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Spying on Myself

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Spying on Myself

by
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May 1978

*Candidate For The Master Of Fine Arts
In The School Of Photographic Arts And Sciences
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My interest in photography began when I was twelve years old. This fascination developed because I was able to 'keep' things that I saw. It was a way of holding onto an experience that I liked. The first photographs were mainly of objects and animals [not people] and an occasional picture of a friend or family member

As my interest changed and developed photography became a way of not only holding onto an experience but the camera helped to create a new one. I can remember thinking to myself after photographing some people on a dock that I didn't care how the photographs came out but the fact that I enjoyed taking them was enough. I held onto this idea for a long time.

Looking at photographs that I've taken has always served as an open door to relive the experience before, during and after the picture was taken.

Many years later I realized that the experience of taking the picture was not fulfilling enough. I was beginning to see photography as a craft. At this point in time my photography is used as a way of preserving my experiences, creating new ones and as a craft. I am interested in the print as a separate and unique entity as well as part of the whole process.

Recently I have begun to think of my photography as an aid toward greater awareness of myself and my environment. Instead of just photographing to preserve a fond memory, I want to be able to use my photographs as a means of understanding myself and my environment. This idea is better understood in terms of psycho-therapy. An understanding of Gestalt Therapy with its emphasis on the here and now helped me to achieve this goal.

For me at this time the word Gestalt means a way of describing a process of perception. Gestalt Psychologists dealt with this process and believed that when one perceives something that person plays a large part in what is being perceived. While perceiving with any of the senses a person organizes and groups that which is being perceived. In this way the experience becomes something different to each person. Also, by organizing and grouping, each individual item is seen as part of the whole. This whole is divided into figure and background. This concept is commonly referred to as figure/ground.

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Gestalt Therapy looks at the figure/ground relationship in a different way. Figure is thought of as living in the present. Ground is everything that a person has experienced. The goal of the Gestalt Therapist is to give the person more experiences so that there is greater possibility for a wider variety of figure for the person to act upon. When people get into situations that remind them of something that happened in the past, they tend to organize the event as they had in the past. They are reacting mostly on ground and not enough from figure, or, they are living in the past and not in the 'here and now.'

Gestalt Therapy can be summarized into three general principles; living in the present, awareness, and responsibility. [Fagan and Shepard, What is Gestalt Therapy, p. 68]. For me these serve as the basis for the creative process. When I am very aware of my immediate environment, responding to it as I perceive it and taking responsibility for my part of the process I feel that every movement I make is connected and working with the subject. I almost feel that I intuitively predict what will happen next so that my camera is already aimed at the correct moment.

I believe that if it were possible to photograph at the level that Gestalt Therapy is based upon, a photographer and subject could work effectively towards a photograph that would be interpreted and accepted by both.

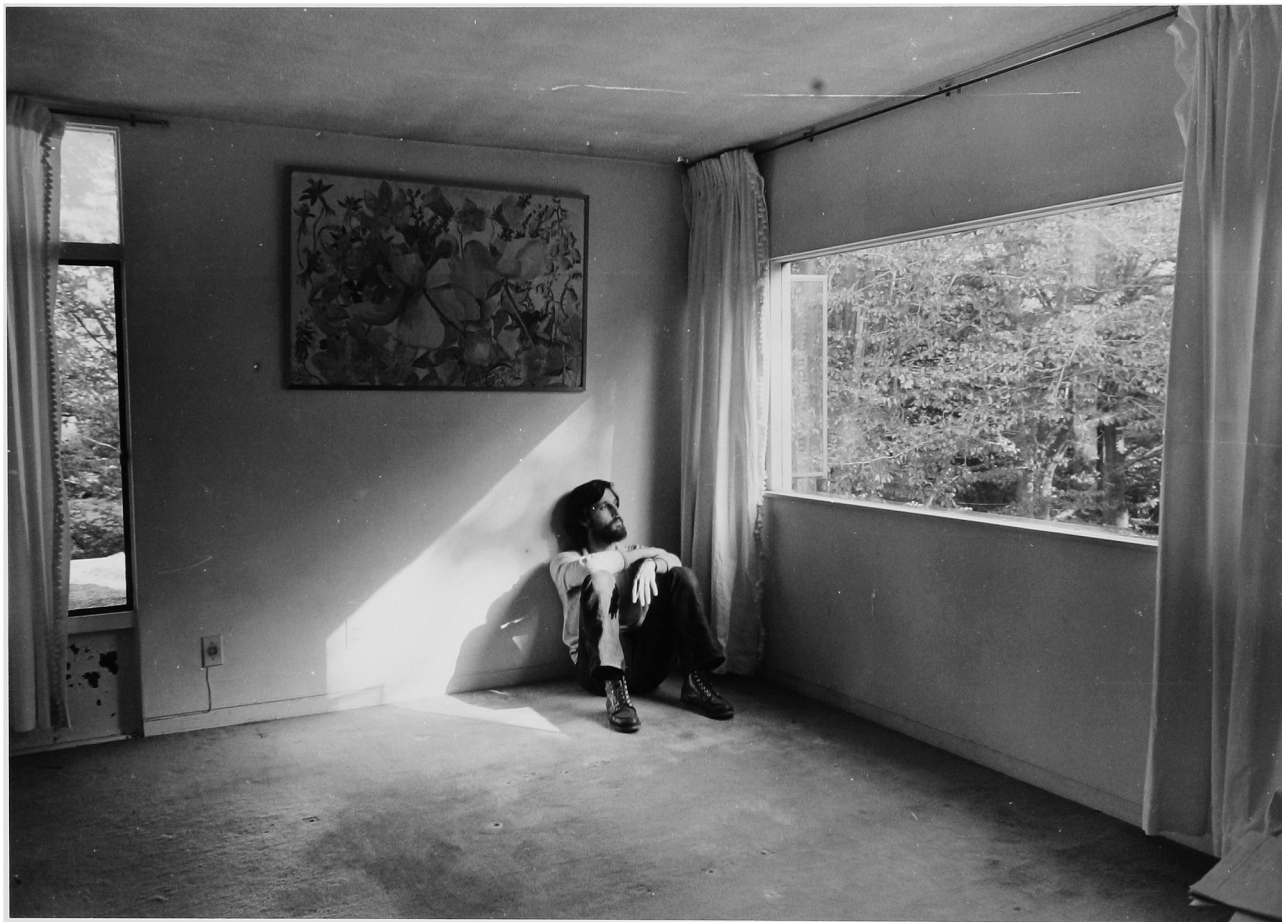
In order for this to happen it seems necessary to understand how one makes contact with the environment. I learned about how I made contact with the environment by participating in Gestalt Group Therapy.

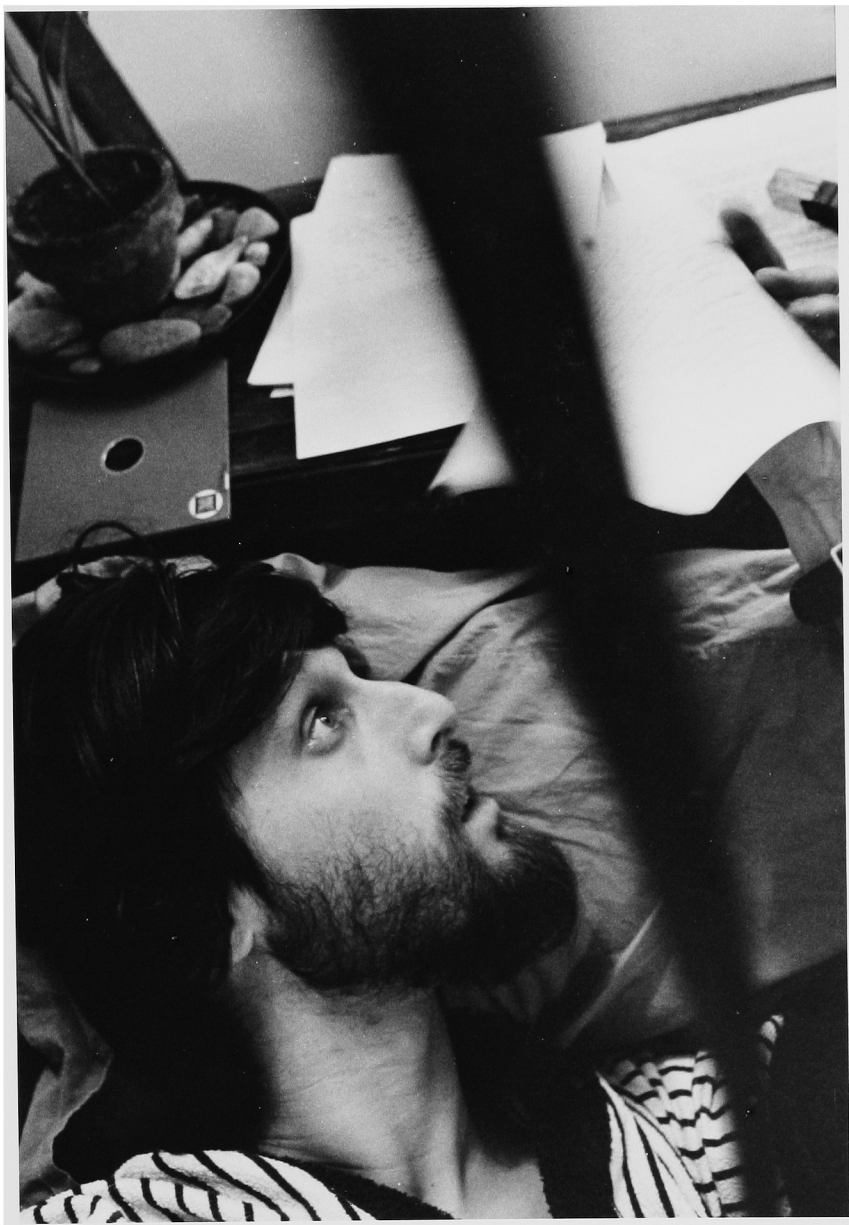
My photographs are divided into two sections. In the first section I explore myself through self-portraits. In the second section the exploration is based upon the feedback I received from group.

The following self-portraits were taken before, during and after therapy. In the first few photographs I seemed to have aimed the camera at myself as though being forced to. I look scared perhaps because I am worried at what will show.

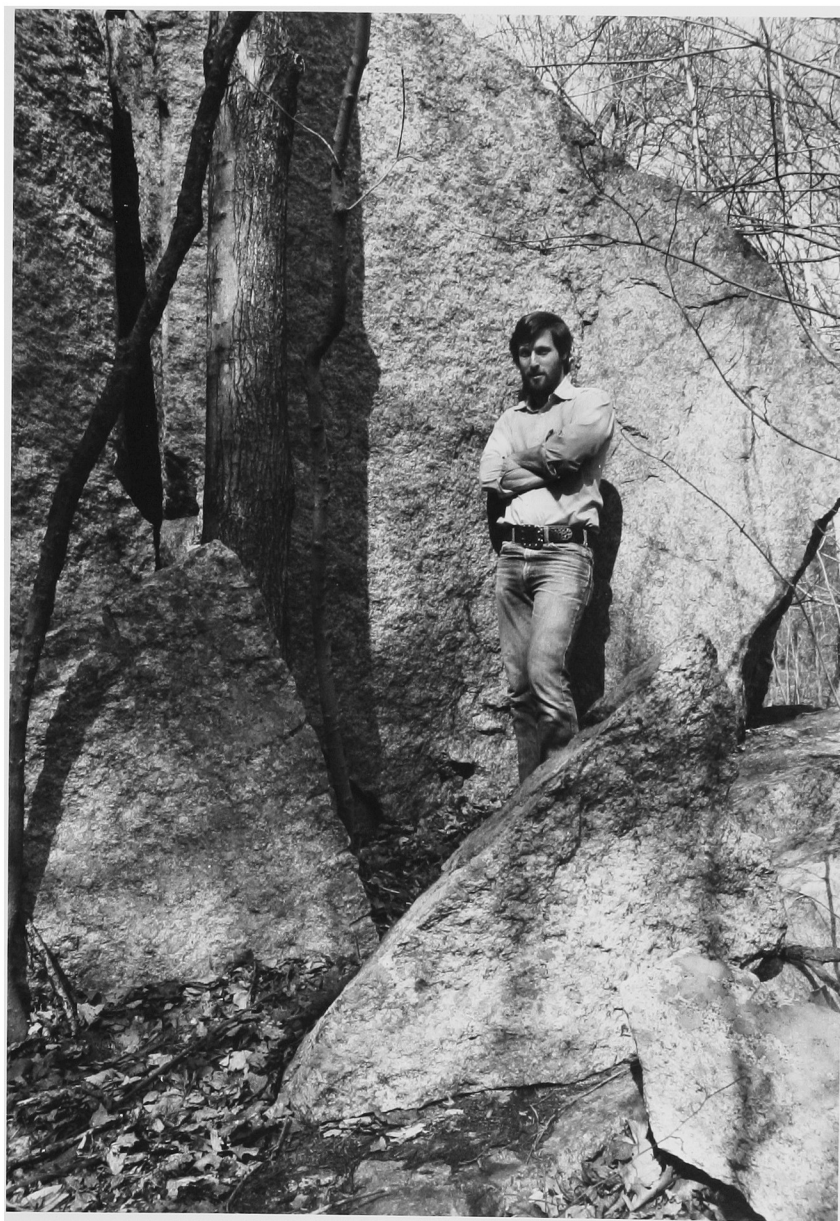
During group therapy I got a lot of feedback. Through painfully anxious moments I tried to assimilate what was being said and later photographed myself as people experienced me. I was told that trying to talk to me is like moving a big rock. I then photographed myself to try and understand what it would be like to be a 'human rock.' When group members said I was like a rock it seems they meant that I was not connecting up with or responding to what they were saying. Perhaps this way of dealing with people shows photographically in my just taking the pictures for memories or for the sake of the experience and not seeing photography as a total process.

In the later self-portraits I am making more contact with myself and my environment.





in need of protection)
both inside and out



It's hard to learn about myself,
parts that I like and
parts that I don't





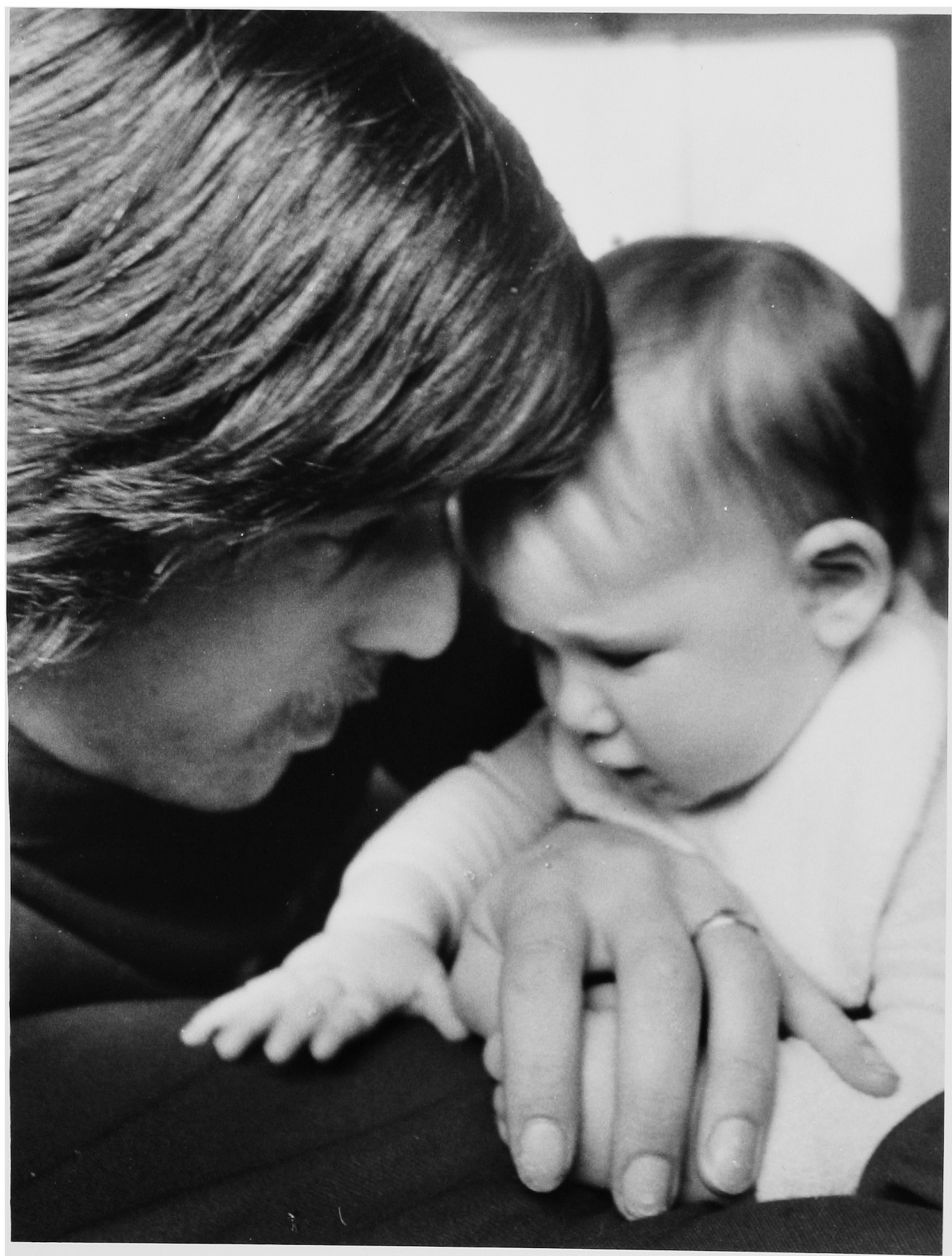




A little before Group terminated I was beginning to realize that I spent a lot of time thinking and mulling things over in my head. The result of this was an interruption in the contact I was making with the outside world. In the next series of photographs I attempt to express spontaneity and feeling from a gut level and make contact with other people.











○ enjoy fooling around and
have trouble making contact
with my sister.



Being a grandmother is important to my mother; sometimes she is overpowering in that role.



Watching their relationship gives me
a warm and peaceful feeling.







THESIS REPORT

THESIS PROPOSAL

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SCOPE: To explore my awareness as it is related to my photography.

PURPOSE: In the past several months I have become very interested in Gestalt Therapy. It interests me because it focuses on the here and now; I see my photography oriented in this same manner. Gestalt theory states that people's problems arise from their lack of awareness of oneself and from the ways in which they block this awareness. I am interested in exploring the intersection of Gestalt Therapy and Photography.

Recently I've met a Gestalt Therapist who conducted some experimentation with the relationship between Gestalt Therapy and Photography. He suggested the best way to learn about Gestalt Therapy was to get involved either in individual or group therapy. Since then I have joined one of his groups with the understanding that I can explore myself, my awareness, my photography and their interrelatedness.

For the visual aspect of my thesis I plan to photograph six different areas that I will discuss while in therapy; myself, my wife, my daughter, my mother, pictures from the drivers seat and old buildings. [These areas are flexible and might change during the project]. From these I will choose three to be presented as my thesis. The presentation of the visual material will be in book form, with a series of photographs [7-15] of each area that is chosen.

DISCUSSION

For many years I have been intrigued with the idea of using photography in a therapeutic sense. While teaching high school students photography, I've learned that for a few, photography is one of the easiest ways of communicating. The photography class became a comfortable place where students began to develop greater enthusiasm in other academic subjects. By talking with the students about their photography, I was able to learn about them. The visual image was a means of getting in touch with their feelings.

These experiences helped to convince me that photography and therapy did in fact go together. but where would be a place to start this type of exploration? The area is quite broad with many different aspects to explore. I decided to narrow this exploration down by experimenting on a highly personal level. It seemed important that the first step in this kind of exploration was to deal with my own feelings.

I started this project with the idea that my photography would change as my awareness about myself changed. In my mind's eye I thought this process would be easy to show in photographs. In reality it was not. One of the biggest problems that I encountered was how to measure a change in my photography. Looking at my photographs over a period of a year the task seemed impossible. No matter what occurred in therapy, I could easily 'read' anything I wanted into the picture and deduce any desired conclusions. I didn't want to do this because it would not really be exploring the relationship of photography and therapy.

As a result, I decided to alter my original proposal. Instead of showing change in several different areas that I was photographing, I decided to concentrate on one myself. This led to two different sets of photographs; self-portraits and another set which explores some of the feedback I received from group therapy. Most of this feedback centered around the fact that I reacted mostly from my intellect instead of from my gut feelings.

The self-portraits definitely trace a change within me that I could show visually. In the second set I have started to practice photographing from gut feelings.

I choose the words that accompany the photographs by doing a Gestalt exercise that is used trying to obtain a deeper understanding of dreams. In this exercise the person is asked to tell the dream in as much detail as possible and then become each object. The sentences are started with "I am the ..." This is a jumping off point; as the person gets more involved with the 'story' more gut feelings come out.

As a result of doing this exercise I wrote long paragraphs for each of the photographs. I found these paragraphs took away from the visual impact and therefore condensed and summarized my main feelings about each photograph.

Sometimes I look at the sequence of photographs and feel that this process of growing, changing, photographing could continue indefinitely.

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