

The Visual Memoir Project:

Searching For An Art of Memory

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Abstract

This essay describes an in-progress arts-based dissertation project that attempts “visual life writing” (Sinner & Owen, 2011) as photographic memoir. Spanning several years to date, the series addresses the idea of visually archiving the self through an everyday photographic ritual. Ruminations on loss, presence/absence, and the passage of time are given creative and emotional consideration from behind the camera. Through narrative reflections on my experiences as an artist, teacher, and researcher, the process of art-making is brought alongside the images themselves. Drawing as its subject matter selected scenes, encounters, and objects from everyday life, I share how the project came to be and discuss some of its challenges, influences, hopes, and new understandings. Methods including near-daily photo walks, rephotography, visual journaling, and creative writing are enacted in an effort to locate the potentially pedagogical within a search for memory (Ricoeur, 2004). Some issues related to photographic practice and research are considered, including camera ethics and the vulnerability inherent in memoir-based work. Presented as an offering in-the-making, this is an unfinished, ever-evolving passion project still in a process of being understood. A small selection of digital images from the Visual Memoir Project (VMP) series are included, all by the author.

Keywords

visual life writing, photography, walking, memoir, ethics, loss, Sontag

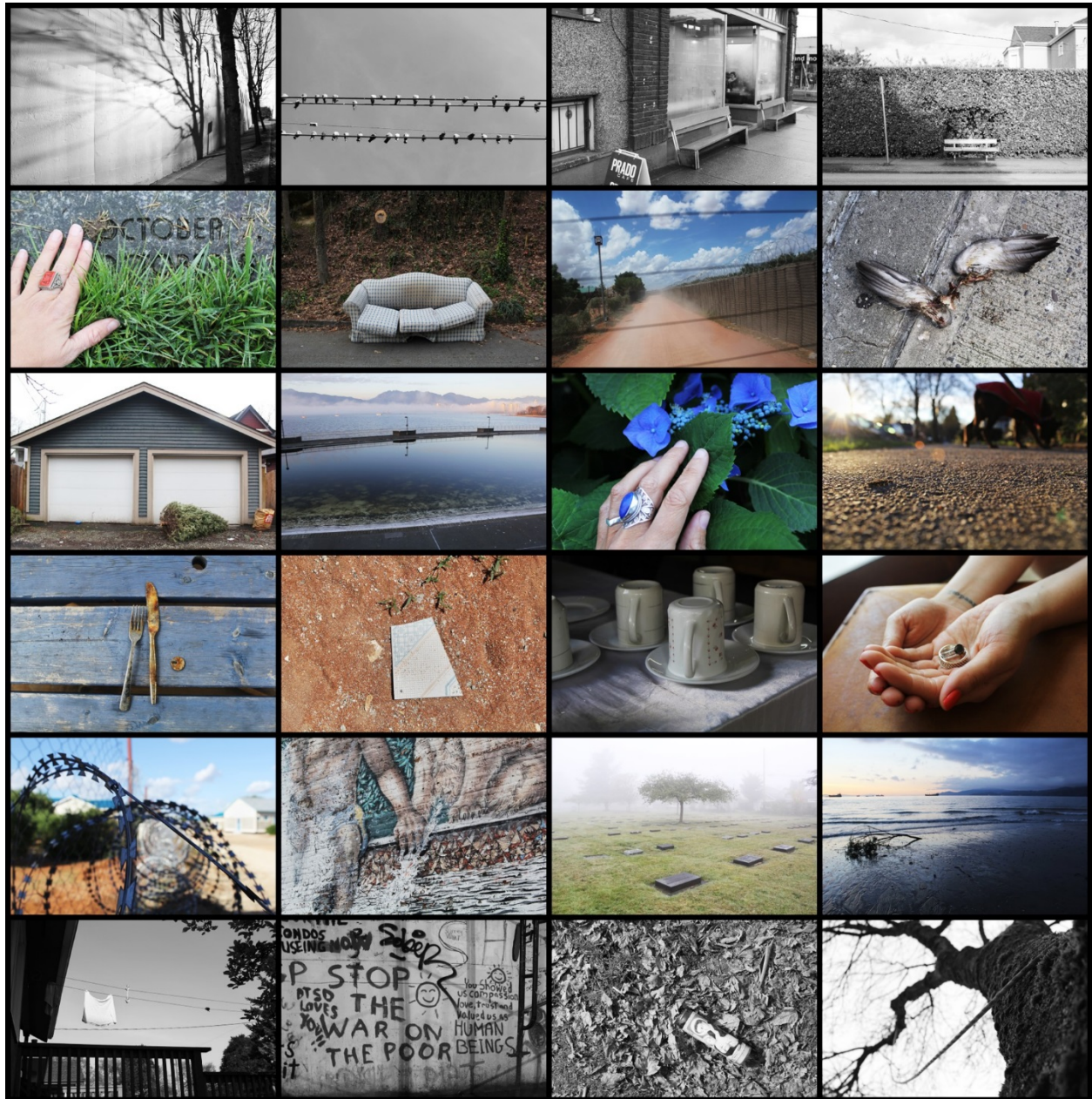


FIGURE 1: CONTACT SHEET: 24 SELECTED IMAGES FROM THE VMP
BY BLAKE SMITH

Our lives are at once ordinary and mythical. We live and die, age beautifully or full of wrinkles. We wake in the morning, buy yellow cheese, and hope we have enough money to pay for it. At the same instant we have these magnificent hearts that pump all sorrow and all winters we are alive on the earth. We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded. This is how writers must think, this is how we must sit down with pen in hand. We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived. Let it be known, the earth passes before us. Our details are important. Otherwise, if they are not, we can drop a bomb and it doesn't matter.

Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within

Natalie Goldberg | 2005

Years of Collecting: The Visual Memoir Project (2011-present)

In the late nineteen seventies, photography critic, playwright, novelist, and filmmaker Susan Sontag was interviewed for *Rolling Stone* magazine by Jonathan Cott (2013). Sontag's seminal book, *On Photography*, had been recently published, and she had undergone significant surgery and treatment for breast cancer which provided the life material for her book, *Illness as Metaphor*. Cott first interviewed her in Paris, then they continued the conversation in New York City a few months later. As Sontag told Cott, she was worried that if they didn't finish the interview soon, she "may change too much." She said "I write partially in *order* to change myself so that once I write about something I don't have to think about it anymore" and that after "having done it, I'm already someplace else." Cott replied "In a way, it sounds like a firefly that at the very moment you see its light you realize that it's in fact already flown off somewhere else" (Cott, 2013, p. 122-123). Sontag agreed.

As a creative, personal endeavor and an intellectual undertaking, I have spent the past several years creating a collection of photographs that attempt to take on a "visual life writing"¹ project as photographic memoir. Entitled the Visual Memoir Project (VMP), this essay hopes to shed some narrative insight into its intentionality², emergent qualities, and influences both artistic and pedagogical. Included here are only a small selection of digital images from a much larger series which, in final form, I envision printed in a book along with creative writing, field notes, and poetry. Equally vulnerable and cathartic to take on as a long-term project, the VMP

1 The conception of "visual life writing" through photography is encouraged by the collaborative work of Anita Sinner and Jade Owen (2011), appreciating "life writing" as a poetic, reflective, and pedagogical practice illustrated by Carl Leggo (2005, 2010), Timothy Adams (2000), and many others. Employed here as an everyday photographic practice, "visual life writing" performs as an active ritual and an ongoing artistic rumination on the passage of time.

2 A version of this essay (along with a projected series of selected images from the VMP) was first presented at the 2015 National Art Education Association Annual Convention in New Orleans, LO, USA. It was shared as part of the Seminar for Research in Art Education (SRAE) Graduate Research Session in conjunction with the Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers Session. Later, some of the content was adapted for a group research panel at the 2015 American Educational Research Association Annual Conference in Chicago, IL, USA entitled: *The Not So Idle Flâneur: A Metaphor for Knowing, Being Ethical, and Negotiating New Data Collection and Production*.

began initially as an a/r/tographic inquiry in graduate school³ about mementos, displacement from home, and letting go. Slowly (and certainly not without frustration, poor decisions, or days without pictures or inspiration), it has grown into a dissertation-turned-deeply-personal-undertaking still in the making. As I write this and imagine where the inquiry may or may not lead, the memoir continues to unfold. Something new is being learned every day, with every new image. I am uncertain where (or how) it will ever gain completion to close its final chapter, but I draw guidance from the title of a lovely book about artist and activist Dan Eldon's visual journals: *The Journey is the Destination: The Journals of Dan Eldon* (Eldon & Eldon, 1997). Because the moments and scenes recorded have all passed yet retain a presence in photographic form, they are Cott's fireflies flown elsewhere. Like Sontag, I, too, am "already someplace else" – as time passes, my thinking about, understanding of, and attachment to the project changes. Sequencing, juxtaposition, thematic groupings, and emotional pull all vary. This is suggestive of a fluid rather than fixed method of understanding or way of seeing (and seeing art), as well as an invitation to confront the desires behind one's work. Looking back, it seems that the way we might make sense of that which beckons our attention is rarely understood the same way twice.

Named a *memoir* (Karr, 2015; Rieff, 2008⁴), the VMP includes a curated selection of encounters (both sought and stumbled upon) that have been gathered photographically to tell

3 All ideas are born somewhere and are worth tracing back to their origin. I have found that being immersed in creative and intellectually-challenging environments (such as stimulating classrooms and working with supportive mentors) is where such ideas may come into being. In its infancy, the VMP began unexpectedly in a graduate level A/r/tography course taught by Dr. Rita Irwin at The University of British Columbia in 2011. Thinking about the memories and deep histories embedded in cherished objects, I began photographing personal mementos brought with me to Canada (such as my grandmother's locket - see Smith, 2014), writing letters and poetry to them. Over time, this later led to the VMP as a series paying close attention, in part, to relationships with personal and found objects, as well as referencing the work of contemporary artists, which draws inspiration from my mentorship by Dr. Donal O'Donoghue.

4 David Rieff's touching, raw, and somewhat bitter memoir, *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir* (2008), is penned by Susan Sontag's son. Heart-wrenchingly told, Rieff speaks from his insider perspective about her years-long battles with cancer, some aspects of their relationship, and the ferocious, hopeful spirit Susan carried until her death, ever-seeking new treatments. Ethically, he makes a critical point of judgment regarding Annie Leibovitz's photographs of his mother (on her right to take/make/publish them). When tracing the works of

a visual story of a particular aesthetic tone. It is a *project* in that it is challenging, educational, and durational; it involves qualitative methods and research questions around ethics, memory, and photography's pedagogical potential. For me, it represents a path of inquiry that begs to be followed, yet its outcome and final shot are comfortably unknown. And it is *visual* because of the photographs and the nature of thoughtful observation they entail. This path of inquiry was followed with purpose in photographic form because the visual is a language that (I think) I can make sense of/with. Thinking with Sontag and others, I am also trying not to define but rather to better understand ethical practices for both the photographer and the photographed so that implications are never sidelined. An emergent through-line of this study invites consideration towards the capacity for the teaching artist, a teacher and maker of art, to be a storyteller and to take on the same kinds of intimate projects she asks of her students. Spanning several years to date, the body of work covers specific temporal, geographical, and psychological terrains; as such, the contexts of time, place, and pain each play a significant role, and one does not exist without the other. This terrain includes photographs taken in/near some of the places I have lived, traveled through, or called home as well as scenes captured along certain neighborhood streets and emotional paths I have walked day after day, camera in hand.

Much-inspired by photographer and teacher Byron Wolfe and his beautiful book entitled *Everyday: A Yearlong Visual Diary* (2007), this body of work autobiographically draws as its subject matter selected scenes and encounters from my everyday life. And yet, there is a lack in some sense of the everyday and an obvious "distancing" in some images: Not everything that could have been or was photographed made its way into the collection; the number of human portraits is very few; there are many more shots taken outside (rather than inside) of the home; and, in some cases, there was a decided refusal of vulnerability from the photographer (me) and/or my chosen photographed subject. Thinking photographs as visual testimony devoted to the recovery of experience, they are what Roger Simon (2014) might describe as image "remnants" desperately fighting erasure. Inescapably, they are embedded with a subjective

others who wrote about Sontag after her death, or who wrote about her ideas regarding photography, I came across his memoir (as well as Sontag's revealing journal *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks 1964-80*, 2013). Rieff's narrative provided an interesting perspective on her life (certainly her death) and her fervent passion for writing. Somewhat similarly, after reading Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), his posthumous publication *Mourning Diary* (2010) offers an insightful text into his relationship with his mother, particularly with the loss of her, as catalogued in his daily hand-written notes (mournings).

history enacted, perhaps, through Simon's "pedagogy of witnessing" (2014) where slices of human life can (and should be) learned from - particularly those slices that have filled us with magic or in some cases, cut us deeply and left a scar. As such, the process of making and trying to "understand" this collection has become a pedagogical endeavor where reflection informs action (and vice versa). As a teacher myself, it makes sense to consider the unexpected lessons the camera may teach and suggests that projects like this may offer possibilities for the classroom, for artistic practice, for memory work, and for research. It also makes sense to continue doing the things we love – for me, this is taking and making pictures, every day.



FIGURE 2: LONG SHADOWS ON A WALL THAT NO LONGER EXISTS | BY BLAKE SMITH

On Knowing & Learning (Visually)

At the center of both the VMP and how I conceptualize “visual life writing” as an intuitive, emotive method is a desire to situate what Graeme Sullivan describes as “visual knowing” (2010). I understand this positioning as calling upon an artist’s ways of *thinking, feeling, being, looking, listening, learning and unlearning, creating, and disrupting*. The knowing that is gained throughout the process of making the photographs and in reading them as texts-with-timbre afterwards offers a number of possibilities toward the richness of art-making and the experiential nature of learning. O’Donoghue (2015) writes that:

If a turn to experience in art education shifts attention away from equating art education exclusively with the production of objects of a physical nature (from which the initiated can make determinations and appraisals), it calls us to consider and imagine other ways of making, and therefore, it has the potential to engage us differently in thinking about making processes (p. 110).

Further, he suggests that “certain things are possible when we cultivate an *attitude* of openness, curiosity, inquiry, delayed judgment, trying and undergoing, becoming and unbecoming, possibility and potentiality” (O’Donoghue, 2015, p. 110). It is in the very spirit of these ideals that this research project is carried out.

As visual artifacts constituting a “living archive” (Riaño-Alcalá & Baines, 2011), the images I have tried to create/collect are evidence of an intentional thinking through and devotion of immense time in the service of an idea. In the case of a dissertation with a deliberate artistic lean, the aim is a scholarly passion project that relies on and trusts, at its very heart center, the knowing that comes from looking closely. It also holds space for feeling, which some call the sixth sense, to be positioned as one of many beautiful qualities that can define and in/form qualitative (in this case, arts-based) research. As creative texts, the photographs in the VMP are meant to enhance, juxtapose, inform, and speak back to a textual research narrative that is not rigid but rather in flux. (*I’m sure it has a beginning and will one day have an end, but what is being learned and made in the middle is what is most interesting for now.*) Creativity and intuitive seeing are positioned as agentic for the writing of alternative academic scripts so that new forms may be given to new ideas - or in some cases, new forms given to existing ideas. Together in this way, my hope is that complex and different understandings are made possible when writing in an a/r/tographic language (Irwin & deCosson, Eds., 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, Eds., 2008) alongside a linguistic one. Therefore, the daily act of trying to visually catalogue an experience offers a way to reflect on the educational qualities of an artistic practice (Barone & Eisner, 2012) and maps my journey as an art educator. I believe both (the daily act and the mapping of a journey) are incredibly important for the *process* of research and the search for meaning *within* that research.

Speaking of process, it is important to say that observation, reflection, meaning-making, and ideation occur and continue to occur – and yet, some things stay consistent. In the same way I cannot imagine a life without teaching, I cannot imagine a life (or the life of this project) without pictures. Specifically, a life without the pictures James Elkins (2001) describes as the ones that can bring us to tears⁵ (*he referred to paintings, I refer to photographs – the camera's paintings*). Covering a range of subject matter, each picture or mini-series within the larger VMP series followed an invitation to pay close attention to something through the lens of a camera. Perhaps, they are captures of what Natalie Goldberg (2005) calls us to record and write about in the opening excerpt to this essay – our magnificent lives and worthy details. This work, a photographic attempt at Mary Karr's "the art of memoir" (2015), is being "written" in honor of both lives and details. To frame the importance of paying attention to and recording the mundane details of one's everyday life to is to do so precisely because they matter and we may want to remember them. From daily routine activities and the things we walk past but rarely see...to our most substantial, life-changing events that can alter our very being, these are the moments that shape us and make us who we are.

5 Elkins (2001) posted inquiries in journals and newspapers and wrote to his colleagues asking for peoples' stories of responding to a painting with tears. He received many responses and found that "roughly half of the cases converge on two kinds of experience" that are somewhat in opposition: one, "because pictures seem unbearably full, complex, daunting, or somehow too close to be properly seen," or two, "they cry because pictures seem unbearably empty, dark, painfully vast, cold, and somehow too far away to be understood" (Elkins, 2001, p. xi). I suppose I am interested in both kinds of responses - and the ones in between.



FIGURES 3 & 4 (DIPTYCH): FOUND: WINGS, NO BODY. HELD: METAL & HOPE.
BY BLAKE SMITH

On Memory & Writing In Pictures

As both a medium and method of inquiry, I am asking what it means (and perhaps looks like) to visually archive the self, to visually “write a life” (Leggo, 2010). Research questions being considered at the center of this series ask the following:

How might visual life writing through photographic memoir be considered a generative practice?

By employing everyday photography through a frame of memory, what might emerge?

What ethical considerations are important to consider when conducting photographic research and practice?

In an ongoing effort to discover some “answers,” I have created a pictorial record as evidence of my movement through and relationships with particular subjects (places, objects, people, time periods, experiences). Methodologically, it is a photo-based lived inquiry that writes a kind of picture-poetry where photographic memory guides visual narration and the visuals themselves invite a poetic way of writing⁶. The VMP beholds an archive of things found, felt, and seen. Together, these become ethereal photographic ruins, the corpses of my memory, however fragmented or fleeting. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004) writes: “To remember is to have a memory or *to set off in search of a memory*” and distinguishes “memory as appearing...” and “memory as *an object of a search* ordinarily called recall, recollection” (p. 4). By contemplating the temporal, emotional, material, ethical, and affective qualities bound up in this kind of endeavor and attempting to write in pictures, I am in some ways searching photographically for what Geoffrey Batchen (2004) calls an art of memory (from which my essay title borrows its namesake).

In the VMP, a number of themes are being explored, revisited, and made present. Some were recognized from the very beginning, and other themes present themselves with each passing day. By choosing to name them, I wish not to categorize or limit what someone else might see (or not see) in them; instead, the themes speak to what was thought about, walked past, or looked at (or for) at the time of their pictorial arrival. In this ongoing search for

6 Some related examples of what I refer to as poetic writing include: Bitek (2012); Cixous & Calle-Gruber (1997); Leggo (2010); and Smith (2014).

meaning and memory, these inquiries include photographic ruminations on loss (Barthes, 2010; Prosser, 2005), the passage of time (Adams, 2000; Leggo, 2010; Wolfe, 2007), and the spaces, both tangible and intangible, between presence and absence (Miyako, 2008; Riaño-Alcalá & Baines, 2011). In some cases, themes or recurrent subject matter only became evident when reviewing contact sheets and proofs afterwards - this is part of the process: *the looking back, the act of returning, the edit*. Therefore, this body of unfinished work is perhaps a container that presents an opportunity for the illumination of the past in the present,⁷ inviting one to picture the ways memories can be bound up in a single image – or series of them. Further, it is suggestive of the potential of photographs as agents and archives of knowledge and is a gesture towards visual memoir-writing as pedagogical as well as ethically-bound.

7 I am indebted to Dr. Michael Parsons (Visiting Professor of Art Education at The University of British Columbia 2014-2015) for this concept (“illumination”) and for inviting me to consider the potential place of metaphor within this work. Thank you.



FIGURE 5: WALKING AMONG GRAVES IN THE MORNING FOG | BY BLAKE SMITH

On Loss & Temporality

As with any project, artwork, or research agenda, there is inevitably the question of *why*, which we can choose to put an answer to, or not. My *why* is that, due to some indelible experiences with loss, I have a habit of photographing things I am afraid of losing or forgetting. In wanting to make sense of this loss through art-making, it seems that years of photographic practice have filled a void where finite explanations may not have existed - but images could. In some ways, photography acts to mediate a fear of letting go and somehow stalls the passage of time, if only for an instant. The images capture light-fall at different hours of the day and try to photographically collect the four seasons that make up a year. Through vision and proximity, I seek compositional artistry charged with emotional image resonance. As representative of things or moments I hold dear, they are images of subjects I'm afraid will be forever lost – if not photographed, rescued in-camera through “creative practices of remembering” (Keightley & Pickering, 2012). This project has become my daily act of photographic *preservation* through attentive *observation*, rendering time, memory, and experience into two-dimensional snapshots. Selfishly (and longingly), they are nostalgia-gripped refusals to be erased, forgotten

(Batchen, 2004), or to forget (Connerton, 2008). And while my face is not in any of the photos, I know I am (or was) there and that this memoir belongs to no one else – a self-portrait of another kind, perhaps. Often compelled to reach out and touch, or to hold gently, something being photographed, I think this is one way I’ve retained a sense of presence in these photographs – and offered up a reminder to behold fragile things, gently and before they fade away. Maybe the act of photographing my hands becomes a way of saying “I was here.”

A substantial challenge being faced in terms of artistic data production (Eisner, 1997) is in the temporal nature of the photograph itself. Thinking with photo theorist and critic Roland Barthes (1980/2010), it seems that this series is hoping to capture something that is in fact, already gone – these moments are an album of yesterdays, present only in what is remembered, printed, and archived. Barthes’s (1980) concept of the *noeme* speaks to *what has been*, reminding us that the present moment is always the past moment – the minute we recognize it or yearn to freeze time, it is already too late and that moment is now gone. We can never return to what was, left only with our sense of loss and these fragments. I gaze at this series in a similar way Barthes gazed towards his mother in the famous Winter Garden Photograph, discussed at length in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980). Sadly, I already know that this collection may one day be part of an archive of disappeared, digitized moments (Leggo, 2010) – but at least they are here now, so there is something to work with and to treasure.

On Teaching & Learning: Birthplace of An Inquiry

In terms of framing an inquiry, what is important to communicate is how I came to this research: first as a teacher and second as a student. While I now teach at the university level, in my previous career I spent an incredible ten years doing something I love: teaching high school photography, both darkroom and digital. This was an interesting time to be teaching, when most school darkrooms were closing and digital labs were replacing them; I was lucky enough to have access to both and, thus, was able to teach both ways of working with photographs. *(This was also a (rare) moment I recall before smartphones lived in many students’ pocket or purse and, as such, have now altered the history of picture taking/making/sharing.)* Alongside all of the technical information and visual art standards students needed to learn, the kinds of projects I tended (still tend) to assign were of the reflective, storytelling kind. Invitations were set forth in an effort to help them to each find their own creative place in this world by pointing a camera at whatever they found important, interesting, beautiful, difficult, awe-inspiring, confusing, ordinary, momentous – or simply, worth photographing. In an effort to understand

the visual language of photography and learn to see, I tried to grow their individual capacities to observe what is outside, as well as pull from deep within.

As an “experience-producer” (O’Donoghue, 2015), I will admit to wanting the images they produced to matter, to authentically mean something, and to reflect or reveal a vision as unique as each of them are. In terms of subject matter, we may have started with cliché shots of stop signs and sunsets (*Didn’t we all start there? I certainly did*), but we ended up with enigmatic portraits, compelling compositions, and complex photo essays on topics such as: being adopted, being bullied, falling in love, coming out, playing sports, burying a father and best friend, growing up, and much more. As an artist and art teacher, I made/held space in the classroom for photography to be for them whatever they needed it to be. At that precious time in their fragile, angst-filled, silly, and wild lives, the art classroom became a sanctuary for some. Beyond technical prowess and art historical knowledge, the cultivation of visual awareness, emotional intelligence, and a gorgeous sensitivity around lived experience through art were paramount to me in my responsibilities as a teacher. Mentioning this is to position some of the intentions behind the VMP, as it seems I was teaching my students to write their own lives into pictures as I am now writing my own. It only makes sense to work through the same kind of questions and pedagogical challenges asked of my students by asking them of myself.

Like some kind of echo-methodology, the impact that those ten years in the classroom (and the years of teaching since) have made is noteworthy, as we are all beckoned by something to do the work that we do and to dream that it might be possible. (*There is always some kind of an echo.*) As I imagine research that could have art classroom implications, or the influence classroom life has upon the framing of a research endeavor and its goals, I have often turned to the work of contemporary photographers⁸ as curricular entry points into visual life writing.

8 Some of the photographers whose work has greatly impacted my ways of seeing, photographing, and teaching photography include the following, in no particular order: *Alfredo Jaar, Ishiuchi Miyako, Byron Wolfe, Mark Klett, Susan Meseilas, Vik Muniz, Emily Jacir, Dana Claxton, Ken Gonzalez-Day, Paul Graham, Edward Weston, Edward Burtynsky, Jan Napoli, Gordon Parks, Nan Goldin, Fred Herzog, William Eggleston, and of course Michelle Van Parys (my inspirational college photography professor at the College of Charleston, SC).* Because some lists may never cease to end, I will stop here. While many of their geographies reflect my current North American context of study, this is not intended as an exclusive set of artists and not all may be considered contemporary.

In relation to the VMP, I study and teach the work of these photographers because in some way their works, in my view, contend with places of memory and memory of places - as well the things we often leave behind. In their images, I see landscapes of skin and sky juxtaposed against landscapes of grief and belonging. Together, their photographic surveys of places and objects offer visual references⁹ for recording traces of “the everyday,” for creative remembrance, for responding artistically to loss through art, and for ways of utilizing art to pursue memories.

9 As frameworks for creative and critical observation, I suggest students could benefit greatly from exposure to examples including and beyond this layered bouquet of international artistic perspectives. (*I think: The more examples of art they see, the better*). Pedagogically, this approach appreciates and is informed by the work of art educator Olivia Gude (2007/2010) on her “principles of possibility,” which invite art teachers to rethink curricular goals/methods to strike new creative fire. Specifically, my desire is for (her) principles of “empowered making and experiencing, forming of self, attentive living, and not knowing” to become possible for students, teachers, or others interested in writing their own version of a visual memoir. (See also: https://naea.digication.com/omg/Postmodern_Principles)



FIGURE 6: A FENCE PROTECTING THE BHER LEARNING CENTRE IN
DADAAB REFUGEE CAMP, KENYA | BY BLAKE SMITH

On Visual Method/ologies & Slowly Walking

As methodological ways of searching, creating, and collecting (what I hope will be) meaningful data, I have practiced visual life writing through various methods, including: near-daily photo walks, rephotography, visual journaling, and creative writing (including poetry, field notes, and written narratives). Practicing photography “every day” and participating in a regular walking practice have helped to generate mini-studies of some local neighborhoods and other (what are to me) important places. These methods have provided regular opportunities to document, re-photograph, and carefully record and observe areas that I live, move through, and walk within (Solnit, 2002).

At times, a noble yet frail four-legged companion (my chocolate Labrador) is by my side on these photo-walks, which are almost meditative; in a way, it is tiny, memorable scenes from our life and daily walks together that I am “writing in pictures.” As an artist, walking slowly with a dog may seem tiresome or dull; however, it has invited an incredible sense of pause, necessary slowness, and an unexpected calm to my process of seeing. *(But, for every moment the shutter clicks, I recognize and sometimes regret it as a moment not spent “in the moment.”)* During the

many years of walking with dogs (I used to have two), I've often had a camera slung on my shoulder and/or an iPhone in my back pocket and found my gaze looking down instead of up, watching where the dogs were walking and to see what drew their furry attention. By routinely traversing the same routes and alleys for days and months on end (sometimes three and four times a day), the commonplace has necessarily become extraordinary, and I am obliged to keep fresh eyes. Always surprised at what we come across on these gentle adventures together, I am regularly inspired by the way the same place will look drastically different at various times of day and with changes in the weather, the light, the season, or even my mood.

Because she is an older dog and we are in no real hurry to cover significant ground, I am limited in my geographic (therefore photographic) movement depending on how far and long we go. Yet, imagination knows no bounds, and I have found that sublime subjects tend to present themselves when you least expect them. At times on these particular kinds of small walks, there is an inherent task at hand to refuse boredom, to remain present, and to look with scrutiny and curiosity in order to notice delicate scenic variations along the way. *(It reminds me of the time and patience I learned to practice when shooting and teaching black and white 35mm film photography: Exposures had to be spot-on, color was understood not by hue but rather in black and white luminescent tone, and you only had 24 (or 36) chances to take single shots, in the high hopes that a rare few might be terrific, worth printing, and had captured your subject as you'd hoped.)* These realizations and "constraints" have done nothing but enhance the project by providing a constant reminder to visually breathe. However, they also shed poignant light on something I never expected when beginning the series: The complexities bound up in a research topic (loss) that is emotionally quite close to home. It has, at times, been difficult and even sad to photograph something I dearly love¹⁰, knowing the photographs

10 My intentions here identify closely with a tender commentary on Angela West's photographs in her series *Angela West: Back Home*, part of a 1996 exhibition entitled *New Photography* held at The High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia (my hometown): *"Through the act of photographing, West instills (this) common scene with new meaning and poignancy, hinting at the emotional currents that run through people's lives-sensations of pleasure and joy but also of nostalgia and loss. Approaching the landscape in this way provides the artist with the most potent metaphor she has for the passage of time. According to West, 'That these photographs may one day provoke pain is an unqualified implication of photographing a person and a place that you love'"* (*New Photography* exhibition guide, 1996). The exhibition also included works by Taryn Simon, Sze Tsung Leong, and Ruth Dussault.

will one day be all that I have left to remember her by. I suppose that is always the case with that which we photograph...

Alternatively, on days when I walk alone and therefore travel farther distances as more of a solo explorer, I wander my way to new spaces not knowing where the day will lead – photographable subjects present themselves unknowingly, and new paths are made by walking forward with the faith that interesting subjects will indeed arise. Some days, one photo is all that I take (like photographer William Eggleston, who often challenged himself to just one shot); on other days or travels abroad, I may take hundreds or thousands¹¹. Therefore, walking and observing with a camera can offer a productive metaphor for cultivating what Irwin (2006) calls “a spiritual and aesthetic currere: a walking pedagogy of self” (p. 80) within the sites we move through as researchers, artists, and human beings. Methods such as visual life writing, rephotography, and regular photo walks suggest alternative ways for registering experience, generating potentially evocative art/data, and archiving the self in a myriad of ways and places. Positioning qualitative methods and artistic responses as key to this study, I place immense value on the creative and reflective art-making process, the beautifully-emergent nature of this style of research, and the unknown as welcome territory (both internally and externally) to explore.

11 In the VMP, many shots were taken (thousands) and just as many were not, for a variety of reasons; few are deleted, and most are printed as small proofs and viewed on contact sheets. Besides iPhone and Instagram photos (some which are edited with filters, etc.), any other post-process edits I have done are normally quite minimal in order to retain original luminance (as if I was shooting film). For all the images that are shot, of course not all become part of this specific project, and not all are shot locally in and around Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (my current home). Because my cameras travel with me almost everywhere I go, the series includes photographs taken (thus far), in addition to Canada, in: the United States (Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Wisconsin, Illinois, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Hawaii), Mexico, Holland, and Kenya. Where the cameras and I may travel next is to be determined...more than once, I have imagined what it might be like to take this project “on the road” (or even “around the world”). A traveling memoirist/memoir of sorts, perhaps others could be invited to join in “writing” their own visual memoirs along the way, addressing narratives as well as counter-narratives. This idea is much-inspired by a project I love: NPR’s StoryCorps (see: <https://storycorps.org>), possibly the largest public oral history project in the United States, soon to go global. This inspired a popular photography assignment I once gave, called Share Your Story: The Visual StoryCorps Project. (Looking back, perhaps that’s where the VMP seed was first planted...).



FIGURES 7 & 8 (DIPTYCH): DELICATE SUBJECTS, FOUND WHILE WALKING
BY BLAKE SMITH

On Ethics in Photographic Research & Practice

A crucial piece to address is that this work is not without its challenges and ethical dilemmas. As researchers, scholars, and civic pedagogues (teachers, artists, community workers), I think it is vital to make public these kinds of concerns, for much can be learned from the things we push up against or find troubling. While I do find great comfort and creative opportunity with the photographic form in terms of aesthetic, affective, and narrative potential, it would be irresponsible to ignore its deeply rooted, highly contested politics - politics (and ways of photographing) that have changed drastically in the digital, online era. Photographic research and practice today certainly offers many great benefits and avenues for visual storytelling and social awareness, but it does not come without its complications: Ethical and moral decisions; public/private lives; questions around representation, privilege, surveillance, access, and human rights; photography's seemingly-unbreakable relationship to social media; consent and permissions; and assumptions about what (or whom) is ok and not ok to photograph are only some of the concerns that come to mind¹².

Susan Sontag (1973/2003) challenges the idea of what truly is “picturesque” and described the voyeuristic, acquisitional, and power-driven capacity of photographs *and photographers* to do possible harm – she alerts us of a possibly tendency to render a kind of image violence by looking through a camera lens and possessing one's subjects, claiming to know them. To some, the photographer may be seen as a voyeur, directly or indirectly preying on his/her subjects through distanced or close observation, moving about various spaces with the permission and access to do so. In my case: equipped with a camera, the privilege of sight, and the physical/political freedom to move about with relative safety and ease (*yet, not always safe nor at total ease*). Admittedly, obvious discomfort has sometimes been caused by the mere

12 These ideas are smartly addressed by many whose work I respectfully gain guidance from in the important conversation around ethics and art. Some of these authors and artists who influence my current understandings include: Jo Aldridge (2012), Mieke Bal (2007), Janet Batsleer (2011), Jamie Joanou (2009), David Levi Strauss (1998), M. Brinton Lykes (2010), Ishiuchi Miyako (2008), Gillian Rose (2012), Fabiola Naguib (2007), David Rieff (2008), Roger Simon (2014), and Susan Sontag (1973/2003). I hope more people continue to write about and open dialogue these important issues in the coming future, and I encourage art teachers to engage in critical, honest discussions about ethics with their students. For photography, the new digital, social media-driven landscape certainly changes the conversation on ethics and art, and I think young people can and should be engaged regularly as contributors and critics in dialogue alongside their teachers.

presence of me with my camera in public spaces as well as private ones. There have been several times where I wanted to take a picture but chose not to, felt that I couldn't (or shouldn't), or was swiftly told no. This has caused some disappointment but certainly invited self reflection into artistic and research intentions, calling me to constantly ponder what kind of ethical values are important and imperative to consider in the VMP. It also begs the question: *Do ethics and decisions change (or need to change) regarding art versus research endeavors, and if so, how so?* As such, I try to keep (and revisit) a list of the things I chose not to photograph or simply did not know how and encourage my photography students to do the same.

Thus, while this overall inquiry privileges the photographic image as an art form, as a creative research investigation it must call attention to camera consciousness and the privilege, ethics, and complications of photography (Bal, 2007; Sontag, 1973/2003) as well as the ethics of memory work within photographic research – what we hope images will show, do, and who they may serve or potentially harm. For arts-based researchers (or any researchers using photography) and teachers of art, these concerns are paramount when positioning our/others' appetite for visual consumption against a desire for poetic (photographic) presence. It seems this is key when participation and/or collaboration in certain kinds of projects/studies invites the lives of others into the work (Aldridge, 2012; Batsleer, 2011; Lykes, 2010). When I start to think about what is photographable and what (or whom) could be photographed as part of this visual life writing project, I feel a resistance as an artist to self-censor yet a desire to understand and respect ethical boundaries – boundaries that, especially in qualitative research, ought to be carefully understood, clearly communicated, respectfully negotiated, contextualized, and made transparent. I suggest that this is why we must talk about the *why* and the *what-ifs* in justifying the work we choose or hope to do. And yet, there will always be more questions than answers, with no single “right” way to approach the subject of ethical practice – except, perhaps, by being transparent about one's decision intentions, or hopes and remaining open to conversations where knowledge may be enlarged and respectful relationships may be maintained instead of stained.

On What I've Learned Thus Far...

Living with it (where a project about your life and the life outside of your project slowly seem to merge into one), I have seen the VMP “grow up” right before my eyes – we have grown together actually. One photo somehow became extended: Inspired by a college photo assignment I was once given and later gave to my high school students, this series itself has

become an “extended image.” Perhaps this could be considered a photographic form of pedagogy that traces the past, cataloguing and reflecting on a teacher’s traveled path to inform the writing of a memoir. As personal, autobiographical documents, I will confess that many of the photographs in the VMP series are honest products of the loneliness that sometimes is graduate school, where near-ritualistic creative enterprises such as everyday photography, mindful walking (Jung, 2014), and visual journaling became necessary – together, they have helped to keep the spirit of learning and the morale of the learner alive. The work also puts into motion “theory to practice” by allowing for an act of “doing” alongside many other related acts of writing, reading, interviewing, teaching, etc. Moving beyond my own understandings, I wonder if this work (specifically the photographs speaking to a sense of loss) may act as a metaphor for education and a process of learning, calling us as educators, artists, and human beings to ask ourselves some valuable questions:

What have we lost, and what have we gained?

What has left us, what (who) are we seeing/not seeing,
and how could we learn to see in new ways?

Where is there decay, loss, or something (someone, some place) left behind?
What might beckon our collective return, to try again,
perhaps with a greater sense of slowness and ethics?

What is the mark (the image, the imprint, the memory) we have made,
are making, or desire to make for the future?

With an impassioned return to hope and possibility,
what might inform or inspire a remarkable sense of vision?

I ask these questions because I think they might offer some potential inroads to pedagogical possibilities and to what art education might be, become, or make possible. If photographs can help to locate sites of mourning, marvel, and madness, perhaps so can pedagogy or other educational/creative endeavors that involve acts of returning and looking back on *what once was* – to reveal *what could be*.

In writing this essay and sharing these photographs, my hope is that its scholarly significance (or why this matters) can be found in its attempts – attempts at visibility, at

vulnerability, at ethically-bound practice, at creativity in an everyday routine act, and at bringing emotion and memory into conversation with photography. I have tried to consider not just research “findings” but more so the evolutionary process of arriving at and making sense of an artistic research agenda: one that is guaranteed to be flawed, that must be flexible yet rigorous, and is certainly something to be learned from, whatever the end results. By doing work at the intersections of art practice and research method, it reveals what is possible from engaging in the study, making, and research of art as educational (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Sullivan, 2006) and experiential (Dewey, 1934; O’Donoghue, 2015). *Both* pay attention to the act and art of thoughtful observation and *both* appreciate the emergent and nuanced qualities of arts-based educational research.



FIGURE 9: WAITING... | BY BLAKE SMITH

On An Ongoing Attempt...Where From Here?

In terms of what's next for the VMP, I view this body of work as an unfinished, ever-shifting process of visual collecting – the fact that I still have questions and the desire to keep taking pictures signifies a journey of inquiry that has begun and evolved, but is not over yet. The end of the study will likely be the closing of one pictorial narrative and the beginning of the next. The longer this project continues, I am faced with the difficult questions of: *Is writing a life, my life, even possible? And when (how?) do I stop?* For me, this is art and research in pursuit of deep meaning, and it is a result of teaching, learning, looking, and being alive. A “fluid of contradictions,” this project is in many ways, my “bitter milk” (Grumet, 1988). As a kind of unexplainable longing *to feel* with and through the photograph, this project is a prolonged visual statement from a woman who teaches art – and it is her wish, her effort to hold on and let go at the same time. We see excerpts from her photo diary about “the everyday” but it inherently fails to include every sadness and joy and lived moment - everything that, in real life, might be considered *the real diary*. And yet, the work, the journey, continues...it must. At least for now.

While the VMP strives to locate and develop an awareness of beauty in the banal, it is also imperfect and certainly full of subjectivities, assumptions, and limitations. It is an incomplete record of one person's lived (photographed) experience that cannot avoid interpretation or judgment, and it does not seek such avoidance. By writing about the images and process instead of letting them stand alone, without context, I likely offer up and inevitably shape a certain perception or understanding. The intention is not to define, box in, or over-describe; instead, I hope to draw attention to the importance of artistic practice to this research effort and highlight what a photographic ritual deeply anchored to one's own life and way of seeing has brought forth: a deliberate slowing down, a hopefully unique way of archiving the self via an alternative research art-text, a shortening of the distance and proximity between a photographer and her surroundings – and most of all, a photographic memoir that captures (what might be) otherwise-unremembered “picturesque” scenes from a fragile time I wish to always remember.

Until the VMP takes its last photographic breath, I plan to continue the search for memory – by taking slow walks and looking closely while living this inquiry with an enchanted sense of wonder, curiosity, and hope from behind the camera lens – one shutter-click, one sunrise, one heartbeat, and one “everyday” at a time.

Postscript | February 2016

This essay was composed in March of 2015. In the spirit of wanting to capture a bracketed moment in time, like a child catching a lightning bug in her mason jar at dusk, this essay reflects the temporal nature of both memoir and photography. It speaks with poetry and frankness to the fleeting wings of time passing. Seasons turn, years go by, and countless meaningful experiences leave their imprints upon our lives. In some cases, memory is marked (and we become shaped) by moments which are difficult yet inevitable – moments when bodies fail, hearts break, and compassionate goodbyes are necessary. Therefore, I dedicate this essay to two brave and noble four-legged companions whom I carry with me in heart and spirit: my dogs Kaylah (1999-2016) and Sandi (2000-2014). We gain an education in many ways; undoubtedly, my life and art have been greatly enriched from sharing their company all of these wonderful, memorable years.

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