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To Photograph Without Taking Any Pictures — Notes on the act of photographing

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This text is an experimental amalgamation of written reflections made in response to periods of notographing, the practical exploration of the processes involved in making photographs, without making any photographs. By performing all the actions and processes of photographing but having no film in the camera and, thereby, not taking any

pictures, I am removing the predominant role of the image within photography, to focus attention upon the performative habits, behaviours, choices and decisions that go into the production of photographs.

What should I remember? Does the act of photographing supplant memory? Perhaps I should concentrate on the processes and habits around the photographing – where I am, what I choose to look at or ignore, how I hold my camera, the sounds and movements in the environment, the feeling, the sensations of walking in the cold on my way to catch a train to work.

Through the act of notographing, of exploring the processes of photography without producing any pictures, photography has been turned around. Usually, there is a weight while photographing, of having to work through and show a quantity of pictures; it embodies the responsibility of bringing the whole performance to fruition in a further act of exposure. Now, without film in the camera, the weight is immediate. The work lasts here and now in the few seconds that I respond to stimuli and then look through the camera. The usual, physical beginning of a photograph is now the end of the act, when the shutter completes its tiny acknowledgement. The record is now written rather than a picture. However, this record is still necessary as a mediation with the other.

And yet, are conventions and habits, which dictate our behaviour, the real mediating presence? Photography, as mediating presence, isn't a camera between me and the world, nor a picture between the world and an audience; it is me choosing to use a dated film camera, photographing in black and white, embracing movement and blur, enhancing the contrast in my pictures, being mindful of the space I am in to avoid too many people and so on. It is the aesthetic preferences, theoretical alignments and practical considerations that allow me a more purposeful and responsible engagement with the world.

Should I describe the things I pass? The man walking on the other side of the road – the vapour trail burning in the blue ice sky – the leaves crisp with frost and autumn.

Spending time in not making pictures sometimes feels foolish, sometimes anxiety ridden. I could spend the time just thinking and writing – that is, after all, what I end up with at the end of one of these sessions. *But the world!* If ever there was an answer to this, surely it must be *The World!* It is there, *being*, in full presence, and I am a part of it. Sitting, thinking, writing and wondering will teach me very little about engaging with the world – with myself – *I have to act.*

Acting like a photographer – this feels wrong. I'm not trying to act like a photographer. I'm not trying to look the part or fulfil a role. I'm consciously engaging in and with the performance of photography. Each of these sessions is an attempt to gain further insight into the photographic act. And today has reminded me of that.

The emphasis on the performative negates the central impulse of photography to record, concentrating instead on my routines of composition, rituals of movement through space, idealized mental models of the imagery I make and philosophical considerations of the purpose of photography. With the actions of photography pushed to the fore, I can

locate habits that have become ingrained over more than twenty years of photographing to consider their role, value and meaning. To capture these reflections as immediately as possible, I endeavour to produce written interpretations in the time following a period of notographing based on the unrefined notes that I make during the session.

Has it been a more forceful reminder because of the lack of pictures? Has the lightness of the act reduced the sense of mediation, of there being something between me and this street, these trees?

Habits of photographing: carrying a camera, looking at the things around me, moving through my everyday spaces, identifying the subjects I usually photograph and those I don't. It's a choice between making a picture and not making a picture. The world has been divided.

The impulse to make a picture, then, this miniscule period of intense enthusiasm, coming before any decision to release the shutter, is the result of habitual actions. The whole moment resides in the potential for something to strike – a pre-conceived construction based on my interpretation of cultural and aesthetic frames. As soon as it strikes, it is overtaken by choice and decision, further habits, constructions, and restrictions, a combination of which allow or prevent the picture being made. But it is these same factors that allow the moment to exist in the first place, the whole becoming a revolving process of influence, impetus and impulse that is eventually habituated and unconsciously enacted.

I have passed through this space hundreds of times, often while photographing, yet today, renewed in my enthusiasm for notographing, I have seen the place renewed also; have seen things in it for the first time; have seen, in a different light, things that I always see, and feel both myself and the place rejuvenated.

What constitutes the act of photography? The simplest answer is me, holding my camera. Every other aspect of my photographing is also an everyday activity – walking around, looking at things, considering subjects and compositions, recognizing my habitual aesthetic interests, wondering about what I'm doing, and so on, are constants in life. Carrying a camera, though, and being conscious of having it, holding it and feeling its presence as part of my presence, constitutes an option – to make a picture or not.

This, I believe, is the essence of photography. Everything else leads to, encourages, follows, questions and problematizes the choice one makes in the face of this option.

Am I thinking less when I notograph? Or am I getting used to doing it? I'm more grounded in the process and need less reflection to work with it. I was, without a hint of negativity, going through the motions. I was simply photographing.

This is all photography.