

PROVINCETOWN

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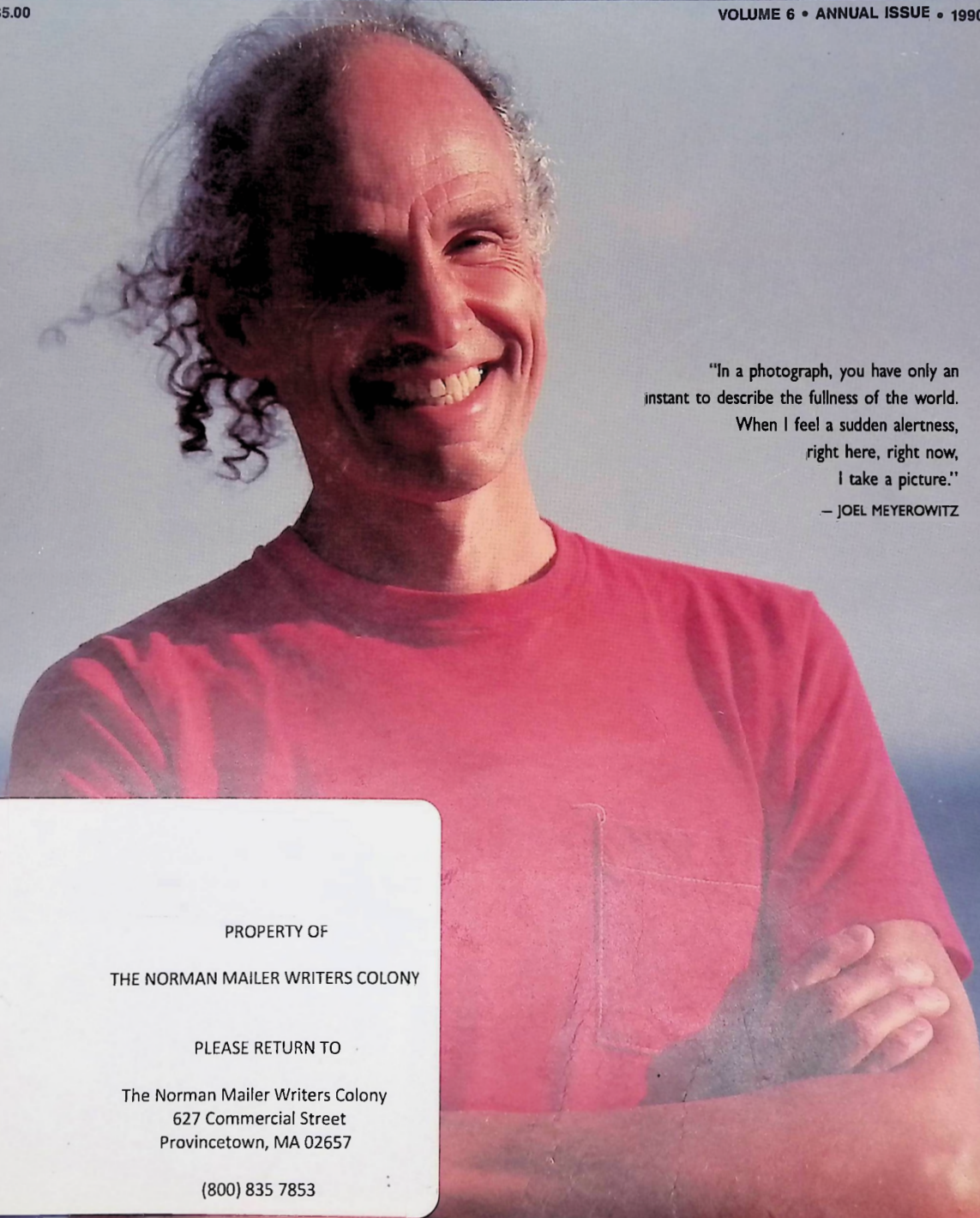
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"In a photograph, you have only an instant to describe the fullness of the world.

When I feel a sudden alertness,
right here, right now,
I take a picture."

— JOEL MEYEROWITZ

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Joel Meyerowitz

True Colors



A Provincetown Arts Interview

This interview is based on a series of conversations between Agathe Amzallag and Joel Meyerowitz which took place over the course of several days late last summer. Sitting on Meyerowitz's bay-side deck, facing the sea, they talked while the weather changed, the tide came in and out, and August turned into September.

PROVINCETOWN ARTS: You first came here in 1976, after many summers in New York City. What provoked your visit?

JOEL MEYEROWITZ: I was looking for a change of locale. I had been photographing in 35 mm color on the streets of New York and I had begun to ask questions about the way the images were being described by the film. I increased the size of my camera from a small to a medium size format, but it was an odd sized tool, not useful enough for me. I thought if I needed to put a camera on a tripod I might as well get the biggest camera I could. Suddenly I had an 8 by 10, which didn't feel right for city pictures. It weighed 25 pounds and required a tripod. It was so slow, I needed to come to a slow place. My good friend, Murray Reich, knew that my work was in transition. He suggested I come to the Cape. I came as a street photographer used to working quickly. I found myself here in a meditative place with a slow instrument. It was that junction of sensibility and the tool which produced those early Cape photographs. For me, it became a new form. I wanted bigger images that would describe things more cohesively, more fully and roundly, sometimes too much. With a small camera, you use speed as a property. Part of what small-camera photography is about is continuous experience. Rather than making several images and turning to the next, the big camera is about making a single picture carefully.

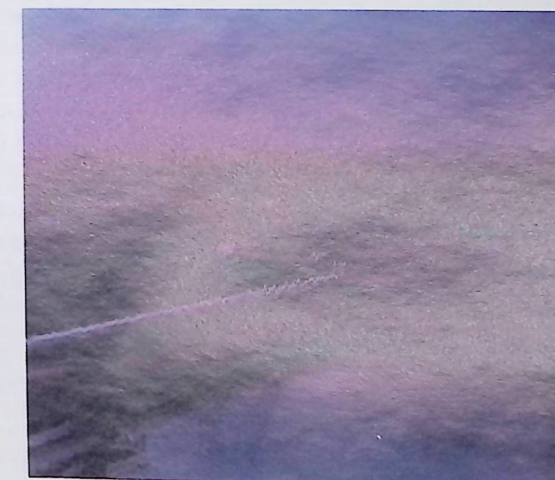
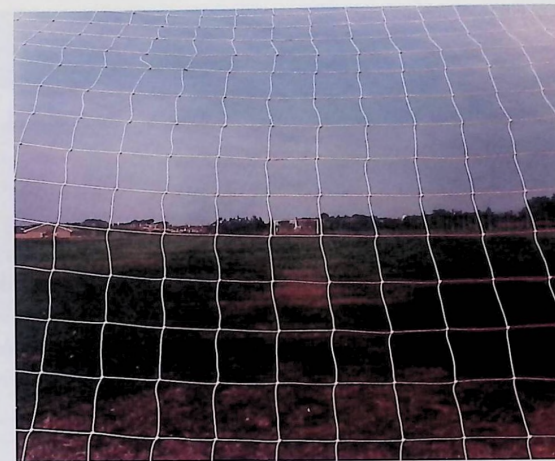
PA: When you refer to "description" in a photograph, what do you mean?

JM: I don't only mean the cold factual accounting of things in a frame. I really mean the sensation I get from things, their surface and color, their connotative qualities, my memory of them in other conditions. When I committed myself to color exclusively, I was responding to a need for greater description. Color plays itself out along a richer band of feelings, with more wavelengths, more radiance, more sensation.

PA: When you stood in front of the bay, did you feel any special call?

JM: I spent the first month with my family in the Truro countryside, in a green setting, so I had no experience of the bay as we know it here. Late that first summer, we came

Photographs by Joel Meyerowitz



Editor's Note:

JOEL MEYEROWITZ has been a contributor to **Provincetown Arts** since its inception in 1985. His cover for the inaugural issue, a 24-page tabloid, was an artist's studio, showing a soft Cape light falling on a jumble of assorted pastels, piled like fruit on a table. The artist, Vivian Bower, was not present in the photograph. For the next two tabloid issues, featuring the studio of Fritz Bultman, on the cover of one, and the shared studio of Nora Speyer and Sideo Fromboluti, on the other, Meyerowitz made photographs in which the spirit of the artist appeared invisibly in his or her own studio. In the case of Fritz Bultman, the artist had died, and on his studio floor, swept clean, stood two easels, one empty, the other holding a large blank sheet of drawing paper, inviting the reader to stand in the place of the absent artist. When **Provincetown Arts** consolidated into its present format, with a color cover, a decision was made to feature, not the artist's studio, but the artist in person. In suit, Meyerowitz captured telling color portraits of Norman Mailer, Robert Motherwell, and Annie Dillard.

As an annual, **Provincetown Arts**, like Christmas, comes but once a year. Something about the sluggishness of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the invention of photography, in 1839, inspired us to recognize at last that Meyerowitz himself was an ideal cover subject. His book of color photographs, **Cape Light**, has endured since its publication in 1978, becoming a sourcebook in contemporary photography, with its new appreciation of

color. In a catalogue essay for the anniversary exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, "On the Art of Fixing a Shadow," Colin Westerbeck remarks that Meyerowitz first gained widespread attention when he switched from black and white photography to color landscape work. Observing that "color photography is currently functioning as a separate genre," Westerbeck elaborates, "Color has always been a troublesome aspect of perception in Western culture. In metaphysical philosophy, it has usually been taken to be a secondary attribute, one that cannot be supposed to inhere in external realities, but is, rather, something that the mind imposes on such reality. Only in the context of the greater subjectivism that has characterized postwar photography, perhaps, could color eventually come to be seen as a viable art form."

As a "secondary attribute," color in photography was like prettiness in a pastel, ephemeral in its surface and saccharine in its sentiment. If Meyerowitz' black and white street photographs concentrated on bringing into the photographic frame elements that aspired to leap away from the edges, then his color photographs concentrated on showing the momentary appearance of something that was ordinarily hidden behind the lush color. One photograph from **Cape Light**, "Provincetown Porch," shows a bolt of lightning cracking the night sky, the white fracture a corner detail that reveals, at that precise moment, the sudden fact that the world possesses color, even at night.

to live on a back street in Provincetown. We would go to the bay for an hour, but the tide would be too high to sit at the beach or too low to swim. Then we were invited to breakfast at a house on the bay. That day, there was a sailboat race near Long Point, some hot air balloons drifted by, a woman stood perfectly still atop a stone jetty, out on the water, and began to sing opera. I realized that if you live on the water you have access to those events, both natural and human. You watch the change in weather. You begin to feel an ache for the bay. The next summer I rented the first house in Provincetown, and watched the bay from the porch. Beyond fascination, I don't think I had any ideas except the need to have more of it. Now, after years of watching the bay, I have feelings and ideas about what it means to me.

PA: What is it that is so special about this place?

JM: There is a special quality that the Cape has which brings me into harmony here. Coming from New York City where there is dissonance, agitation, crazy energy, where the city pumps up some sense of our significance because we see ourselves in manmade surroundings, on glittering streets against buildings, where we have the sense of things being permanent and solid. I come here to lose my sense of things being solid. The bay and the sky and the sand bars seem immeasurable, without permanence or solidity. I feel I am watching time melt. I'm just passing through. I feel incredibly small. Sitting here on the deck, or on top of a dune, we see a figure out there, and the figure is the size of a dot, hardly a human being. These tiny little figures walking on a sandbar are, to me, a recognition of the real scale of things, human scale, the vastness of the world, in which any individual is insignificant in comparison. What I love about this place is how transported and in harmony I become. It's as if my heartbeat is slowing down, and my connection to things is deeper because of it.

PA: What is it about scale and space on the Cape that fascinates you?

JM: I saw this one day as I was watching my family and friends in the bay. I looked out, and saw them standing in the water up to their ankles, so calmly. They were in and of the elements, small particles under the vast sky and the

endless horizon line. The water was very still. So still they were joined to their reflection. Each of their bodies was precisely described by color. It was a warm, late August afternoon, it was great to just stand in the water. The rest of the year we are bound up in elevators and subways and buses, the cages of urban life. We roar for freedom. Now here they were just tiny people wearing some colored shreds on their bodies and standing in the water. Even though they are sophisticated human beings, they seemed suddenly primitive, aquatic creatures. They were only going to be there for a moment. But they extended that moment because they were loving it. The reason I went to make a photograph wasn't the physical beauty alone but my sense of how transitory the moment was, and how fragile we all are.

PA: Isn't the essential question about knowing when to take a picture?

JM: You feel something, a sudden alertness, right here, right now! In a photograph you have only this instant to describe the fullness of the world. It is not a painted version in which I emphasize some things, leave others out, shift the colors, and bring myself to it day after day until I describe the fullness of my emotional connection. I think of Hopper, here on the Cape, and the build-up of energy over weeks and weeks of making a painting, every day having to come back to the painting to find his way again. A photographer is in a slightly more helpless position. I take the world in infinitesimally small and instantaneous bites. Something happens. I take a picture. I react before thought. Click! Your first understanding is intuitive. Later, the reading of the contact sheets brings you closer to what might be called your ideas. I look at prints and say, "Oh, that's what I'm interested in."

PA: Can you say something about how you read a photograph?

JM: On the printed page, reading prose, you start at the upper left and read it in a formal way, line after line. The lines that are laid down by the writer have an underlying form. There is some meaning that the author is taking you toward. There's some understanding that you're going to have at the end of it. But with a photograph, the viewer is free to enter anywhere they wish. They can start in the center and work outward in circles. They can hop across the image in an erratic manner. They can start with a shadow that falls across the bottom, then work their way to the sky. In that

sense, a photograph is like the world. The camera seems an appropriate tool to interact with the fragmentation of the modern world because it tears a little piece out of the whole in a fraction of a second. It is amazing that a blink might hold meaning, but it may be that revelation occurs in a fraction of a second.

PA: De Kooning once said about art, "Content is tiny. Very tiny, a glimpse." One doesn't read a photograph as linear prose, but rather as poetry.

JM: There are many layers. The reader has to be willing to give and the photographer has to be capable of yielding. In drawing, there is the notion of making a circle by not completing it, by leaving a space with the connection implied. The eye completes the circle. That's what I mean about the photograph being entered into by the viewer. That open-ended unfinished quality is what the human being who makes the picture brings to it. Something willing to be left unsaid, unfinished. The formal properties of the frame shouldn't be used to fix things. They are being fixed by the photograph. By putting a border, the photographic frame, around the flow of experience, the photographer tries to suspend in it the flow of life in the most open way, rather than to seal it. The image, though it is being stopped in time, should maintain a sense of time's fluidity.

PA: Listening to you speak about reading a photograph, I think of a remark of Moholy-Nagy, who said, "The illiterate of the future will be the man who does not know how to take a photograph."

JM: It's easy to take a photograph. You press a button.

PA: When you teach, is that what you tell students?

JM: I tell them that if they learn to pay attention carefully enough and to be mindful of their own instincts, they might reveal something necessary to their own growth, and to their understanding of what the world's signals are, for the world is full of signs. Photography is a demanding and difficult form, yet worthy and profound. It takes the endurance of a tough personality to stick with it. It takes time to see the evolution of one's work. That is done through the discipline of working and the reading of the work, the discipline of doing it over long periods of time and believing that the work will teach you something

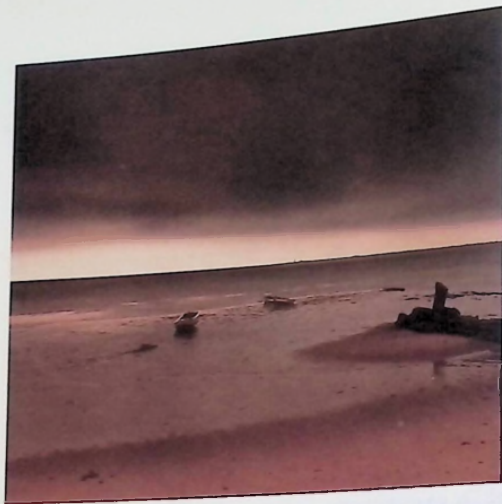
about the medium, about yourself, and about life.

PA: From looking at your recent photographs, in your continuing series about the bay, I see an intense communion, as if you are waiting for something to happen.

JM: That's true. On a day like today, we can definitely see that the water is water and the sky is the sky. Yet there are times other than today when, carrying the memory of this clear division by the horizon, suddenly we can't see the distinction. Some atmospheric delicacy has occurred that makes the two bind together. We disbelieve our eyes. We feel we are in this globe of light. Some of the light is liquid, some of the light is air, but it's hard to determine what is what. We are convinced they are merging. That joining is becoming, for me, a photographic resource. Sometimes it's just a detail, the way the tide inches in, creeping onto the sandbar. Maybe the tiny rustling of the water surface and a little etching of the light. There is no grand display. I am photographing what does not call out to be seen. I'm looking for the moment between moments. This bowl, which we are sitting on the edge of, is filling up again, and the way it fills up today is different from the way it filled up yesterday. This little puddle is emptying and filling, like the heart pump of the earth beating right in front of me, and I watch it. The best moments have a sense of deep calm, as if I were so yielding to the forces in front of me that my sense of self is united with them. I'm just standing where I'm standing. I feel the sand, see the water, and there is no conceptualizing. I'm not searching for a good photograph. I would say that the search is to have that feeling of completion again. Walt Whitman says, "I give. I don't give a lecture or charity. When I give, I give of myself."

PA: There must be times when you say, "This doesn't belong — this is not a picture."

JM: Yes, there are. It's true there are things that leave me empty. There's also, on the other side of that, the special sound, that some pictures make, which is the call of the photograph. Sometimes I don't quite understand a picture, and I think, "Did I make that? How did I know to make that? I was there! I stood in front of it. I recognized something in it. As I look at it redescribed in the photograph, I see what I photographed, newly, as if I had in my hand a magical key. Its oddness, its unfamiliarity, for me suggests that there's a next level. That's the new place to go. I think every



artist is searching for a way of pushing open their work so that they grow into the next level of consciousness, next place of growth, and you never know where it's going to come from. If you make the same pictures all the time, you'll never grow. You'll be on a great plateau skimming along, never changing. That's the easiest thing. It's much harder to push through the repetition to some place that's riskier, less known.

PA: Is that what art expresses?

JM: If art is life—I don't mean life that we live—I mean life. If the work of art stays alive each time you come to it, it speaks to you freshly. That's all. I don't make a distinction between good art and bad art. To me it's either art, or it's not art. And it's art when it has life, and it gives you something to come away with, something to respond to, and think about, at any level. It could be the tiniest little sound coming out of the lower left hand corner of any painting, or behind any sculpture, and suddenly you say, "Ah." You're seized by the recognition of something you haven't seen before. You recognize the unknown and you open up in that moment to some new level of experience. That's what art can give you!

PA: Yes, a moment of silence.

JM: Exactly. It produces that silence which is awesome. When we are in a holy place, when we are in a great natural environment, or when we hear the first notes of a work of music that carries us away, the silence speaks variants in one's self. That silence is full.

PA: What do you want from a photograph?

JM: Pure image. No captions. I aspire to make photographs in which you look, and suddenly you're in, you are swallowed by the photograph. The surface of a photograph has almost no solidity. The paper is thin as a hair. To be able to hold a piece of this paper in your hand and look until you fall through the rabbit hole, like Alice, down into the thing itself, is a remarkable power for a static image.

PA: What do you experience when you crouch behind a camera, hooded in darkness, peering at the world through the 8 by 10 inch theater?

JM: One of the joys of making these photographs, using the camera I use, is that I see the world upside down. I am discon-

nected from content and context, free, loose in the world. The sky is the ground, the ground is the sky. Gravity has lost its pull. We stand in the world on our two feet, feeling planted. We sense gravity. We get our orientation from the horizon line. When I go under the cloth, after I adjust to the dark, I find the proportions have altered. Momentarily, I don't know where I am. I don't have to come out from behind the cloth and look to get my bearings. I just believe in what I see on the surface of the glass. All I have to do is find my balance, like dancing.

PA: Balance, in what sense?

JM: The beauty of dance is seeing the dancer somewhere between finding balance and losing balance. Good dancers who dance with abandon seem to be giving themselves to the form. They never look clumsy. Losing balance is not about clumsiness, but about going to the edge of one's capabilities, almost the point where one could just as easily fall. That they stay upright and carry the movement with grace and purity is what makes it dance. They have so much discipline, they can afford to abandon themselves. That's where their truth is. Making a photograph is in some ways like dancing in that you are seeking a balance, some harmony. You receive the forces at play in the world, and if you move with them, to the edge of what you know, you find balance.

PA: Tell me, we were talking about the landscape, about the light, about the sea, but when you see people, when do you feel that connection — when do you feel the call of the soul of someone?

JM: That, I think, is the essential question. Whether it's the presence of a place or a human presence, the call is simply stepping into a pool of well being, a moment of harmony. Next to each moment, there is a moment on either side. Infinite slices of time are available to all of us. If you hesitate for a second, that moment is gone, less than a second, because we are talking about the thinnest slice of recognition. What's necessary is to be in touch with the moment. Suddenly you are aware that you are feeling alive, right now. Your life and the flow of the world are connected. And, at that moment you're open to the experience, you put a camera between you and it and let it swallow what you think you are experiencing.

PA: What is the moment you seek in photographing a person?

JM: When they let out their breath. When they let it out, I can see them as shining examples of themselves. Their spirit is shining. People do become shy or withdrawn or somehow not quite themselves. They may wonder what to do with their hands, as if their arms were eight feet long and incredibly heavy. My way is towards freeing them from self-consciousness. That's where the truth is. The release of energy, the giving over of the self to the space between us gives me the moment to make a picture. I watch for some unfolding of their being, some split-second free fall. I hold them with my voice, with a line of encouragement, not telling them how to pose or shape themselves, but just addressing them until they expose themselves. If I don't feel open, I don't make a photograph.

PA: Would you say you direct people when you take their portrait?

JM: I would rather the direction, if any, be through the most subtle influence. If someone does not know what to do, I will do three or four things while I'm talking to them. I'll fold my hands across my chest. I'll mirror their own leaning movement and suggest something to their unconscious. They have to find their way, but I won't tell them how.

PA: As a young man in New York, you worked briefly as an art director for an ad agency. One day you went on a shoot and by accident watched Robert Frank at work. The next week you had quit your job and begun photographing. What did you photograph?

JM: There seems to be only one location, Fifth Avenue. That's the boulevard, the Champs Elysees. That's the spine of New York, where all its intelligence and fashion and energy coalesce. When I first began photographing, actually the very first day after I quit my job and went out on the street with a camera, I went to Fifth Avenue. I had no idea there was a history of Fifth Avenue as a haunt for photographers. I went because it excited me. I found myself walking with the crowd, being swallowed up by it. Occasionally I would see something, a hand reaching out to touch another person's shoulder, or the way several people coming down the street, separate from each other, would appear inexplicably held together. When you put a frame around them, there is an energy of potential meaning that comes from their joining. That is the photographic moment! That became my daily training. I went out every day for more

than 12 years from '62 to about '74, with a few breaks when I was living in Europe or traveling. I'd walk down Fifth Avenue from 59th Street to 34th Street, walk back up to 59th, go into the park, and come back down Fifth. I would go at lunch hour and during the after work period, when the street was alive with people. In the course of those years I met and kept company with Garry Winogrand and Tod Papageorge, two other photographers who felt Fifth Avenue was the stream with the best fish.

PA: There is no collection of your black and white street photographs. Why not?

JM: I've been working on it a long time, and I have yet to bring it together in a satisfying book form. The alignment of images that would give it a serious statement of purpose has eluded me. When I first began to photograph with a small camera on the streets of America, I was yearning to add my voice to the work of Robert Frank and Walker Evans.

PA: While you have continued to make photographs on the Cape, you have also spent the last several years photographing cities, especially St. Louis and Atlanta. The contrast must be instructive.

JM: I love cities. To me, they're like nature. They're wild!

PA: In one photograph of a new construction site in Atlanta, large trees have been cut to stumps. I sense your anger.

JM: These five gigantic healthy trees are like elephants that have been cut off at the ankles. Their feet are planted in the ground and the elephants have been carried away, for what? In this frame they stand as if on the proscenium of a stage, while coming on stage left is this 50 story building and its brothers. And they're coming. What's going to fall in the onslaught, implied in this picture, are all those trees and all those little buildings, people's homes, and simple streets and gardens. They'll all fall just so some aggressive corporations can put up more buildings. There are enough buildings! There is a whole downtown Atlanta. Instead of continuing to build where buildings already exist, they assault the neighbor-

hoods and the natural environment. They ruthlessly cut down trees that are our ecological partners. We say, oh, we can sacrifice this tree or that tree but we'll preserve the forests. Meanwhile this green belt of ours is being ravaged. Another unnecessary structure goes up, and the two story building and the tree go down, along with our sense of human scale.

PA: Do you have any hope that



"These gigantic healthy trees are like elephants that have been cut off at the ankles. Their feet are planted in the ground and the elephants have been carried away, for what? — just so some aggressive corporations can put up more buildings."

photography can cure a social condition?

JM: It can point a finger. I feel a need to turn my energy that way. It may be part of my aging process. In representing an American trauma, Atlanta seemed to stand for all cities. Although I was commissioned to photograph the urban environment, I could not celebrate the building boom. I found myself on the attack. I think I am photographing the truth of what our country looks like right now. All of that American frontier energy, the explorer energy, becomes the developer energy, and is turning inward. The frontier becomes the city. Cities are being overwhelmed, overtaken in some way. I think that needs to be

photographed. We all have something to say about it. All those ambitious projects that anger everybody in New York, the skyscrapers being built on the edge of Central Park, blocking our sunlight in the park, well, that's happening everywhere. It pains me. I'm making pictures that measure my feelings. I feel compassion for the destruction of the city in the name of building it.

PA: Can you photograph in foreign countries?

JM: I've photographed abroad in a lot of places, but since I don't go back to the same places, I feel I have only skimmed the surface. My work is American. You wear the culture that you grow up in. It is your skin, your suit. Gestures, inflections, the subtlest of patterns is meaningful. Abroad, there is a charm to everyday life, but the reading may be wrong. If you're an American and you go to Texas, you watch Texans more closely than a European with cowboys on his mind. Within one's culture, you read deeper. You go back and look again and again.

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