

Photo Developing Volume III

STUDYING PHOTOGRAPHY
A Survival Guide

For Nathan

Douglas Holleley PhD

CLARELLEN

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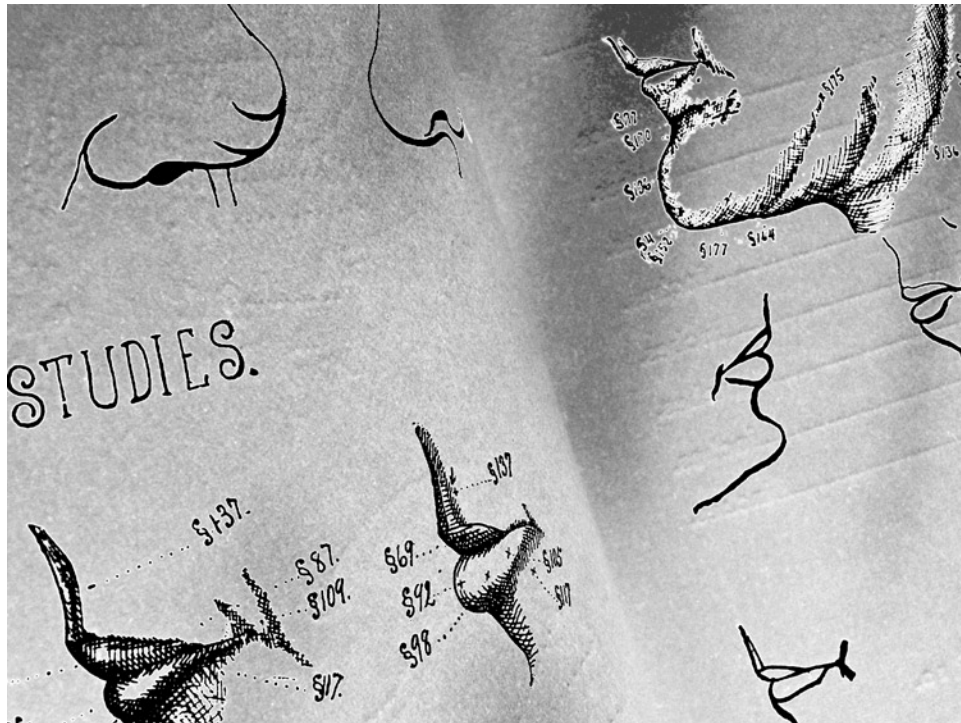
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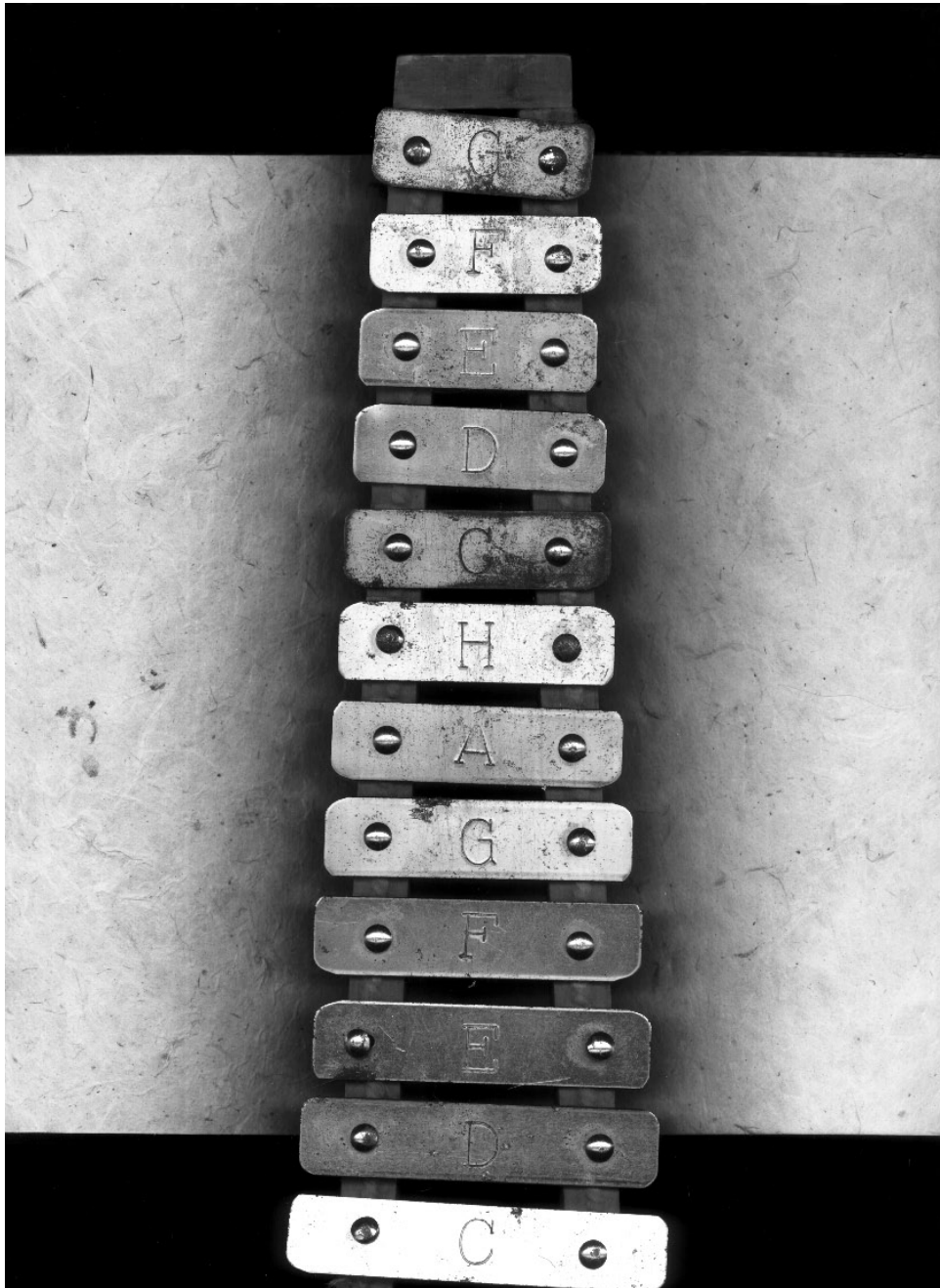
And so our studies begin. This image is from the author's book, Secrets of the Spread, Rochester, NY: 2005. The original subject of the image is of an illustration in Descriptive Mentality from the Head, Face and Hand by Holmes W. Merton. Philadelphia: David McKay Publisher, 1899.

INTRODUCTION

This book will assist students in understanding many of the developmental issues that underpin the study of photography. It will also be of use to graduate students contemplating careers as teachers, not only because of the photographic skills and attitudes it addresses but also because the book discusses, as a matter of necessity, many embedded assumptions and practices that are intrinsic to the educational process itself. For similar reasons it will also be of assistance to others, who may not (yet) be formally enrolled in a course of study.

Every assignment, lesson plan, and academic structure represents powerful, embedded value systems. These are seldom overtly expressed yet at the same time they deeply influence the way photography is perceived and learned. In the first essay we will look at some of these structures and processes that combine to form a *Hidden Curriculum*.

The remaining essays are intended to help the student successfully negotiate the many hoops and hurdles that accompany the study of photography in an academic environment.



Opposite: A direct scan of a xylophone with its own hidden curriculum. In this case, the previously unknown musical key of "H." From the author's book, Paper, Scissors and Stone. Woodford, NSW: Rockcorry, 1995.

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

*Thank Heavens for perversity.
Otherwise we couldn't count on anything!*

In this essay we will examine certain outcomes that to a large degree are a function of the way photography is taught in universities and colleges. They can, in accumulation, form a *Hidden Curriculum*. You will observe that many of these items are a function of using 35mm photography as the basic learning tool. As digital cameras become accepted in the curriculum, some if not all of these assumptions may be questioned and/or eliminated. However, even this new technology runs the risk of being employed within a paradigm based on conventions and assumptions derived from 35mm practice. The point being that as a result of these and other factors, students acquire unstated skills and values, often by accident. Some of these are counter-productive, others are helpful. Some are even wonderful.

- Over-shooting
- Incremental Progress
- Arbitrary Hierarchies
- Episodic Effort and Growth
- The Ways of Academia
- Subtle Influence
- Fortuitous Side Effects

To each in turn:

OVER-SHOOTING

Students are taught, and subsequently come to learn, that to make a “good” image it is necessary to expose many, many images. The corollary is that only one image per roll (or digital session) is going to be any good!

It is a fact that making a variety of photographs from a variety of viewpoints can increase one’s chance of obtaining a successful image. But the obvious trap is the implied admission of chance into the image-making process. In saying this I am not arguing that chance is a bad thing—often the surprises on a roll of film are the most satisfying. However, an over-reliance on a “shot-gun” approach does little to promote thoughtful growth. In fact the direct opposite can be the case. All too often the temptation exists to simply blast off many images in the hope that one or two may work.

Certainly it can feel good to say, “I shot five rolls over the weekend.”* However, if these five rolls were exposed thoughtlessly and with little consideration for the quality of light, then there is every chance that not one of the frames so made is usable. When I was at graduate school one of my fellow students once made the observation that, “activity is not necessarily work.” I am not arguing for a situation where it is sufficient to go out into the world and make one or two images—far from it. I am simply saying that quantity without thoughtfulness may well be inferior to 20, even a dozen, well-considered exposures. Yet there are even more dire consequences than obtaining 150 or so unusable images. Of these the most disastrous is the effect that such a practice can have on your thinking when it comes time to select images to print.

You will recall in the summary (in italics above) that the corollary of the “shot-gun” approach is the thought that as a result it is unlikely that there will be more than one, maybe

** It is worthwhile, for a moment, to consider the use of the verb “to shoot” when describing the act of photographing. This word is intrinsically offensive and aggressive. Instead consider how your attitude toward photography changes when you use other verbs to describe this act. How different is it to make a photograph, expose a photograph, or even permit a photograph. It is an interesting exercise to consciously remove the word “shoot” from your vocabulary altogether when talking about photography. If you can do so you will be surprised how foreign, and indeed, distasteful it is when others use it without thought. For more discussion on this notion see the author’s book, Your Assignment: Photography. Rochester, NY: Clavellen. 2009.*

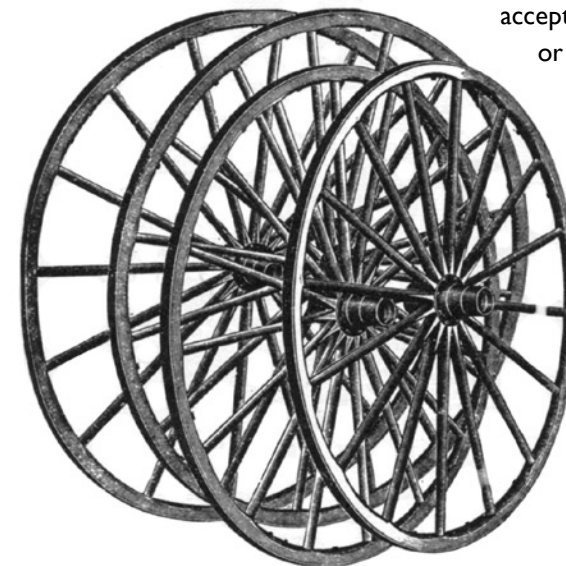
Note: According to Juan Eduardo Cirlot in his wonderful book, A Dictionary of Symbols, (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1962) multiplicity represents the farthest point from the Source of all things and hence is negative in character. Consider this when you are next tempted to blast off “a few rolls.” Image below from The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog. Chicago, IL: 1902.

two images on any one roll of film worthy of printing and/or further thought. This is a pernicious notion but is surprisingly difficult to shed. Because the practice of highly selective editing is so necessary if one “shoots” a large number of images, the thought begins to take shape that it would be virtually impossible to expose a roll of film wherein each image, or a large proportion therein, has validity. Even when this does happen (and it does happen surprisingly often) there is often great resistance to accepting this outcome as having any merit.

Reasons vary; it can seem like cheating, it is statistically impossible, it is not what is being asked for by the teacher, it is too easy. None of these excuses (more properly perceptual and/or cognitive blindness) have any real weight. They are simply a function of the *Hidden Curriculum*.

Often I have seen examples of wonderful visual interactions with the world that are sustained through entire rolls of film—and as often as not I have watched the student painfully attempt to find the image that is “the one,” or “the best.” Even when reassured that all are of interest (and indeed all, even if of the same object, scene or subject, are different to each other) it can often take the student weeks, even an entire semester and sometimes never, to

accept with grace the gift that he or she has presented to him—or herself. This graphically shows just how ingrained certain attitudes can become, and how little direct (conscious) effort is needed to teach, learn or unlearn them.



INCREMENTAL PROGRESS

Students learn to give themselves feedback in a series of hierarchical steps, especially when using 35mm photography.

Stop to think what the shape of your photography learning experience would be if there were no 35mm cameras or no digital cameras. Instead, consider how different the experience would be if you learned photography using only a 4"x5" camera. Would you take this behemoth out into the world and blast off 30 frames? Would you then make a set of proof sheets, discard 29 of the images, proof print the remaining frame, do the same thing again for the remaining weeks of the semester, and then and only then, with a week or so to go, set about making a set of "exhibition quality" prints for the final assessment? Pretty unlikely! More likely you would make a smaller number of images, print each one carefully, and slowly but surely acquire a respectable number of prints as you put each finished print into a box for safekeeping and reference.

An essential part of the *Hidden Curriculum* in most photography courses is a process where the final print is something that is slowly approached only after going through a number of proscribed processes and judgments. These include looking at the negatives, making a proof sheet, making a proof print and finally, usually toward the end of the semester, making a final large-scale image. This work path is widely encouraged but it arguably works against the more important processes of reflection and editing.

I ask the reader to consider another way of proceeding. Why not simply make a decent print from the beginning instead of a proof? It makes more sense to simply print the image at a decent size, take a small amount of extra care, and then place this image in a box. If you do this, by the end of the semester you will have a large number of finished prints from which to choose and there need not be that last-minute frenzy of printing. In this way the final weeks can be spent reflecting and editing rather than printing in a panic.

Below: Image from The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog. Chicago, IL: 1902.



ARBITRARY HIERARCHIES

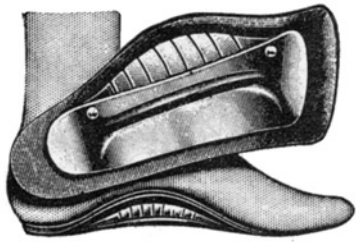
In most institutions students learn an artificial hierarchy based on the practice of teaching black and white before color.

Most photography courses begin with a semester called something along the lines of *Basic Photography* or *Introduction to Photography*. Almost always such courses prescribe the use of a 35mm camera with manual controls and involve learning how to process film, make a proof sheet and make a print. Almost always, such courses are conducted in black and white. Here again, values are being taught that are incidental to the stated aims of the courses.

The most obvious of these is that black-and-white photography is somehow more "basic" than color photography. To an extent this is true, but only from a technical perspective. Although loading film onto a spiral in pitch darkness takes a bit of getting used to, and although making a good print seems relatively easy but is actually quite difficult, the real reason, I suspect, is because all of the steps can be done in a hands-on way. It must be conceded that this does provide a good all-round introduction to the basic processes of the medium.

However, from a conceptual perspective, nothing could be further from the truth. In my opinion black-and-white photography is infinitely more difficult than color photography. It requires the student to engage with complex issues of abstraction, reduction and a re-jigging of their perception to be able to truly see the world in terms of light patterns while attempting to ignore the more obvious cues and clues of natural color. In my experience, unless there is a very determined attempt on behalf of the teacher to explain the high degree of abstraction that is involved, and the supreme importance of light and/or its absence in the creation of visual structure, then students simply continue to see as they always have and as often as not the work manifests a persistence of seeing and responding to color while the film indifferently transcribes these observations in simple black and white. As such, the images become a catalog of "things" rather than a record of

EXCUSES 101



I am not sure whether the following is true, or whether it is just a dream, but it seems that a long time ago I had a student we will call Z. One day she arrived (again) late to class without any work. She explained that the reason for this was that the night before she was feeling depressed and decided to get a razor and slash at her wrists. Having done so she had second thoughts about the wisdom of this action and hopped into her car to drive to the hospital. On her way she rolled her automobile. When the police arrived at the scene they found a small quantity of marijuana in the glove compartment. As a result she was apprehended, taken to the police station for a couple of hours before ending up at the hospital. Consequently she was up all night and was unable to finish her work!

Whether any or all of this was true or not I will never know for sure. But I do know the bandages on her wrist disappeared by the next class two days later—leaving no scars.

However, more than anything, it established a pretty impressive benchmark for excuses. I suggest offering anything less than this level of complexity (and most likely imagination) is not likely to work as hoped. Essentially what I am proposing is that excuses be graded in much the same way that other work for class is graded. I would (and did) give the above a mark of 9 out of 10. I would suggest that anything less than an 8 be disregarded out of hand.

Left: Image from The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog. Chicago, IL: 1927.

Overleaf: All images from The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog. Chicago, IL: 1927, with the exception of Item 13, which is from The Camera. Philadelphia: The Camera Publishing Company, November 1903. Volume 7, Number 1.

Surprisingly frequently a student will pin his or her prints on the wall and preface any accompanying remarks with the words, “This was just an experiment.” These words, when decoded usually mean something like this:

I took these images with no real plan (and to be honest with no real thought) and therefore I show them to you while assuming no responsibility for their worth or otherwise. As such do not criticize me excessively as I don't quite yet know what I am doing or have done.

The trouble with this excuse is that it abdicates personal responsibility and even worse, devalues an empirical approach that, if taken seriously and responsibly, can produce work of great (and unexpected) beauty.

Imagine how different the world would be if Alexander Fleming after looking at the shabby patches of grunge in his little petri dishes and decrying the failure of his initial experiment, simply tossed the penicillin mould in the trash. Fleming was not looking for antibiotics—he was presented with this discovery as a result of his search for something else—and he had the choice to see or not see this new material. His medium was the scientific empirical approach, his outcome the result of interacting with that medium. He took the answers he received—even those generated by accident—as valid data and as a result made a ground-breaking discovery.

Thus instead of using the phrase “just an experiment”^{*} as a buffer against criticism, see it instead as a legitimate way of generating imagery, with the proviso that the data so generated be scrutinized with intelligence and receptivity.

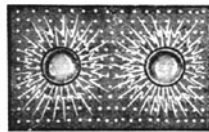
^{*} Note: “Just” can mean “appropriate and correct” as well as “merely.”

TYPES OF STUDENTS

1. The Feedback Junkie. Requires constant feedback and/or reassurance.



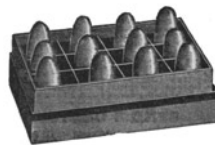
2. The Seeker of The Secret. The student who thinks that the teacher is with-holding information that, if only divulged, will guarantee success.



3. The Pleaser. The student who wants to be told exactly what to do.



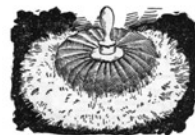
4. The "Organized" One. A student who is juggling too many things, e.g., an external job, family and/or other obligations, in too little time and expects the class to accommodate this self-imposed regime of near panic.



5. The Praise/Approval Seeker. One seeking validation of mediocre efforts (often already produced).



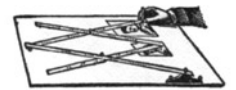
6. The Eternally Disappointed One. Always wants his/her work to be something it isn't.



7. The Macho Man (make that Boy)! Thinks making art (or taking one's feelings and thoughts seriously) is for girly men.



8. The Slow (sometimes sporadic) Developer. Not necessarily a bad thing.



9. The Consistent One. Not necessarily a good thing.



10. The Abdicator. Expects the teacher to "motivate" them.



11. The Victim. Uses illness, misfortune, ethnicity, etc., as a substitute for work.



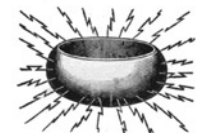
12. The Rebel. The student who insists on doing/saying the opposite no matter what the issue.

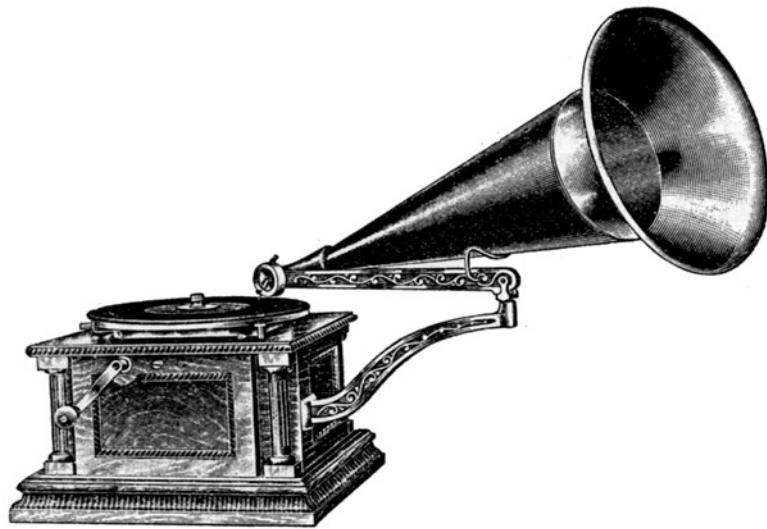


13. The Lazy One.



14. The Worker. Heaven!





If you are by nature modest in temperament, you may find it uncomfortable at first to “blow your own horn” in too strident a manner. However, it is not asking too much to simply have sufficient respect for the viewer of your images, who may well be a future employer or graduate school admissions officer, and present your work professionally and appropriately. This is not ego. This is common sense. Image from The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog. Chicago, IL: 1902.

ASPECTS OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

When you graduate you will want or need a job, and/or a show or further education at the graduate level. To satisfy this need you already have, and will also need, the following:

1. You will have a formal degree that certifies that you have successfully negotiated the program.
2. You will have a transcript that will show what courses you took and the grades you earned for each course.
3. You will need references from one or more faculty.
4. You will need a curriculum vitae (resume).
5. You will need to write a letter of application.
6. Ideally you will have a website or an online portfolio.
7. You will have your work.

1. The Degree

Employers will look at the degree primarily from the perspective that it certifies that you can be trusted to complete a set task within a structured environment. It shows that you are capable of working under supervision and that you respect both deadlines and authority.

2. The Transcript

This will be primarily of interest if you are seeking to enroll in a graduate course of study or wish to get a job in a college or university. Naturally the greater number of good grades you have the better because grades are the currency of universities. However, even if the record is not ideal, there is always hope as we will see when we come to Item 7.