Please Mr. Postman

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Graduate Program in Art

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Abstract

The letters contained here manifest my urgent concerns as an artist and also put language to my gratitude to those who have prompted the sustaining questions of my practice. I use photography to engage with society and the material conditions of culture. Reflexively, I question the photographic apparatus itself. My interest and hopes for understanding photography have driven me to strange lengths. In a multitude of jobs over decades, from newspaper routes to photojournalism to television production, photography has paid my bills. The first letter in this document is addressed to Journalism. It is a cover letter I wrote in 2008 for a journalism fellowship at The Ohio State University. Writing in the form of letters forces honesty and opens my thoughts in a direct manner that is lost in my more academic writing. This document contains letters to the people, institutions and concepts that help define my artistic practice.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family. My passion to share, question and create comes from their generosity of love and compassion.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ann, Aspen, Laura and my friends for their inspiration, honesty, dedication and humor throughout these last several years.
Vita

May 1999 ............................................................... Hopkins High School
2003 ...................................................................... B.J. University of Missouri—Columbia
2011 to present ........................................................ Graduate Student, Department of Art, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: Please Mr. Postman
July 20, 2008

Debra Jasper, Director
Kiplinger Program in Public Affairs Journalism
350 Page Hall, 1810 College Road
Columbus, Ohio 43210

Dear Journalism,

I wish I could quit you. But damn, I love storytelling too much. Everyday I try to do the best for you at my small daily newspaper. You are so difficult. I stay up late trying to figure you out but you just keep changing.

On the other hand, maybe that’s why I like you so much. Each day you bring something new for me to learn. You allow me to tell the stories of people from all walks of life. My colleagues and I get so much inspiration from the amazing opportunities you offer. You are so old but still coming up with new ways to share and interact.

When I attended classes at the University of Missouri-Columbia you were just leaving the darkroom for the digital camera and then you left me, the still photographer, in the dust for a video camera.

I still want to be with you for the rest of my life. Let’s take six months away from the strains of daily deadlines in order to catch up. I will never fall behind you again. We can do great things together. I love you.

Yours Truly,
Nicholas George
March 20, 2014

Thrift Store
4471 Winnetka Avenue
New Hope, MN 55428

Dear Thrift Store,

I am writing after more than 20 years of visiting your aisles. I came first with my father, and I often continue to do so still. In the early years I came in search of toys, then clothes, electronics, then records and then you became a friend.

You became a friend after college when I found myself chasing a career as a photojournalist at small town newspapers throughout the West. In these small towns I sought you out as a familiar place in my lonely hours. I had no friends and enjoyed spending time sifting through strange devices and purchasing essentials for my various apartments. I didn’t realize you were a friend during this period until now.

Recently, I have found love in my life and made new friends, and I now wonder how many people aimlessly walk the thrift aisles as a result of loneliness. People often strike up conversations with me in thrift stores. This happens much more than in any other sort of retail space. I think some of them must be like me, buying things as a means of short-lived fulfillment and interest. I know I have done this dozens if not hundreds of times; it feels like sad consumerism.

Today, I visit you as part of my art practice in Ohio. I use you as a touchstone and contemporary stockpile of materials, knowledge and culture. I photograph you and work with your contents in the studio in my efforts to respond to our consumer culture.
I couldn’t have made my SureShot with CoolScan series without you. For this series, at your stores, I have purchased more than 80 point-and-shoot 35mm cameras with film remaining in them. After purchasing one of these cameras I rewind the film. I use this found film to photograph objects lining your pegboard walls and shelves. I never know quite what to expect: when the film had in fact been used before, a double exposure results. My image punctures the previous owner’s latent picture on the film. Two images separated by time and space, between consumer and conceptual approaches to the medium, become one. Just how much time and space exists between exposures is impossible to know. Equally elusive are the reasons why previous owners discarded the film and cameras. In place of two discrete images, these new, single images open an interstitial photographic space.

Looking back, I suppose that’s why I like you so much, I never know what I’ll find in you. Stay cheap my friend.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
March 22, 2014

Recognition

997 North High Street

Columbus, OH 43201

Dear Recognition,

I write to put words to the ways in which I put you to use.

In you I find great freedom and wiggle room. I can exert various degrees of effort in my attempts to lock you into a fixed or determined level of appreciation in relation to a work of art. How long should I consider the object of my focus? Am I better off with my gut reaction or laboring over the decision? When the dictionary says that you are “identification of a thing or person from previous encounters or knowledge,” I tend to agree; I also find you fairly straightforward. The real work comes when the dictionary defines you as “acknowledgment of something's existence, validity.” It is here in the acknowledgement of validity that I grapple with a language to explain my deployment of you. When I say deployment, I mean this “fixing” of your validity in a photographic sense.

I am thinking about my photographic series that tend to coalesce in the editing process into a sort of visual poetry or visual conversation. Yet, before the editing process comes the image-making process. In this sense, the “fixed subject” of my images is largely the process itself. The individual pictures in the series gain my recognition on a more poetic level. How can I rationalize and articulate my recognition of different images resulting from the same process? Is one better somehow than another? If my images derive meaning from the process how do I recognize a process as valid?
For example, my *Frozen Layer Cake* series use the chemical photo process, only literally, frozen. The image is initiated by placing a frozen bowl of photo chemicals upside down on a piece of light sensitive photo paper in the darkroom. I then leave the bowl to melt on the paper for roughly 24 hours. The bowl is frozen first with water filling a quarter of the bowl. Next, I add fixer and freeze, stop bath and freeze, lastly, developer until the bowl is full to the brim and freeze. When I return to the paper I simply whisk the paper out from under the bowl as if it was the tablecloth magic trick.

Like a bit of very slow magic, I have rendered a circle on to this photogram of sorts. The majority of the paper has not received any chemicals or the right chemicals in the proper manner and will thus shift colors for weeks to come.

The question of recognition is essential to the editing of this series. I have made dozens of these images using the same process I have described. I decide to recognize an experimental process as valid especially when it has not been used before and it produces a visual rendering that I find exciting. Recognizing individual prints as “pieces” is decided through attention to my emotions and also a poetic use of the anthropomorphic hints in the images.

I explore chemical photographic processes in order to remain engaged with the material aspects of photography. It is here in the material touch that I can feel a sense of visual recognition. In the chemical process I have a chance to find something new, unknown even to myself until the process is enacted. In the end, you, Recognition, are my editing guide and my edit is an idiosyncratic reflection of my visual definition of you.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
March 21, 2014

Michael Wagar
Executive Editor, The Chronicle
321 North Pearl Street
Centralia, WA 98531

Dear Michael Wagar,

The time I called you from a phone booth for an interview because I was too broke to own a phone.
The time you didn’t give me the job. The time you did give me the job. I acted like I owned a car. My mom gave me her old car.

I drove west from Minnesota as a photojournalist. I got a haircut somewhere in Montana. I now lived in Washington State above a discoteca. Everyday another assignment or breaking news.
I chased the flames and light. Everyday another newspaper.

The times they died in their cars.
The times I summited Mount St. Helens.
The murder scenes. The murder trials.
The meth lab with the frozen bear head.
The time the police chief threw me in the squad car.
The job shadows I bought donuts for.
The dollar bills in my pants at Chippendales.
The hotdogs at high school baseball games.
The Rowdy Rebel Store.
The dead soldiers.
The parades.
The police scanner.
The east county flood.
The west county flood.
The mud. The dead cows.
The Zucchini Fest and Cheese Days.
The fire lookouts.
The business section.
The food section.
The boxing.
The jail.
The obits.
The pedophiles.
The helicopter ride into the volcano.
The time you laid off the other photographer instead of me.
The softball in Yakima.
The trip to China.
The foot chase with the mad man.
The time you hired my friend, Dan.
The time Dan and I disappeared into the wilderness for days.
The time my car died in Forks and I lived in a gravel pit.
The time I lied so that I could live in a town with more interesting people.
The time you made me move back to that depressing town.
The mold. The mud.
The time I quit and drove East to Ohio.

I thank you.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
January 13, 2014

Northrup-King Seed Company, a division of Syngenta
1500 Jackson St. NE
Minneapolis, MN 55413

Dear Northrup-King Seed Company,

Forty years ago, my father worked in your seed-packaging factory. His job entailed building and filling display racks with all the varieties of seeds offered in garden stores (25 packets of tomato seeds, 25 packets of carrot seeds, etc.) This all took place on the fifth story of your factory. My father told me that some workers would throw 50 pound bags of seeds out of the window into the snow bank were they would be hidden until they could return at night to retrieve their stolen goods. As you know, these seeds were worth a considerable amount of money and could be sold off. My dad, however, would just pocket a few small seed packets so that he could plant the vegetable seeds in our garden. While both of these acts are illegal, the contrast between them has informed much of my thinking. I hope you will forgive his theft as the seeds turned into vegetables in our garden, feeding us, teaching me, and inspiring my efforts today to do more with less, to be okay with less, to slow down and work hard. In this story I find a sort of calibration for my actions, right or wrong. In the end, I hope you can forgive these stolen seeds because I will never forget them.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
March 24, 2014

James Welling
537 West 20th Street
New York, NY 10011

Dear James Welling,

I am writing with great excitement and appreciation for your work. In recent years I have been thinking intently about your abstract work. Yet, today I find myself trying to understand how your wide-ranging practice fits together. I am working to understand and build out connections between my more documentary work and the abstractions of my studio and darkroom practice. Your belief that “any idea is a good idea if you work at it enough” drives me to work through ideas vigorously. Like you, I do this when engaging with the material/chemical aspects of photography. Photography excites me in its ability to transform something cheap into something beautiful and emotional. I am thinking here of your use of inexpensive orange plastic in the Drapes series. Beyond this simple transformation of the cheap material into the luxurious, it is a powerful and enigmatic shift in representation. The Jell-O and aluminum foil series also accomplish this truly difficult and powerful photographic act.

Despite your transformations through the camera, your insistence on the impossibility of total abstraction in photography rings very true to me. Your instructive example noting that the border of the print is the shadow of the easel helps ground my understanding. At the center of your oeuvre, I see an openness to follow questions into unknown spaces. You know how to follow your instincts while making work without overly questioning your intuition.

I am at a point in my practice that seems to echo the moment in your career where a sense of boredom with abstraction happened. I wish for ambiguity in my photography outside the studio while offering a loose
narrative for the viewer. I think an artwork should be like a good book that you love but discover halfway through that the second half is missing. Complicating and confusing the image types/categories that we are used to seeing is central to my practice. Your Tile photographs seem like photograms and perform this twist. Using film for photograms before enlargement of the resulting negative is another example I am inspired by. Do you worry about any of these techniques becoming a real-estate rush for ownership of process? When does process equal meaning and is that problematic? Your flexibility with material and apparatus is inspiring. You didn’t seem to flinch moving into digital with the Light Sources and Glass House projects. I also agree that the inkjet print can mimic the beauty of the printed page. You are right, the view camera will always be our “time machine.”

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Nick George
March 25, 2014

Tino Sehgal
24 West 57th Street
New York, NY 10019

Dear Tino Sehgal,

The central question of your practice (can there be a progress that is not a technological progress?) and your attempts to answer this question address my anxiety over being a consumer and also a photographer. Your seeking to also replace the economic function of technological progress in your quest for a shift in social/cultural progress is pivotal. I agree with you that many new technologies aren’t bringing us much.

We are indeed seeing a decreasing utility in technological innovations in respect to quality of life. I ask this about my digital cameras and smart phones. These gadgets do everything I need them to do. The companies can stop making new ones. But they don’t. They plan obsolescence and engineer ways to ensure that I will need to buy a new one. That is, if I wish to go on being specialized in the labor of being a professional photographer. Consumers are no longer an important driving force behind the real technological progress of cameras. It used to be that consumer photography propelled photographic innovation but now machines are taking more pictures than humans. Companies will continue to innovate their photographic machines even if the public were to stop using photography altogether.

In light of this, the absence of materials in your work is refreshing. Yes, the age of the production of mere things is over. We are now in the “production age of subjectivity” as you say. I don’t just want a phone, I want a silver-colored phone. I don’t just need shoes, I want Nike shoes. Your refusal to avoid the market is essential to the larger discourse of your practice. We must continue to participate in the market since we demand our professions to be specialized. We have to make a product in order participate in the market.
Your remarkable works (constructed situations) have created salaries for people without bringing any external materials into the equation.

Or as you eloquently put it, not a service but a “pure service”—a transformation of only actions rather than of materials and actions. You reflect and act on this in a constructive way by asking: why is it not possible to escape this technological progress? It does little to improve the quality of life while using so much of our finite resources. We need to wake up and find new socio-cultural activities and free ourselves from these distractions disguised as technological innovations. Let us stop with the counterproductive and inefficient innovations of superficial technology. Our inputs are indeed finite. Here’s to entering a state of equilibrium! As affluent society, we need to decrease the extent to which we define our personality with products and embrace these constructed situations—your new realm of pure services.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
March 25, 2014

Emmet Gowin
202 North Chancellor Street
Newtown, PA 18940-2206

Dear Emmet Gowin,

I am writing as a result of being very moved by your words and enraptured by your photography. Recently, I have studied your books and continue to find them more and more interesting. Your portraits and landscapes struck me forcefully at a time when I had seen few powerful examples of these subjects in recent years. I had a fresh and new feeling of excitement about this simple and direct work. You breathed new strength into my hopes of making important pictures of my own life.

Like you, I learned photography mostly from books and following the examples of Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson. After a very long route through various jobs in photography, and personal modes of photographing, I have come to agree with you that home snapshots are among the richest resources of images. The intimacy of the gaze in such images cannot be captured in strangers. Through your direct embrace of your surrounding life you transform documents into phenomenal poetry. I have learned from your focus on being in the appropriate time and place for yourself. The trust of intuition to know what’s right for you, to relish that which is near your core, that which belongs to your emotional orientation. Like you say, I will not be afraid of any sort of authority. I know exactly how I feel.

Thanks to your example, I am now alert for the things that only I will see. I will be sure to share with others.

Thank you.
Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
March 16, 2014

Tacita Dean
24 West 57th Street
New York, NY 10019

Dear Tacita Dean,

I have just returned to Ohio from the Spiral Jetty. The day after watching the sunset behind the jetty I watched your film, JG, at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. The film allowed an open yet generative visual space for me to reflect on the hours I spent alone near the jetty. The scarcity of talking in the film allowed for these words to act as prompts for my reflections and visions of my experience on the lake but also inside the time of your film. I remain particularly interested in the idea of the jetty being able to unwind itself and know all of the landscapes it has ever seen—the coil acting as a memory bank and an eye. The disparate narration of time in the film performed a powerful stretching inside my memory. The passing time lost in the sun, glow and symmetry of the landscape beyond the jetty was confused again inside the durational space of your film.

This was the first film of yours I had seen but my interest in your work began when reading an article in Artforum about your piece in the Tate’s Turbine Hall. I also sought out your book, Floh, after learning about it. I was thrilled and excited by the total lack of text in the book. It left me wide open to engage with the collection of found snapshots. I had not yet read your short statement about the book but have since found it very interesting, especially in regard to my own practice and questions about the nature of collections. Your insistence to avoid explanations and descriptions of the found images gives me more determination to allow for this openness and poetry in my own work using found film. I also came to realize I was building collections only after they were well under way. You wrote, “nothing is more worrying to the collector than the prospect of ‘Closure’; the realization that there will be a ‘final version’
and a potential end to the collection.” I find that I can relate to this feeling quite a bit but I am also excited by the prospect of closure and disintegration of my collections. In collecting, I hope to assemble pieces for a combined sort of inspiration or reaction inside myself before transforming and re-contextualizing the objects in/through artworks.

If we think about time on the cosmic scale there can never be a final collection of anything. You write: “FLOH exists in the continuum and will one day, I hope, return, ownerless and silent to its origins in the fleamarket.” Through your collected snapshots and concept of the continuum I can find peace and understanding with the notion that everything is truly ownerless.

The Voices of Time is on the way to my apartment now and I look forward to another reading of your film and my Spiral Jetty experience. I can still see the end of your film, that final flash of the jetty in white somehow floating off and through the dark space.

Thank you for your time and inspiration.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
March 25, 2014

Photography
900 East Avenue
Rochester, NY 14607

Dear Photography,

It seems like it’s always been you and me, even before I used a camera. I learned to see “photographically” on weekly car rides up north to the family cabin in Minnesota. The station wagon window became my viewfinder as I took mental snapshots in a steady stream. At regular intervals I took note of vertical lines in the landscape. This all started from my desire to escape the smell of coffee and confined boredom of the backseat. Today, I relish both of these things. We have come a long way.

I remember we started with the sun prints and fell down the rabbit hole. The roll of snapshots in California, black and white film, darkroom experiments, the interruption of video cameras, commercial portraiture and color film processing, digital photography and manipulation, inkjet printer, street photography, photojournalism student, newspaper photo technician, photojournalist, multimedia journalist, online editor, journalism fellow, television producer, journalism professor, art photography graduate student, digital media coordinator, and now, finally, artist.

This list reiterates the extent of my involvement with you over the last twenty-five years. Your allure has fluctuated. Sometimes you brought me money and I loved you. Sometimes you brought me money and I hated you. These days my problem seems to be figuring out what to do with you. You are spiraling out of control. I don’t think you even know yourself anymore. Have the machines taken over? Please, do let me know because I am pulling my hair out. The drones love you. The selfies love you and yes, try as I might to stop, I still love you.
I will always remember the first time we met. It was the seventh grade. Kelly helped me load the black and white film into a development tank. That first roll seemed like it had everything—the portrait of Melissa, the still life of my rollerblade and the cityscape. Today, I realize I will work forever to know everything about you. But only after you recognize that you are the apparatus and I won’t be your tool.

Sincerely,

Nick Robert George
References


