

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

January 7, 2007

## Polidori and people pictures

Filed under: [media](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:31 pm

A month ago I wrote a post entitled [Where Are the People](#). Among other things, I discussed the fine art photographs of the Katrina disaster. Regarding the work of Robert Polidori, Chris Jordan, Katherine Wolkoff and others, I wrote:

I think these are all terrific photographers. And they've done admirable work. But after awhile I find the absence of people in the pictures a little frustrating.

Katrina is a good example of why I often defend the efforts of photojournalists. Certainly photojournalism has numerous faults, but I admire the attempt to connect the subject (in this case Katrina) to real people.

Today Robert Polidori responded to this post. (Read the [full response here](#)). Most of his comments are a defense of his photographic practice. Just to be clear, I never said that Polidori (or the others) did anything wrong. I didn't criticize the use of beauty and certainly did not suggest a moral failure.

My point was quite simple. "While it is worthwhile to see the architectural devastation of New Orleans," I wrote, "I also want to see the people – the lives actually living in this mess."

I was tempted to let Polidori's response stay lost in the blog archives. I have no beef with him or his work and don't want to fan any flames. But along with Polidori's defense of his practice, he made one particular comment that was just too juicy to leave alone:

What more are you really going to learn from having a person there? My belief is that you should take stills of what doesn't seem to move, and take movies or videos of does. It's my opinion that people come off better in movies.

It is an interesting opinion. While I won't claim that portraits capture the 'soul life' (as he says of his interiors), I would certainly argue for their relevance.



Jeremiah Ward wears makeshift shoes after he was rescued from the Ninth Ward, photo by Irwin Thompson / Dallas Morning News

Polidori asks what we learn from pictures of people. In the case of the image above, one might say something about cigar boxes or improvisation or resiliency – but is art really about learning? I’m much more comfortable with the pursuit of beauty.

Would the feet be more beautiful if they were on video or described in prose? Or would this photograph be more beautiful if we didn’t see the feet?

Polidori makes a good point about a certain kind of fine-art portraiture. Had he or I (or the other artists mentioned above) attempted to photograph the victims of Katrina, they might have appeared “like stick figure props in front of their house.”

But this just gets to the crux of my argument. If we are going to have images from events like Katrina in our galleries, museums and libraries (as I think we must), I hope they aren’t limited to stiff, large-format photography. Those pictures absolutely have their place. But so do Jeremiah’s feet.

## 48 Comments

1. very juicy... was mr. polidori deliberately using a poetic 'layout' for his post?

*Comment by john k. — January 8, 2007 @ [12:00 am](#)*

2. "What more are you really going to learn from having a person there?"

Impossible to say without the photographs. Maybe its just me but I never understand people who dismiss something that they didn't try. Maybe nothing more would be revealed but who can know without attempting it. But what the hell do I know I am just one of those mid-western artists.

*Comment by bradley peters — January 8, 2007 @ [1:06 am](#)*

3. i find it interesting that Polidori makes it sound as though he showed up in post katrina new orleans '19 days after the storm hit' and just shot what was available:

"...There were no people in these neighborhoods.  
The place was empty.  
I happen to have a press pass...  
What am I suppose to do?"

is that to say he would have shot whatever he found, when he showed up?

*Comment by john k. — January 8, 2007 @ [1:58 am](#)*

4. i have always found great beauty in dilapidation, and the juxtaposition of a refrigerator in a tree, and a beautiful light blue pool with a diving board, being the only things left of a house can be so poetic. i found myself wanting to go to new orleans myself. but i could never use someone else's pain. that is not beautiful. dilapidation that comes naturally from time, and the wear of human living, or neglect is one thing, when it happens overnight, it is a catastrophe, and yes it should be documented, but for the horror of the event, and the beauty of the people banding together. "what more are you going to learn from having a person there?" that's actually what it should be about. The story would not even be in the news if the area was uninhabited. he reminds me of a fashion photographer who only shoots women so he can see them nude, then calls it art.

*Comment by susan worsham — January 8, 2007 @ [2:52 am](#)*

5. Mountain out of a mole hill.

*Comment by Philip — January 8, 2007 @ [3:12 am](#)*

6. "It is my belief that you have a lot more indices of personal values by looking at what individuals place in their living interiors than by looking at their face."

I think this is sort of true, and goes to the heart of the dilemma that received expression in the blog around Thomas Hoepker's 9/11 picture. Photography is about surfaces, and — despite what we may want to believe about or project into photographs of people — the superficial appearance of a person can tell us very little of their reality, except in a "central casting" kind of way. As was also discussed in this blog, why do photographers' attempts to make writers \*look\* more like "Writers" generally fail? Photography's great service is to remind us how things \*really\* look, in an as unmediated way as is possible for a human artefact.

Here's an amusing example: who would have thought that Woody Allen would be the obvious casting choice for a film about the most notorious Brazilian bandit? (see <http://brazilbrazil.com/lampiao.html>). I get the giggles every time I think of this, but it's a good example of the way Central Casting and Reality can come to (productive) blows.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [4:37 am](#)

7. I still find taking photos of people I don't personally know deeply problematic and uncomfortable on so many levels.

On the other hand I think photography can excel in revealing human presence by it's marks, traces and imprints; I'm sure there's a (Greek?) word for describing something by it's absence.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [5:37 am](#)

8. I was reading the comment after reading the post, and was putting things together, some what trying to see the debate from both sides, and agreeing a little with each and then this blew my mind wide open... "Look I'm just like you. I like all my pictures better than everyone else's."

wait, i must have read that wrong...

Comment by [Chad](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [5:54 am](#)

9. This is all word froth. If you prefer your images with people, more power to you (I can't believe you're having a hard time finding those, we must frequent different galleries). If Polidori feels like doing photos without people, more power to him. I'll go to both your shows (and do). Your statement is about you, not about art or images. One can't/shouldn't argue about someone else's taste. Objectively, the history of art contains great (as in richly complex, provoking, mysterious multilayered) works with and without people. I hunger for great images. There's too much mediocrity around.

Comment by [Eric Perlberg](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [5:56 am](#)

10. interesting debate. I would say that I have to agree with Alec on this one. While I find the exploration of such a theme via empty landscape very eloquent, I also want the human connection there and I don't by any means agree with Polidori about moving things requiring a moving format to express their "soul." I think that Kenneth Jarecke said it best: "Maybe our goal could be to help the viewer see their own humanity in our subjects." That is modest, apt and sufficient it seems to me.

Comment by [Jon Anderson](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [8:17 am](#)

11. "Your statement is about you, not about art or images." I think Eric had a good point here, that Alec's statement was simply just based upon his thoughts, I thought the point though was that it wasn't based as a critique. Maybe I misunderstood the purpose of it. Either way Polidori's comment came back and seemed to turn it into one. The problem I have is that Polidori's comment didn't seem to get that both types of photography could be just as impactful to speak about humanity.

Comment by [Chad](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [9:04 am](#)

12. From what I have seen of Polidori's work, he photographed New Orleans in his "style." He was doing his own work. Dan Burkholder photographed New Orleans. (see <http://www.danburkholder.com/shadows>) Again I know his work and he was doing it in his own way....which didn't include people.

The same may be true for all the people who have photographed the aftermath. So the bigger question for me is where were the photographers whose style (work) is about people. Did they go to New Orleans and photograph the people in the aftermath?

Comment by [Billie](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [9:29 am](#)

13. One more thought. I don't agree with Polidori's comment about taking movies or video of things that move. People move but if we saw a video of the feet with makeshift shoes would we have time to study it. We'd think, Oh, nice. But would we see "Keeping Moving" on the "shoe." We'd go back to a photo several times to look and think about it but if it were part of a video, most of us would not go back to pick up all the nuances. Not saying that video doesn't have its place. Not saying it can't touch us deeply. I'm just saying that still photographs of things that move have value too.

*Comment by [Billie](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [9:36 am](#)*

14. I saw the book and spent considerable time going through the huge number of images. As one who rarely has people in his photographs I guess I understand some of need not to include people. I find my process gets very complicated by engaging people and negotiating with them to be photographed. If I'm doing it for money it's easier to ask. There seems to be something of a function to making photographs with an apparent "excuse".

I don't agree that portraits can't convey something, and that one needs to have them move. I think we all have our list of stunning portraits made over the years by various photogs.

*Comment by [Chris Faust](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [11:05 am](#)*

15. Polidori's photos of New Orleans slightly and to a greater extent Edward Burtynsky's pictures of environmental depredations have always made me uncomfortable on the grounds that they are glamorizing death and destruction to make coffee table books. But I don't really feel that way about Polidori. I think he's really good. And after reading his response to Alec, I thought about it for a while. Polidori's pictures are, in their way, more powerful than pictures of people could be. He is photographing absence, death. His work confronts the horror (in its gorgeous way) better than any picture of a person can because any survivor's story is necessarily a triumph. I don't think any photographs "must" be in our galleries, museums and libraries, peopled or un. That is, unless they're as good as Polidori's.

*Comment by [A P Cass](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [12:07 pm](#)*

16. guybatey wrote: "On the other hand I think photography can excel in revealing human presence by its marks, traces and imprints; I'm sure there's a (Greek?) word for describing something by its absence."

There is a theological term "apophatic", which means, in effect, to define something (e.g. a deity) by what it is not. Perhaps that's what you had in mind. Theology is full of such useful words, useful even to us non-believers!

*Comment by [Mike C.](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [12:28 pm](#)*

17. Alec, How interesting you speak of photographs including people, in the context of Mr. Polidori and his Katrina images. I was shocked and disappointed by the image he made of the dead man, lying on his own bed in his home, partially covered by a blanket. That was one image, which included people, I could have done without seeing! Wm.

*Comment by [William Greiner](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [1:07 pm](#)*

18. "His work confronts the horror (in its gorgeous way)"

the word gorgeous seems to mirror some people's problem with this kind of work. by walking into other people's destruction and death, of ruin, with a press pass, to set up an artistic and 'gorgeous' photograph on someone else's property, the photographer may appear to be exploiting and romanticizing the situation for selfish ends, and being paid handsomely to do so.

i may not agree with those critics, but...

*Comment by john k. — January 8, 2007 @ [1:38 pm](#)*

19. Word/topic froth or not....My opinion on the question: "Where are the pictures of the people of the Katrina event?" – I have to believe there is potentially a lot more than just about victims. What of the people deciding to return? How much \$\$ is being spent on a fundamentally flawed "flood control wall" by our Army Corps of Engineers – and what does that really say about our values / relationships (culture) with nature... etc – etc.

Anyway the point is there's plenty of stuff for any number of approaches to see (and photograph – or to make whatever kind of art you need ) of the spectacle (and beyond) to draw out your own conclusions I would think.

At the moment, the question asks me to think more about the function value of a museum / gallery (Is there really a wide variation / scope in purpose? Or are these places just "gatekeepers of tastemaking / trendsetting ?" "Vanity fair or "Educators" A place of discussion? A place to establish values?

I recall a phrase from a previous post of yours on Jerry Liebling – something to the effect: "When was the last time you went to the museum and you went in fear?"... the fear of learning something that could change your life / challenge your beliefs. Consider how pictures are used...

Here's a mission statement – from the Guggenheim (from their own website)

"The mission of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation is to promote the understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, and other manifestations of visual culture, primarily of the modern and contemporary periods, and to collect, conserve, and study the art of our time. The Foundation realizes this mission through exceptional exhibitions, education programs, research initiatives, and publications, and strives to engage and educate an increasingly diverse international audience through its unique network of museums and cultural partnerships. "

I didn't immediately find a mission statement for the MET.. but here's an important opening sentence on the "history" of the MET (from their own website)

"The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded in 1870 by a group of American citizens – businessmen and financiers as well as leading artists and thinkers of the day – who wanted to create a museum to bring art and art education to the American people."

So maybe just the news isn't by itself automatically "visual culture" worthy material – who's to say?

*Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [1:46 pm](#)*

20. Alec,

I find it interesting that you draw out Polidori's distinction between still images and motion pictures by pulling words into the mix. "Would [Jeremiah's] feet be more beautiful if they were ... described in prose?" I know what you're getting at is a descriptive prose, words to call forth the image, the man. But I can't help thinking about how words are already at work here. In that short little caption, we've already slipped beyond the image and then back into it again. Which calls to mind all the work captions can (or cannot do).

Polidori's point about photographing people immediately brought to mind Dorothea Lange. But even Lange's portraits, as humane and insightful as they so often are, relied on captions to inform and enliven them. Indeed, to pore through Lange's FSA photos on the Library of Congress website is to immerse one's self in both words and images.

What can we learn from pictures of people? Well, in the case of Lange's portraits, I'd say a great deal. But, I'd add that taken together with their captions – especially those that lean toward the

descriptive prose you're hinting at [for example, "Negro woman who has never been out of Mississippi."] — we can learn even more.

*Comment by [Drew Levy](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [3:54 pm](#)*

21. I'm not surprised that this post has generated some heat. What is surprising is that so many readers view this as some battle between my vision and Polidori's. I don't know how much clearer I can be that I appreciate his photography.

I think Billie asks the question more succinctly, "Where were the photographers whose style (work) is about people. Did they go to New Orleans and photograph the people in the aftermath?" Eric suggests that I'm just going to the wrong galleries. Am I?

While it is frustrating that my query is being interpreted as a critique, I'm glad I wrote the post. Polidori's belief that 'you should take stills of what doesn't seem to move' is fascinating. Given the reader reaction, it is also popular.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [3:58 pm](#)*

22. Alec, I also agree that this is in no way a criticism of Robert or anyone's work but more a general question posed.  
I still feel that in some way the reason there is a vast amount of contemporary images which do not describe portraits and individuals is the same reason our nation was shocked by the images of the victims trapped within NOLA, it's simply too hard to look at. To look at this a person suffering on a grand scale in an art context is even more difficult.  
My own opinion is we are at a very interesting moment and looking at ourselves, (through portraits of others), is reflective in a way that many are simply not ready to come to terms with. We like our portraits cool, distanced and with a veneer of time/nostalgia. A photograph of someone we can identify with asks the viewer to be somewhat self-critical. It's a powerful thing and problematic especially if you're the maker but perhaps oh-so-necessary.

*Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [6:13 pm](#)*

23. Have you seen/heard Polidori's [Katrina slideshow at The New Yorker](#)? He speaks about some of the issues discussed above – the photo of the dead man, the absence of people, fine art versus photojournalism, architectural photography.

I'd never really thought about Polidori's oeuvre as "photography of habitat". Now that I do, I see it in a new light.

*Comment by [rob](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [6:32 pm](#)*

24. Brian, I think you're raising a very interesting point here. One thing that struck me is that in various emails people told me they were uncomfortable with seeing dead victims in Nola. I have never heard that many (or actually any) complaints about seeing dead people in, say, the areas affected by the tsunami just a while ago. Is this due to the fact that photos of victims in Nola really ask us to be self-critical (after all, a large fraction of the mess was produced by neglect and indifference), whereas photos of dead people in South Eastern Asia "only" touch us on a much more superficial level?

I realize, of course, that this somewhat skirts past Alec's main point here – or maybe it doesn't?

*Comment by [Joerg M. Colberg](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [7:22 pm](#)*

25. Hi Alec. A quick apology about my post above... When I initially read your post and some of the subsequent comments before I posted my own, I interpreted your comment and the subsequent comments to be about photographic art in general and not specifically about Katrina and similar events, ie, I read it as a need to rebalance the tension between more Magnum like images centred

on people and a rising tide of "scene" work without humans in photographic galleries. Thus my comment about word froth and arguing over taste. But you did say specifically you were referring specifically to Katrina and Katrina like events. So my taste-based comment above missed the point and was out of order. Sorry if that was what frustrated you, Alec.

In regards to Katrina like event work in galleries, I haven't seen much Katrina work in galleries save for Polidori's photos at Flowers East here in London and William Greiner's moving work on his web log.

However, I do regularly see powerful human story in disaster photographic work in galleries. Here are a few galleries where I've seen shows depicting the human side of Katrina like events: the OXO gallery, the outdoor Photography Space in front of the National Theatre and as well as that at MORE London, the photography exhibition space inside the National Theatre, the yearly Press Photos of the Year exhibit in Royal Festival Hall, The Magnum Gallery, Getty Images, The Hoppen Gallery, Photofusion and the Photographer's gallery. All in London.

*Comment by [Eric Perlberg](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [7:42 pm](#)*

26. Joerg,

Sontag talks about this in Regarding the Pain of Others. That seeing victims of 911 are really too close to home. A photograph of the 'other' (a victim of the Tsunami for instance) is easily out of sight out of mind and doesn't challenge our own sense of self. She argued that contemporary American society self-edits these things out, to avoid psychological conflict.

I think this directly applies to the post as seeing death on ones own proverbial doorstep brings to mind our own mortality, and fragility. I would argue that in this instance this moves beyond death to any images of poor black people suffering at the hands of neglect. Isn't this why Frank's American's pissed so many people off when published?

*Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [8:36 pm](#)*

27. Brian, that would make sense to me. So this then is in part what Alec was aiming at when he said that he preferred to see people in those photos: You can browse through Robert's book and be somewhat affected (even though seeing dozens and dozens of interiors has an oddly numbing effect), but it's quite a bit harder to look at photos of people, whether they're standing up to their neck in water, wearing makeshift shoes, or are bloated dead corpses, and not feel profoundly disturbed.

*Comment by [Joerg M. Colberg](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [9:11 pm](#)*

28. Having recently seen Mr. Polidori's book about Katrina, "After the Flood" I must say that there are people all over the place; they just don't happen to be in the photographs. By this I mean that each photograph contains the remnants of a person's life – his home, her car, his bed, her couch – that speak volumes about who that particular person is. His effort to record the destruction is, to my mind, admirable and is a body of work that will stand the test of time. I live in New Orleans and, believe me, this is what it looked like. Flipping the pages of the book reminded me of being in those neighborhoods after the flood because, unlike the aftermath of, say, a tornado where relatively few houses are destroyed, 80% of this city looked like the images in his book. Imagine 80% of your city being underwater or being otherwise destroyed in some way. I say if Mr. Soth wants people in the photos then he should come down here and put people in the photos. I think his vision would serve the recording of this disaster admirably. Polidori did it his way; Soth should do it his way.

*Comment by [Thom Bennett](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [10:01 pm](#)*

29. oh my. Thom Bennett makes an incisive point, even brilliant, then pees all over it. He should have stopped three sentences sooner.

*Comment by [THyde](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [10:15 pm](#)*

30. Very good discussion.

I never saw Alec's statements as arguments against Polidori or other similar work. With that said, it is interesting to find such frustration, pitting one against the other.

I'd like to offer:

Is it possible a reason we often see work similar to Robert Polidori's is purchasers of art see the beauty in devastation more aesthetically virtuous than those of people dying?

I state this on the grounds of a specific audience, separate from the necessity or social importance and impact of the job of the photographer documenting a terrifying event. I also understand, as a fellow photographer, we refuse to publically label our artwork as marketable products, which this question addresses. Fortunately or unfortunately—depending on one's disposition—our sometimes very personal and very heavy artwork will be sold to some extent on its aesthetic appeal.

To avoid a personal bout, I feel the work done containing and omitting human form surrounding Hurricane Katrina is equally important. I merely pose this question to facilitate new discussion.

*Comment by [Ryan](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [10:21 pm](#)*

31. Joerg and Brian,

Talking about the country editing out the images of citizens dying strikes a lot of thoughts in my mind and I wonder how long it will be in time until those images are distant enough to be viewed without the same weight of reality to them. Or maybe it's not something that will change so quickly with the generations.

*Comment by [Chad](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [10:58 pm](#)*

32. I find both styles of photography beautiful. I shoot more along Polidori's side but work for a newspaper so I will play devil's advocate. Both styles deserve merit but they should not go without criticism. Of particular interest, regarding both styles, is the rationale for producing such work.

I agree with the notion that seeing photos of people in America suffering is not something many people want to look at. For this reason I think it would be tragic if the work of fine-art documentary photographers define this event and not the work of the Times-Picayune, the Dallas Morning News and countless other newspapers and photojournalists. These people were there as the events were transpiring to show the world what was going on. I think people forget about the dangers involved in producing those images.

Also, I wish the work of these newspapers were on more (if they are on any) walls of contemporary art galleries. However, the galleries' role is not to educate, it is to sell. So we will continue to see the work of Polidori, Chris Jordan (whose work we have used in our newspaper) and others. Their aesthetics are pleasing on the eye, subtle and smart.

On a personal level I am quite tired of the still-life documentary Katrina photos. It is being (and has been) done by too many people whose aesthetics merge and leave very few stand-outs. Like boxing picture stories are to photojournalists, I feel this is a topic in fine-art documentary photography that should be left alone—unless you have something new to say with your images.

*Comment by [Steve Miller](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [12:33 am](#)*

33. There is a series of photos by Gary Fabiano on the [pixelpress.org](#) website, called 'Living Rooms'. I think it's a pretty powerful essay, made much stronger by the absence of humans.

*Comment by [Greg Thompson](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [1:24 am](#)*

34. people make us uncomfortable. they talk back, they ask questions, they require engagement, they need explanations, they get in the way of technique, they can be annoying, they can be uncooperative, they can demand that we think, their lives become something that has to be understood – basically, by working to place people into an image a photographer has to step outside his/her comfort zone, realize the need to concentrate on things other than mere technique (photo technique really being trivial when compared to any other art or craft – even pottery is more complex and requires actual learned skill!), and make that generous, human, compassionate effort to see the world and the lives from the other's point of view. to wonder 'what can we learn from people' is to betray an immense lack of imagination about the meaning of life, the place of man within his/her environment, and the idea of the environment to those who may work/live/play/ within it. polidori's claim simply reveals that to him only the surface matters, but the content or the context. a sufi shrine in a remote village in northern india is not merely a structure, but a reflection of an idea of life and heaven. the only way we could arrive at that understanding is to go beyond our materialism and into the place where the occupants of the shrine themselves want to go. empty rooms may seem poignant, but only because we can project ourselves onto them and never have to wonder or ask about those who actually lived there, or suffered there. were the lives rent asunder in new orleans merely their homes or living rooms? was the trauma, the worst of it, simply the loss of the car? a terrible lack of imagination i must say!

*Comment by [asim rafiqui](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [3:25 am](#)*

35. Asim's has a powerfully expressed argument. But I don't think it's possible to say that 'photos with people' can necessarily have any moral or artistic value over 'photos without people' (or vice versa); any more than it is possible to claim the virtues of figurative over abstract painting.

Authenticity of vision is far more important than subject matter.

*Comment by [guybatey](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [3:43 am](#)*

36. Alec, you make your point elegantly with Jeremiah Ward's makeshift shoes. But what puzzles me is your sense that we don't have adequate exposure of pictures like these "in our museums, galleries, and libraries"—that "documentary pictures of people are underrepresented in the art world." Even if you're defining "documentary" and "art world" narrowly, I just don't get this.

We're living in a period of extraordinary richness (or glut, some would say) when it comes to serious photography, from books to museums to the Web. Arguably, there's a surfeit of images of all kinds, but your argument assumes that it's a zero-sum game when it comes to display and publication of documentary images of people. Others have countered in a similar vein (Eric Perlberg, above). I wonder if you still see it the same way.

Incidentally, I'd argue that the boom in photo book publishing, especially, has created a seamless continuum from the art world through documentary to photojournalism, and back. And lots of opportunities to see first-rate documentary photographs of people.

Finally, this very productive thread raises an interesting side issue. When (if ever) should an artist or writer respond to a review, commentary, or other public provocation? On the one hand, I'm glad that you elicited the response from Polidori—and kudos to him for speaking up and putting himself on the line. On the other hand, he fell into the classic trap of being more defensive than the situation called for.

*Comment by [Alan Thomas](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [9:15 am](#)*

37. Asim, You hit the nail on the head my man. That was a beautiful post right there, and this is coming from someone who more often than not shoots pictures devoid of human presence.

While I will continue to shoot empty spaces, still lifes of personal artifacts, and people-less landscapes, I do sometimes feel that my choice to document the world in this manner has a lot to do with my own fears about interacting with people, and the "purity" (or lack-there-of) of the

exchange that takes place when photographing someone who I don't know personally, have not spoken with a great deal, or shared an experience with.

I find it very difficult to photograph "strangers" precisely because I am concerned that it is often an act of take, more than an act of give. I love people. I have ridden freight trains across America, hitchhiked my fair share, made fast friends with scottish anarchists in Edinburgh when I was a young buck of 14, and most recently, travelled the Alaska Marine Highway up to Kodiak at summers end. Solo.

Every one of the above trips has been full of encounters. Some rich, some terrifying, and most if not all, incredibly life affirming. I have no problem discussing all this in my Journal as I go. The way an old man's gait as he walked up the stairs of the Homer Hostel made me think of a lonely death, a girl in the Kodiak Harborside coffee shop so used to Men's advances in the northern fishing world that she mentioned her boyfriend thrice in the first 5 minutes I spoke with her. Or perhaps the couple who gave me a deal on a room in their house for the night, where I later discovered a poster "hidden" behind the washroom curtain that read "Number of Women MURDERED By LEGAL Abortions" with their names listed below.

When I write about these experiences, my perspective can be described in detail, and to a certain extent laid bare for me or another to take as they will upon re-reading. What if I were to photograph the above mentioned people? What kind of an "encounter" would that be? Does it lose integrity because I cannot (or will not) fully explain my motives in doing so to the people I'm shooting? Is a judgement any better, written, fleshed out, explained? Can I learn to photograph in a way that addresses these concerns honestly in a way that both they and I can understand?

These are real questions for me, and I'll run the risk of coming off cocky by saying they should be real concerns for anyone who spars with the world through the image. Photography is a negotiation, and that is what makes it exciting and gives it life. Whether we are photographing the carcasses of destruction literally or architecturally, there is a responsibility to stand up and be counted, to have an opinion, and furthermore, to stand BEHIND the images we make.

A friend just put me onto this blog yesterday, and it seems like a perfect place to discuss all of this. I'd like to thank Alec and all those participating for making this discussion as Vibrant and interesting as it is.

I'd also like to encourage people to examine the (often difficult to get a hold of) work of Esko Mannikko, if you haven't already. His work on northern fishing life, as well as the border of Texas and Mexico displays a warmth, humor, honesty, and most of all an open mindedness that I find admirable in the face of the artifice and cynicism that has dominated chelsea and academia for the past few years.

Here's to sincerity....

Easy,

Sam

*Comment by Sam Logan — January 9, 2007 @ [11:54 am](#)*

38. Greetings Alec, your blog is fabulous and thanks for this wonderful contribution to the photographic community. I thought I'd weigh in on the "lack of people" question you pose with the work of various Katrina photographers.

For my own part, the primary reason that there are no people in my Katrina photos simply is that there were no people in the landscapes I photographed. It was a silent, empty, desolate place that all the people were gone from, evacuated permanently to this or that hotel or friend's couch in some other state. It was frightening and sad to see this vast quiet graveyard of people's belongings, and to realize that the communities that have existed here for several generations are

gone, and will never be the same. So for me the lack of people is one of the fundamental points of my series.

Another hope I had for my Katrina work was that in the absence of people, the scenes and belongings could serve as symbols that might work on a more universal level. If I photographed people, then the photos would just be about those people; but a photograph of a little girl's ruined collection of socks— in the absence of the girl herself— might serve as a symbol for all of the little girls whose lives were turned upside down by this tragedy. But that's more of a side point and I'm not totally convinced of its value; a person can also serve as a universal symbol, as many people photos do.

And one other thought also: I did meet a few people down there, returning to their destroyed homes for the first time, standing shocked in the ruination of their former neighborhoods. I could have photographed them, and the thought did occur to me to try it. But then I just couldn't do it; it felt wrong to me, invasive or cheesy, like interrupting someone in the middle of their parents' funeral to ask if you can photograph them. It was a private and sacred time for them, and I didn't feel comfortable photographing even from a distance. Usually in those situations my instinct was to pack up my camera and quietly leave, because even being there photographing some other subject didn't feel right.

My final thought is that I have seen lots of photographs of people from the Katrina disaster, and none of them have really moved me. That sounds harsh as I say it, but for me it is true. A disaster-people-photo shows that person in one instant, and by the time we see the photo weeks or months or years later, that instant has passed. Maybe the person is dead by now, or maybe they are alive but their grief has passed, or maybe they are now in some other place doing something completely different. For me there is rarely enough information there for me to form the kind of complex feelings that result in being moved in some way. There are exceptions, of course, but in the case of Katrina photos, I felt somehow detached from all the images of crying people wading through the water with babies. That actually was part of my motivation to go down and photograph Katrina's aftermath— all the people photos I saw that were not really telling the deeper story that I imagined might be there.

There is a Katrina-people-photo project out there, waiting to be done, though. It would be to track down a few hundred people who were permanently displaced from their homes and photograph them in their new surroundings. People who lost everything they owned, and are still trying to get their feet under them; who formerly owned their homes and are now sleeping on friend's couches in Kansas City, or living in some squalid apartment in Houston. The tragedy of Katrina is still happening, invisibly, to 150,000 Americans. That project would be about the people themselves, and not the landscape they left behind.

Cheers and warm regards from Seattle,

~cj

*Comment by [chris jordan](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [12:21 pm](#)*

39. I have felt discomfort with photography in disaster areas with the intent of making fine art. However, I do believe that Robert Polidori and Chris Jordan's work from Katrina's aftermath walks the line. I feel that the intent of a photograph is what allows a sensitive photographer to be able to live with their conscience if they spend much time working in places where one is surrounded by people in terrible straits. Photographers like this hope for their work to serve a greater purpose. I happen to no longer be so certain that photography changes things, in most cases, even when people actually get 'the message'. But documentation of great events is still necessary, even if just to record what happened.

Polidori and Jordan's intent is to create a document that causes people to think about what happened in a different way. Some of the photos are truly haunting. Their statements express their ideas, and I feel their compassion in the work. I do not feel that way about most work of this type. While it would have been good, in my opinion, to have some photos with people to anchor

the body of work in the realm of the living, instead of representation by objects, it is still powerful work.

*Comment by Roger Richards — January 9, 2007 @ [8:24 pm](#)*

40. Chris, I'm so grateful for your levelheaded response. My initial post was titled "Where Are the People." Like Polidori, you state that most residents had evacuated New Orleans by the time you arrived. I imagine it is a letdown for those looking for a fight, but this seems to largely answer my question.

I appreciate the fact that you were uncomfortable photographing residents returning to their homes. While I wouldn't criticize another photographer for having made those pictures, I think your apprehension is completely understandable.

I've been chewing on your comments about the journalistic photographs of people from the Katrina disaster. "For me there is rarely enough information there for me to form the kind of complex feelings that result in being moved in some way," you write, "There are exceptions, of course, but in the case of Katrina photos, I felt somehow detached from all the images of crying people wading through the water with babies.

You make a good point. As you say, there are exceptions. But in many cases I agree. I'm trying to figure out why.

I don't have an answer.

But I would also add that, after awhile, I felt detached from all of the images of moldy, crumbling interiors. I suspect this is largely due to the fact I'm a photographer. The general viewer probably doesn't suffer this kind of image fatigue.

Whatever the case, I agree with your assertion that "there is a Katrina-people-photo project out there, waiting to be done." Thanks again for your comments.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [1:58 am](#)*

41. I wanted to respond to Robert Polidori both as photographer and a resident of New Orleans. I moved to New Orleans a year before the storm after working in NYC as a photojournalist/documentary photographer for 20 years, and these issues hit home to me.

I have copied his post and interjected my responses which are bracketed with ++ plus marks.

# Robert Polidori Says: January 7th, 2007 at 3:12 pm

I arrived 19 days after the storm hit.

The time when the flood waters were just beginning to recede. There were no people in these neighborhoods.

The place was empty.

I happen to have a press pass.

That was the only way to get in unless you were police, army, FEMA, or some other government entity.

The city was evacuated.

What am I suppose to do?

++ Why be defensive about it? There was (and still is) a strange abstraction in the destruction and certainly those of us who live here are appreciative of that, even in the midst of the sadness. And I agree the absence of people is part of the meaning of the picture. I have photographed in a house yesterday that is exactly as it was 19 days after the storm—totally valid I have no issues with that at all. Images of destroyed houses were included in the Katrina exposed show at the New Orleans Museum of Art, many taken by New Orleanians. Almost every photographer who flew or drove in here shot these kind of images.

We appreciate art, even if it shows the destruction of our own homes and culture. But I would be careful about making too many assumptions based on pictures like this. ++

Track down some owner and fly him or her in and pose them like stick figure props in front of their house?  
By this method maybe I would of taken 10 photos in the cumulative 3 months I spent there.

++Certainly an interesting idea, doesn't the New Yorker have the budget for that? It takes a certain sensibility to do that--maybe Mary Ellen Mark who does environmental portraits. Ten pictures, if they are the right ones, are more than enough.? ++

And besides, and more to the point, that is not my intention.  
What more are you really going to learn from having a person there?

++No way to know unless one does that, but my instinct is that it could be very interesting, although a bit expensive. ++

My belief is that you should take stills of what doesn't seem to move, and take movies or videos of does.  
It's my opinion that people come off better in movies.

++You might want to rephrase this-- it comes across as a bit arrogant and pedantic. I think you wanted to say "I" instead of "you." As photographers we need to distinguish between what we do and what can or might be done by others, but that's me, maybe you don't? ++

It is my belief that you have a lot more indices of personal values by looking at what individuals place in their living interiors than by looking at their face.  
That is why I photograph interiors.  
It's their self-intended super-go that interests me.  
It's a look at their soul life.  
Like I've been saying for 33 years rooms are both metaphors and catalysts for states of being.  
The pictures I took in New Orleans are looking at discarded exoskeletons.  
The great majority of these residents who left those homes are now somewhere else living an interrupted life.  
That was and still is the point for me.  
So go ahead- go to Houston or Atlanta and take a portrait of someone who evacuated NOLA, and see if you get a meaningful image of New Orleans.  
Like - I don't think so.

++I suppose it suits your purposes. Since you haven't any of the people who lived here I suggest that you know next to nothing about them., other than that many of the people in the Ninth Ward (is there anything to New Orleans besides that) are poor. I do know many of them.

I am perfectly willing to accept the validity of photographs of these rooms as a testimony to the power of nature and more importantly to convey a feeling of loss and sadness, but to make conclusions about the inhabitants based on what kind furniture and possessions may have floated to the ceiling in the waters and remained there for a week, and then fell to the floor is unfortunate. ++

I've always been accused by my detractors of some sort of moral failure, cowardice, or even lack of humanity by not portraying the human form.

I respond that I do better by portraying traces of character and intentions of human volition that no mug or body shot can ever exude.

++Why not say that's not your vision?" It sounds a lot more professional and less angry. Let's just say that you haven't got a feeling for people. It's OK, I like photographing furniture every now and then. Whatever works for you, ++

Another persistent criticism concerns a sense of "Beauty", like it's sinful.

Hey- If I made them ugly would you look at them more?

Would you find them more meaningful?

Or just morally more acceptable?

When I was shooting in Beyrouth in the mid 90's, many residents wanted to preserve their war-ruined neighborhoods as they were so they could remember what happened and "because they look so beautiful this way" they said.

I lost my hang-ups about death being beautiful then.

++Why even use the word beauty? It means nothing. Try "compelling," or "interestingly composed." ++

And besides, I suspect it's not so much "Beauty" these detractors object to in my work, but something far worse for the contemporary politically-correct Anglo-Saxon aesthetic conscience, namely a sense of "Sentimentality".

This is the taboo.

In relation to this concern of beauty I've come to think that there are 2 main artistic tendencies in the USA.

The New York school, that believes that if it ugly it must mean that it is intelligent, if it is beautiful it must mean that it is stupid.

The L.A. school, that believes that if it is beautiful it must be good, if it is ugly then it must be bad.

++Both the New York and Los Angeles school is that if its huge print and costs a lot of it must be good. ++

This reminds me of a Texas Country star's album, "Too Stupid for New York, Too Ugly For L.A."

Hard to tell where that leaves those Mid-Western artists.

++Ask Alec Soth, isn't he from there? But it might be a good place. I prefer the attitude towards art here in New Orleans. It comes from the bottom up. In New York it is imposed from the top. ++

Furthermore these comments about museums and galleries underrepresenting photos populated by the human figure are ridiculous and sound as if the Great Lakes had become a Sour Milk Sea.

The great number of photo exhibitions I have had to suffer through (in the US and Europe) since the 70's that posit as supposed great aesthetic and philosophical statements the musings of photographers in disguising in various declinations their physical appearance or perhaps even worse just simply cataloging their autoportraits are too numerous for my patience (and yours as a reader) to even enumerate here.

Are you requesting some sort of "Equal Time-Equal Space" provisions for every exhibition that doesn't suit your fancy?

Look I'm just like you.

I like all my pictures better than everyone else's.

++I think that statement speaks for itself. My pictures are my pictures. When I see something I like I wish I had taken it. I see a lot of work that I like, ++

But having to re-do everyone else's picture done your way would take more than all your time and you would no longer have time to be you.

++Lost me there but I try not to think about that sort of thing. I prefer to have a loose style that I can wrap around a lot of things, I like to take a lot of photographs and I don't want to limit myself....but that's me, and I certainly respect those who choose to work in more specific ways.++

Sincerely Yours,  
Robert Polidori  
Jan 7 2007, New Delhi

*Comment by [Andy Levin](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [11:25 am](#)*

42. I'm reminded of an Aperture panel I saw in New York a few months ago featuring several photographers (some mentioned above) who did work in post Katrina New Orleans. Although at first their work seemed similar, by the end of their presentations, and taking a closer look, I found it amazing how different their work was from one another. What became obvious was that the images they made were so fundamentally reflective of their personal response to the tragedy that their individuality came through in their work. People weren't necessary because in fact THEY WERE THE PEOPLE.

*Comment by [Paul Kopeikin](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [1:25 pm](#)*

43. Can we be sure that this Robert Polidori? I'm not convinced, especially since I had doubts when "Martin Parr" left a comment on a past post on your blog. Still, it's an interesting debate.

*Comment by Tim — January 10, 2007 @ [4:29 pm](#)*

44. This has been an excellent discussion and I want to say I how much I appreciate seeing what a thoughtful community of fellow artists has to say about this. Chris — eloquent as usual. I was struck immediately when you spoke in New York by your sensitivity toward the people and I believe that comes through whether they are physically present in the photographs or not. Brian, you make a strong point about the reason why it is difficult to photograph people. Psychologically we construct our identity in part by how we can set ourselves apart from those around us. When that breaks down the identity suffers a crisis.

I doubt I can add much that hasn't been said, but I do want to point to a project that Amy Stein is working on that I think addresses some of the difficulty of how to cope with the tragedy of Katrina artistically and in a way that treats the people with respect . I'm going to paste a description from the project website: <http://www.doyouknowwhatitmeans.org/>

Do You Know What it Means is a collaborative, educational effort designed to help the public better understand what life was like in New Orleans before the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster. Our mission is to collect the untold stories of the people of New Orleans by chronicling and preserving them in an accessible and public digital archive comprised of collected photographs, videos, family histories, interviews and other artifacts. The archive will result in a virtual representation of New Orleans that will in turn help bring a divided community back together.

*Comment by [Patti Hallock](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [11:40 pm](#)*

45. Regarding photography of people post-Katrina, I'm surprised that there has been no mention of the Brenda Ann Kenneally in the NYT Mag. I thought that was an extremely powerful piece.

[http://www.nytimes.com/packages/khtml/2006/08/27/magazine/20060827\\_CHILDREN\\_FEATURE.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/khtml/2006/08/27/magazine/20060827_CHILDREN_FEATURE.html)

I hope this link works.

*Comment by Peter van Agtmael — January 10, 2007 @ [11:51 pm](#)*

46. Great discussion. Regarding Chris' post about the story waiting to be told showing the Katrina survivors diaspora I believe at least one photographer is working on that. He is Chris Usher and he has received funding from the White House News Photographer Assoc and Kodak to create a mobile exhibit and book of this project, One of Us.

*Comment by [Susana Raab](#) — January 17, 2007 @ [5:00 pm](#)*

47. How many emotion stirring, life changing, fire-under-society's-ass lighting images slip by unnoticed because they were in motion and not presented to us in a still?!

2 ways to look at this:

1. If Jeremiah's feet had simply shuffled by us in a video-ed blur, we would be robbed of the opportunity to study this image, to feel it, to use it as inspiration for... so much! Take your pick!

2. If Jeremiah's feet had simply shuffled by us in a video-ed blur, we wouldn't be presented with the task of wasting energy on studying this image; we could more easily not feel it; we could more readily allow this image to slip away unattended, allowing us to more quickly busy ourselves with the fast paced goings on of our rushed society.

Hm. I for one am thrilled to be presented with the opportunity to study what I very well could have missed had it zoomed by me on a video!

Keep it coming, baby!

*Comment by [Jessica](#) — January 26, 2007 @ [3:59 pm](#)*

48. Thank you Peter for the link to Brenda Ann Kenneally. I think this is an very impressive way of communicating pictures. To underline them with the peoples thoughts, to give them not only a face but also a voice. Although I think these pictures would work without sound, I guess they would not last as long in my memory.

To come back to the discussion: Polidori and the others who took non-people-pictures in my eyes did just the right thing.

In every picture we put a little bit of our soul, our feelings. Sometimes we expose them very clear. I feel that these pictures Polidori makes, and not only the ones from katrina but also his work in tschernobyl, where he also, very stricly just pictures the ruins, without any left-over inhabitants, are very true.

The repentance of the desolation makes me, as a visitor in the world of polidoris pictures, also very desolate, with every page you turn, the hope rises to see some lone survivor, you would feel deeply satisfied to see one. But you don't, and so you don't get satisfied, Polidori leaves us with a feeling of emptiness. It is in my eyes like an open ending.

Sure if you would do a classical reportage of the desaster you have to take pictures of the people who are still there, what everyone wants to see. But why always do what the mass wants to see?

Esther-Marie | student of photography at the University of Muenster, Germany

*Comment by [Esther-Marie](#) — March 17, 2007 @ [4:48 am](#)*

