PUZZLING EVIDENCE:
REFLECTIONS ON THE SPACE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Mark Thomas Lanning, Jr.
B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2007

THESIS
Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ART
(Studio Art)
at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SPRING
2010
PUZZLING EVIDENCE:
REFLECTIONS ON THE SPACE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

A Thesis

by

Mark Thomas Lanning, Jr.

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Rachel Clarke, M.F.A.

__________________________________, Second Reader
Ian Harvey, M.F.A.

____________________________
Date
Student: Mark Thomas Lanning, Jr.

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator
Ian Harvey, M.F.A.          Date

Department of Art
Abstract

of

PUZZLING EVIDENCE:
REFLECTIONS ON THE SPACE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

by

Mark Thomas Lanning, Jr.

This paper is a reflection on my development and work to date. I address questions concerning the formation and evolution of my documentary style approach. The paper is constructed on the premise of Lewis Baltz’s suggestion that photography is a discipline whose true position may reside between the novel and film. I explore that suggestion in the context of my own artistic evolution with reference to Walker Evans, Balzac, Henri Lefebvre, and Aristotle, among others.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Rachel Clarke, M.F.A.

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

For Sarah.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not be possible without the guidance and support of a number of folks. I would like to thank the faculty of the Art Department - Rachel Clarke, Ian Harvey, Andrew Connelly, Sarah Flohr, Robert Ortbal, Tom Monteith, Dr. Daniel Frye, Evri Kwong, and Scott Parady - for the last two years worth of advice, criticism, encouragement and perspective they provided toward my development. Special thanks to Roger Vail and Elaine O’Brien whose scholarship, inspiration, and encouragement led me to pursue my goals.

For Sharmon Goff, Nigel Poor, and Douglas Dertiger, thank you all for the mentorship you have provided. My years at Sacramento State are best represented by the kind of instruction, inspiration, and opportunity provided by the Photography Department. Very special thanks also to Dan Roberson, who since 2002 has always been the first to see my prints.

And finally to my family and friends, each of who are both friend and family, I share this accomplishment with all of you, for across all my work and in this paper there is embedded an idea or insight from you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOUNDATIONS &amp; APPROACH</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUZZLING EVIDENCE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Housekeeping,” Jeff Wall, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Doughboy, Stamford, CT,” Lee Friedlander, 1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Still Fabulous,” Mark Lanning, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Frank Fat’s,” Mark Lanning, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Gate,” Mark Lanning, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Biltmore,” Mark Lanning, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>“Interior Detail of Portuguese House,” Walker Evans, 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>“Sleeper,” Mark Lanning, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>“Bed,” Mark Lanning, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>“Chairs,” Mark Lanning, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>“Wrapped Biba,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>“Abandoned Recliner,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>“Living Room,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>“Artesia, NM,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>“Brooks Park, Memphis,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>“Memphis Hawk,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>“Natomas, CA,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>“Causeway, Floodplain,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Lunchroom, Carlsbad Cavern,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>”VFW 4009, Texas,” Mark Lanning, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Resting Walker,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Interstate 11 Bypass Bridge,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>“Fountain,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>“Mia Moore Ave.,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>“Las Vegas Electric,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>“Covered Car, Downtown Las Vegas,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>“Picnic, Lake Mead,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>“Course Houses, Lakes Las Vegas,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>“Propped House, Lake Las Vegas,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>“Pullover, 215 N,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>“New Street, North Las Vegas,”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“It might be more useful, if not necessarily more true, to think of photography as a narrow, deep area between the novel and film.” –Lewis Baltz (Baltz 1990)

Photographer Lewis Baltz has engaged the numerous and sometimes indefinite implications of his chosen medium throughout his career. His quote addresses a desire to better explain where his work comes from. He alludes to a space between two art forms that share ontological similarities in the way they can function in time, describe through images, and deliver narrative. Of course there are obvious distinctions - the use of photographic images to describe in film vs. language in the novel – but what Baltz’s “more useful” suggestion is getting at is that he believes his work cannot be best understood if it is predominantly viewed through the conventions of a two dimensional image alone – photography can more effectively be understood by how it combines and borrows from other artistic forms. Baltz’s quote addresses questions I found myself asking and working through in the last two years; common issues raised to, and by photographers that choose to engage themselves in art practice.

That photography has been fixated on its position and standing in art practice from the moment of Daguerre’s announcement of its invention in 1839 reflects the initial questions surrounding the technology. Photography was not invented as a ready-made artistic medium. No photographer’s equipment enables him or her to be an artist. Because a camera is a recording device, it has a closer correlation to the phonograph than it does to a painting. Though a photograph can collect time, it cannot give it back, as a film
could\(^1\); and though it can present a viewer with a scene, it cannot narrate, as with the novel.

When artist and photographer Jeff Wall was asked to discuss the categorization of his images, such as “Housekeeping, 1996” (fig. 1), as being narrative, his answer similarly commented on a proximity to writing and film:

“All [photographs can] do is suggest what it might be like to experience a narrative... what’s beautiful about them is you feel like you might be in the presence of some kind of narrative - but you aren’t.”\(^2\)

For Wall, the answer to his line of questioning was the staging of his images. He uses production techniques from film and the tableau of 18\(^{th}\) century French painting to hold together the still image, all of which combine to hint toward narrative. A photograph such as Wall’s “Housekeeping” presupposes what has occurred before and anticipates what will happen after. All it shows, however, is one transitory instant in between. The paradox given in Wall’s quote and demonstrated in his work is similarly reflected in the writing of Roland Barthes, who describes the photograph as being “false on the level of perception, true on the level of time.”

The “narrow, deep area between the novel and film,” which Baltz has characterized as being the space of photography, is narrow for its limitations and deep for the different ways in which an artist can capitalize on those limitations. In this paper I will describe where I stand on these and similar issues, and present the resulting work.

---

\(^1\) “Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration…” Andre Bazin (Trachtenberg 1980)

FOUNDATIONS & APPROACH

“I only wanted Uncle Vernon standing by his own car (a Hudson) on a clear day, I got him and the car. I also got a bit of Aunt Mary’s laundry and Beau Jack, the dog, peeing on the fence, and a row of potted tuberous begonias on the porch and 78 trees and a million pebbles in the driveway and more.”

“The camera is not merely a reflecting pool and the photographs are not exactly the mirror, mirror on the wall that speaks with a twisted tongue.”
–Lee Friedlander (Galassi 2005)

In the late winter and early spring months of 2006 I did a short project in midtown and downtown Sacramento that focused on night shots of the structures lining the grid. While I had been developing a personal visual approach as a photographer in the years before, this was the first project in which I was able to assemble a mixture of my desired content in conjunction with a visual structure toward a desired end result. In this section I will discuss this earlier work in order to show how my earlier experiences have directed my work to its current state.

Lee Friedlander speaks to two competing senses in the quotes above. The first quote expresses a type of origin-story fascination with the potential of photographs, while the second quote reflects Friedlander’s long experience and insight as an artist (fig. 2). The phase in between the experiences that generated each quote is the space I found myself in 2006 as the project developed. I was leaving behind the period of skill building and a wholesome attraction to creating images and beginning to engage with what I wanted out of the pictures.

The night shots project (figures 3-6) was the introduction to a number of new questions. To achieve cohesion between the images and their content required the
development of a structure, and with a structure came focus\(^3\). In this early case, the building blocks of that structure were arrived at deductively. For example, I knew that I would be contact printing each image as a platinum-palladium print that would necessitate a large negative. I also knew that each image had to be developed independently, and specifically toward the print, which eliminated my use of a roll film camera. The answer in each case was the use of an 8x10 view camera.

A few times each week I would go out after dark to stalk the midtown and downtown streets in search of shots. In a quiet town like Sacramento there’s rarely anyone walking around after midnight. I favored this sterile setting to examine the structures lining the streets - not for its human absence but for its human and historical presence\(^4\). After shooting the originating image in the project, “Still Fabulous, 2006” (fig.3), every time I found a suitable scene I framed the image in a similar fashion. I worked off the symmetry of the primary architectural structure to line up the frame, which I then used to create tension with the asymmetric elements of the city\(^5\).

I was also attracted to the quality of artificial light, especially when given a long exposure. Because I wanted every element in the frame to contribute to the total reading, I stopped my lens down as far as it would go, f. 64, for maximum focus. This considerably reduces the amount of light that exposes the film, and as a result any one

---

\(^3\) In an interview, Stephen Shore described the way a structure works for him: “Simple economy lead me to only take one exposure of a subject. I knew I couldn't economize by only taking pictures that I knew would be good – that would simply lead to boring, safe images. But, I could decide what I really wanted to photograph and how I wanted to structure the picture. This was a powerful learning experience. I began to learn what I really wanted.” (Colberg 2007)

\(^4\) “All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence.” Andre Bazin (Trachtenberg 1980)

\(^5\) trees, signs of the passage of time, and the other visible structures
photograph represents 15 to 45 minutes of exposure. The detail coupled with the time created an effect that I could not properly describe. Later in my research, however, I came upon this quote from Walter Benjamin’s essay *A Short History of Photography*, in which he describes the visual effect of early portraiture:

“The procedure itself caused the models to live, not out of the instant, but into it; during the long exposure they grew, as it were, into the image.” (Trachtenberg 1980)

Though Benjamin was describing the effect of a human imprint onto the film, the long process of laying these images down to the film, where everything must be absolutely still for as long as 45 minutes, left an image with a presence that was surreal in its stillness and captivating for the way it could hint around the apparent human vacancy.

This project was the main motivation for my subsequent ambitions. Many of the elements seemed to line themselves up, and though I made the most of it while it was fresh, the structure began to run away with itself. At the time, I blamed the changing of the season, from winter into spring. At that point I had yet to really examine what had happened. After creating this series of photographs, I was no longer satisfied with the prospect of making a collection of disparate images. It was only by engaging the deductive process that had led to this early series of images that I was able to reenter the state of mind necessary to follow it with a new series. In the following sections I will discuss how I was able to learn from the lessons of the 2006 series in order to move beyond it.
DEVELOPMENT

“I used [Flaubert’s method] in two ways: Both his realism or naturalism, and his objectivity of treatment. The nonappearance of the author. The nonsubjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I want to use the camera, and do.”
–Walker Evans (Mellow 1999)

“Further along the street one notes the doors, studded with huge nails, on which our ancestors recorded the passions of the age in hieroglyphs, once understood in every household, the meaning of which no one will now ever again unravel.”
–Honoré de Balzac (Balzac 1833, trans. 1955)

Photographers have been assembling a visual language – or vernacular – since the establishment of the snapshot. Naturally different conventions have emerged over time. The long tradition of documentary and documentary-style photographers spoke to me most, and the more I worked the better I was able to situate myself in that tradition. The documentary landscape, broadly defined, can be treacherous for an aspiring artist. For example, what differentiates “artistic social documentation” from photo-reportage or journalism (Rosenblum 2007), and how can one’s individual artistic voice compete with such a well-established and similar mode?

The above quote from Walker Evans is useful here. When Evans speaks of “nonsubjectivity,” he is not merely using another (or incorrect) word for “objectivity.” Evans’ “nonsubjectivity” relates to his visual approach, not his message. James R. Mellow, in his biography of Walker Evans, elaborates on this situation while referencing an image of Evans’, “Interior Detail of Portuguese House, 1930” (fig. 7), as such:

“The pictures on the walls, the poverty of taste, the carelessness of the housekeeping, the hands of the clock on the shelf, the calendar on the wall – all

6 “Documentary: That's a sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. . . . The term should be documentary style. . . . You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless.” -Walker Evans, 1971.

In her sweeping account of the history of photography, Naomi Rosenblum elaborates that it was not until the 1930’s that documentary was characterized as a style or approach, “when American photography historian Beaumont Newhall noted that while the social documentary photographer is neither a mere recorder nor an "artist for arts sake, his reports are often brilliant technically and highly artistic"—that is, documentary images involve imagination and art in that they imbue fact with feeling.” (Rosenblum 2007)

7 “…And tradition implies community; our perpetually unfinished arguments of the art of the past are proof of its vitality.” (Galassi 2000)
*define the character and circumstances, time and place. The eye collects; the camera frames.*” (Mellow 1999)

Here we can see clear evidence of the “nonsubjectivity” – that is – Evans himself is nowhere to be explicitly found in this visual approach (“The eye collects; the camera frames.”). If you take Evans or Mellow at their word, then it’s not such a leap for one to draw a connection between this type of image making and the second quote heading this section, from Honoré de Balzac’s 1833 novel, *Eugénie Grandet*. It is this fusion of a novelist’s sense for detail with the photographer’s eye that is recognized as his primary artistic contribution, and is no doubt at least one source of Lewis Baltz’s idea of a “narrow, deep area between the novel and film.” While characteristics of this may present themselves in journalistic photography, the goal of that field is undoubtedly more concerned with objectively informing a reader/viewer through its depiction of situations or relationships.

My first project in the Master’s program at Sacramento State University was a series examining a very specific social setting: the alley behind my apartment. It was a source for experimentation, and in that series I worked through these ideas in a number of ways. In retrospect, the series is itself a fusion of different modes of documentary photography, the structure of which amounted to a medley of styles informed by photo-reportage (the use the Graflex and flash bulbs), the early social documentation of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine (scenes such as “Sleeper, 2008” and “Bed, 2008,” fig. 8-9), and the scene-specific poetics developed by Walker Evans (fig. 10: “Chairs, 2008”). The alley project was instrumental in my development. I worked with a structure - a concept developed in the night shots of 2006 – and through that structure I was forced to work through decisions about the style I was truly after.

---

8 “This said, however, it also must be emphasized that one cannot be too categorical about such distinctions, since all photographs defy attempts to define their essential nature too narrowly, and in the case of works that have social change as their prime goal the passage of time has been especially effectual in altering purpose, meaning, and resonance.”(Rosenblum 2007)

9 The Graflex is a 4x5 field camera, a model commonly described as a “press camera” due to its ubiquity among the press corps, especially in the 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s.
Though the profusion of influences was helpful in pushing my development along, I sensed that the alley project suffered from a crisis of identity. The black and white prints were so evocative of the crime scene photographs - such as those by Weegee the Famous - and the content and message was so comparatively understated that at the close of that project, which ran well into my second semester, I found it necessary to focus more on developing a balance between my structural and visual approaches. A second round of experimentation led to two new approaches that I would later combine. The first approach was to reexamine my use of the 8x10 view camera based on the results of the alley series. “Wrapped Biba, 2009” (fig. 11), with its extended use of space, best exemplifies results of this reexamination, as well as “Abandoned Recliner, 2009” (fig. 12 - a scene lit by the headlights of my car - evocative of the way I or any driver would have seen the chair in the unlit corner of the cul-de-sac that it temporarily resided in). The second new approach was continued experimentation with the Graflex and the use of color film, the most successful example of which is “Living Room, 2009” (fig. 13).

Though I had experience making color photographs, until this moment I had never committed to the process. Looking at the photographs I made during that time, I notice how the color aided me in looking at more within my frame. With less attention paid to the shape of an object, as is more standard with black and white images, and the ability to let the color form the interest of the image, the photographs I made by combining color with the style of the alley series seemed fresh and exciting, somewhere unknown. To compare two of the most successful images, “Bed” from the alley series and “Living Room” from the color selections, I really expand the possible meanings a viewer might find within the frame. “Bed,” a fairly narrative photograph, relies on light to express the form of the mattress that has been dragged behind a utility box for comparative seclusion from the alley. The second light from behind triangulates the frontal light, brings out the texture of the mattress cover, and suggests car lights or security floods – the attempt at privacy is subverted. “Living Room” on the other hand is decidedly more obscure. There are numerous possibilities for interpretation: many colors and objects fight for visual dominance. Though all the elements seem secure in the frame,
there is an unmistakable tension in the way that each culturally expressive object in the space is layered, so that one upon another they can “invent meaning” (Baltz 1990) for a viewer. “The eye collects; the camera frames.”

By the end of my first year as a graduate student, I had researched and navigated though several territories of documentary photography. In my second year, I would become more ambitious with regard to the projects I made. All the while I continued to develop my visual approach, checking those developments against the structures I established as my methodology. In the final section, with my foundations and development in mind, I will discuss the two culminating bodies of work.
“Systems reveal the most about themselves at some point where they’re about to break.” – Lewis Baltz (Baltz 1990)

“Suddenly there is a difference between a quaint evocation of the past and an open window looking straight down a stack of decades.” – Walker Evans (Trachtenberg 1980)

Artists are always chasing after the creation of some “virtual object” (Lefebvre 1970): some project, some painting, some photograph, or some message that we know we have in us, but has yet to materialize. In search of this goal, we are led by a desire to better understand the work we have made: where did it succeed, where did it fail, and did it fail to materialize as that “virtual object”? In this section I will discuss two projects. The first, a road trip across the states, was an expansive experience in pursuit of a new concept: space. The other, an examination in two parts of Las Vegas, was a culmination of the advances I made in the road trip work and the previous projects discussed in this paper.

When looking at previous projects - the night shots, the alley project, and the experimental 8x10 and color photographs - I noticed similarities that led to the development of a concept of space. That embryonic concept of space informed the road trip work. The dissimilar scenes and objects depicted in the road trip work are a result of three weeks and over 6,000 miles. The time and distance provided unprecedented working freedom. I let the work lead me, and as a result the final edit of 100 prints was an inductive decision based on the pictorial and structural advances I made. It was during that final edit that I fixated on concepts of space, based on the results of the work.

“Space,” however, is an especially multifaceted term. Head space, public space, political space, even Baltz’s “narrow, deep area,” the applications are nearly unlimited, so what space was I seeking? What space had I found? To illustrate rather than define for the time being, I will refer to photographs such as “Artesia, New Mexico, 2009” (fig. 14) and “Brooks Park, Memphis, 2009” (fig. 15). Each scene is an open “public space” and photographs emphasize broad use of “pictorial space.” Other photographs such as
“Memphis Hawk, 2009” (fig. 16) and “Natomas, CA, 2009” (fig. 17), speak to containment: the enclosure of the injured bird and the fenced off, arrested development of a privately owned space. “Artesia, New Mexico,” “Brooks Park, Memphis” and “Causeway, Floodplain, 2009” (fig. 18) are scenes set up for a viewer to enter, engage, and “invent meaning.” By giving viewers a number of scenes to invent that meaning, and compiling them with less expansive images such as “Lunchroom, Carlsbad Cavern, 2009” (fig. 19) and “VFW 4009, Texas, 2009” (fig. 20) I mean for each image to read off the others. This convention of using inter-related photographs in the edit is useful because while space was a focus in content and construction in the case of these photographs, they are structured treatments of individual scenes; any one photograph’s content makes more sense in the context of the series. In other words, I was not trying to countermand the documentary-style approach and content in adherence to a rigid conceptual message, but rather to synthesize the benefits of each approach for my purposes.

Because I have already defined myself as a documentary-style photographer, you will know that social, political, and economic examination is a source of inspiration to me. The work made in Las Vegas was conceived with a goal or theory in mind, my “virtual object.” From the outset, I did not know how to achieve that goal, but I did have tools to draw from, many of which were developed in the summer of 2009.

To set up the discussion of this work, I am going to first explain the way that my pursuit of a project like the work made in Las Vegas (figures 21-31) was informed by discourse. In the 1970 book *The Urban Revolution*, Henri Lefebvre attempts to formulate a theory on “urban society.” In pursuit of this, Lefebvre’s “virtual object,” he describes the way discourse will direct him toward that goal:

10 “I can look at these pictures through the eyes of a builder/archeologist and relive the process as though they were occurring in real time, or I can look at them through the eyes of a photographer who’s preoccupied with scale and who can therefore compress or expand the objects and their field to the point where consciousness must supply an arbitrary time-line. As soon as that happens, an unreal or unworliday atmosphere invades the work, and the viewer is set free to speculate and invent meaning.” (Baltz 1990)

11 “To discourse analysts, ‘discourse’ usually means actual instances on communicative action in the medium of language, although some define the term more broadly as ‘meaningful symbolic behavior’ in any mode… we tend to be interested in what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language, knowledge based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before, to do things in the world.” (Johnstone 2008)
“...we can build a theory from a theoretical hypothesis. The development of such a theory is associated with a methodology. For example, research involving a virtual object, which attempts to define and realize that object as part of an ongoing project, already has a name: transduction. The term reflects an intellectual approach toward a possible object, which we can employ alongside the more conventional activities of deduction and induction.” (Lefebvre 1970)

Lefebvre is employing this transduction “toward a certain concrete,” adding “there is no empirical recipe for fabricating this product.” Because his theory did not already exist, he could not properly deduce or induce its existence. He could, however, and “alongside the more conventional activities of deduction and induction,” incorporate transduction into his methodology; his “intellectual approach toward a possible object.” The importance of Lefebvre’s methodology to me was that there was an established theory and method to integrating a goal (theoretical hypothesis) and a result (of methodology) toward a “possible object.”

The photograph that most directly led to the work in Las Vegas was “Natomas, CA” from the road trip, or space series. In light of the massive recession, I was seeing structures and developments like this all around; projects whose funding fell through, abandoned offices, storefronts, and foreclosed homes. We all saw it, and we were all confused as to how it came about. I wanted to address issues surrounding the specifics of this nationwide disaster. To do that, I decided that instead of attempting to document the entire country – a dizzying prospect considering the scale of the nation and the complexity of the issue – I would select one place, one space: Las Vegas.

The Las Vegas I was after was not the tourist & gaming Las Vegas but Las Vegas the city – a city whose speed of expansion was only to be outdone by the speed of its collapse to insolvency. By February 2009, just over a year after the official start of the recession, Las Vegas had surpassed Detroit - which for over 4 decades has been emptying itself since the pullout of General Motors manufacturing plants - as the nation’s most

---

12 His theory on “urban society”
abandoned city\textsuperscript{14}. That’s a pretty powerful thing to happen to any city, but I saw and opportunity in the way a geographically contained area like Las Vegas could in some way reveal itself as a model of the issue at large.

Selecting a venue and researching the extent of the issues that go on there is only one aspect of the creation of this work, the only aspect that I could work out from an armchair. What I really needed to have any idea of how I was going to bring the project about was to be in the field. So in February 2010 I rented a car, packed my equipment, and set off. After five days of continuous shooting, I had 70 4x5 images. Looking at the photographic results of that first trip (figures 21-27), I noticed, but could not at first understand, a disconnect that shook my assumptions of what this work was going to be. I decided to plan a second trip to see if I could work through the results of my first attempt, to steer myself back toward the project I had envisioned. Instead of renting a car I took a Greyhound bus, and along with my equipment I also happened to pack a copy of Lefebvre’s \textit{The Urban Revolution}\textsuperscript{15}.

The photographs of that second trip (figures 28-31) did not alter the path I was on with the work. Again, I had thought of steering things back toward my original, descriptive vision of the project from afar, and again my photographs responded more to the situation on the ground than they did to my projections. The responsive feedback I was getting from the reality of the situation reverberated against the type of structural approach I had established in my earlier works. As a result, the purposes of my interest in space transformed from a concept of space described categorically to a concept of space imbued with a one-to-one level of experience.

\textsuperscript{14} An especially cruel twist of fate for writer Hal Rothman who in 2002, writing about the worker union presence in Las Vegas wrote: “In the process, [the Culinary Union] ensured Las Vegas’s place as ‘the Last Detroit,’ the last place in American society where unskilled and semiskilled workers can make a middle-class wage and have those dollars create the prosperity that once was the hallmark of the unionized American working class.” (Rothman 2002) Las Vegas is now more likely to be referred to as “the next Detroit.”

\textsuperscript{15} It was on the bus, between Baker and Las Vegas, that I first read about transduction. My first impression of that concept led in some way to my following up the results of the first trip rather than attempting to scrap or reformulate the project.
The one photograph that best communicated the evolving nature of the project to me is “Resting Walker, 2010” (fig. 21). On my second day of shooting I was out working on the eastern edge of the city, mountains at my back and the whole of Las Vegas in front on me to the west. I made three exposures, and like many of the images from the first trip, they turned out to be survey photographs: here is the size of the town, here is an abandoned house, here is a dumped appliance, etc. As I climbed down the bluff I was on, which was really the leveled portion of some bankrupt development butted up against the mountains, this man came walking up the street and stopped. Sensing he was doing his thing and I just happened to be there, I asked if he might mind if I take his picture – just as out of the ordinary for me as I and my view camera were to him. He said no, he didn’t mind, he was just resting at the halfway point of his usual eight-mile walk. I framed the image from where I was standing; he stood erect in his place. I said thanks, goodbye, and we went on our separate ways.

It is extremely uncommon for me to make a picture like this. On some level, I resent the association between photographers and portraiture, the expectation of it. On another level it simply didn’t interest me. But that day I was presented with the opportunity and I wasn’t being precious with my film. I didn’t have to justify anything. It will seem quaint to say, but after years of working alone and for the most part never feeling the impulse to take a person’s portrait, I really appreciate the way that man stands between me and the austere landscape behind him. Perhaps to a viewer it will appear only as a portrait, but “Resting Walker,” to me, represents the untenable space between my motives for the project and the reality of working there.

At the close of my editing process, I eliminated every picture from my final selection that had more to do with my original intent than my reflexive response to working across the city, regardless of whether or not what I knew about Las Vegas was coming across. By working in Las Vegas, I was most effective in making beautifully constructed scenes, articulated by detail, and each one of them in their own way always seemed to concede to despair. In this respect I was no longer making documents; I was more script ing a tragedy in the documentary style.
In Poetics, Aristotle notes the importance of the principle of “dramatic irony” - that before the audience sees the play they know the end, and that they know more than the characters as the play unfolds. In this way, tragedy “shows” rather than “tells” (Aristotle, Fergusson 1961). We live in a time when we study the increasing impact of our culture from a social, environmental, and economic point of view. Empirical evidence points out certain trends, from global warming to the poisoning of our water supply to the massive, system wide defrauding of the financial system. Overwhelmed by the results, we argue about which facts are true, which facts are relevant, which facts are not facts at all, and what it all might lead to. Too little is done by any of us, it seems, to change or in any way augment the path it appears evident we are headed down. Despair. The error I made in constructing a structure to document a social situation in Las Vegas from afar is this: no amount of fact-based treatment about a situation we already know to be true can any longer affects us. It’s just one more problem, and any document would be filed until the situation played itself out. By Aristotle’s reasoning, this is why tragedy was more philosophical than history - where history is concerned with a narrative based on specifics, tragedy addresses more universal consequences (Aristotle, Fergusson 1961). My Las Vegas work is not, of course, a literal attempt at tragedy. But by not redirecting the course of my project toward my ideal, by not ignoring my response to the real place, all that puzzling evidence, I did find a new space, one step closer to Baltz’s “narrow, deep area.”
FIGURES


4. “Frank Fat’s,” Mark Lanning, 2006
5. “Gate,” Mark Lanning, 2006

7. “Interior Detail of Portuguese House,” Walker Evans, 1930


![Image of a bed on the ground behind a fence.]


![Image of two chairs against a wall with graffiti.]

12. “Abandoned Recliner,” Mark Lanning, 2009
13. “Living Room,” Mark Lanning, 2009


17. “Natomas, CA,” Mark Lanning, 2009

18. “Causeway, Floodplain,” Mark Lanning, 2009

20. ”VFW 4009, Texas,” Mark Lanning, 2009
22. “Interstate 11 Bypass Bridge,” Mark Lanning, 2010

23. “Fountain,” Mark Lanning, 2010
24. “Mia Moore Ave.,” Mark Lanning, 2010

26. “Covered Car, Downtown Las Vegas,” Mark Lanning, 2010

27. “Picnic, Lake Mead,” Mark Lanning, 2010
28. “Course Houses, Lakes Las Vegas,” Mark Lanning, 2010

29. “Propped House, Lake Las Vegas,” Mark Lanning, 2010

31. “New Street, North Las Vegas,” Mark Lanning, 2010
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Baltz, Lewis. Rule without Exception. De Moines, Iowa: Published by the University of New Mexico in Association with the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa, 1990. Print.


