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Writers in New York
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Flickr

It is to the borders of the photos I take that I often find my attention drawn. The borders frame my composition, which is more often than not pure happenstance, and pose hard lines beyond which only my memory can serve me. The picture that makes its way into one of my photo albums is carefully selected. It might have been taken earlier that day, or even mere hours before being added when I am most active in my curation. As with baseball cards during a pending trade on the playground, I consider carefully the relation of each new addition to the other photos in an album. These photos, after all, go together; though sometimes a photo must be evicted. My Flickr albums have straightforward titles: *Side of the Road*, *People*, *Planes*, and *New York*. If there is a story to tell in each set of images—about neighborhood streets that I incorporated into my route, or the baristas at the café I frequent who brew and joke and sit on the stairs each morning—then of course I might begin by taking pictures as I encounter the events in my life.

But I don't like carrying a camera. And I certainly don't like pointing it at people. I love camera culture, and have obsessed over equipment purchases; yet to capture these moments, you need to play the role of photographer. I say that my composition is often a surprise because it is common for me to release the shutter as a part of one quick motion—I swing the camera to my eye, focus, fire, and tuck it back by my side. This is a gesture that I hope no one sees. I am not a photographer, so a quick photo snapped at the restaurant table or a pause in the procession of foot traffic in the Village seems a rude

interruption. Usually I only intrude on myself, with no others inconvenienced; and still the desire to be inconspicuous persists. I am a New Photographer—"not a professional, but I like shooting with my Android and my iPhone," as Flickr exec Bernardo Hernandez says. But I also own a fancy DSLR, which, as a New Photographer—a shutterbug—I am both tempted and reluctant to tote.

I enjoy looking at images. Like many others, I have made a habit of trawling the Explore section of Flickr. There, one finds 500 images presented in a large tiling across the screen, easily traversed by a flick of the mouse wheel. The images of this sampling carry the quality of *interestingness* teased out by a clever algorithm. Flickr, since 2004, has been a social network of photographers that encourages contributors to comment on each other's work, mark images as personal favorites, and tag uploads to help others search for images relevant to their queries. From this information, an aggregate of Flickr's daily activity is formed. A moving 24-hour window of these images brings forth from the more than one million uploaded per day a small offering of those that you ought to peruse. "You might want to take your phone off the hook, send your boss to an executive training session and block off some time on your schedule, because we don't think you're going to be walking away from your screen any time soon," jests the Flickr Team.

My initially impartial browsing leads to me clicking on an image that catches my eye, followed by several minutes spent consuming as much of it's creator's photostream as I can. Every image uploaded resides in this continuous roll, but should an image belong to an album, clicking on it will place you among the others that album contains. A one-off can happen, where a contributor's photo that has been blessed by the algorithm

leads me to a collection of photos that entirely fails to impress. But usually, there is a through-line in this person's work. How satisfying it is to find other gems, often as part of a set—*The Streets of San Francisco*—and immerse myself in their tone, their lines, their depth of field, the souls that seem fixed before me, the things that seem to be present or missing in each photo. It is rare to catch a glimpse of the image-maker himself. If the photographer has been honest (with himself, and with me), I learn about him by seeing the things he sees. His dogs, dancers at a festival in Berlin, his hotel he checks into for the convention the next morning, a train waiting at the platform, his children smiling with their suitcases—these photos feel intimate, and I sense that I might understand parts of this man by the few photos he chooses to show us. What might lie beyond the borders, having taken place before, during, or after the photo was taken, I cannot know. And yet, when it is common for albums to contain only a dozen images, I am always captivated by what I can glean from them. The small album speaks most strongly of a story or a narrative. And this narrative need not always relate to the owner's life. William Saroyan, author and dramatist, tells us, "San Francisco itself is art, above all literary art. Every block is a short story, every hill a novel. Every home is a poem, every dweller within immortal. This is the whole truth." Many have successfully captured the charm of brick and concrete, by simply walking down the street. Photos, often taken with iPhones, have showed us this art, and the story in which those who take them interact. Speaking to his considerable collection of early 20th century American post cards, Luc Sante claims:

If I were to come upon a substantial body of pictures by the same photographer, I might be able to make some guesses concerning his or her interests, ambitions, work habits, sense of humor, visual education, and imaginative empathy.

The photos to which Sante refers—encompassing those of Walker Evans and Robert Frank—were "taken by all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons," and if all of the ones taken between 1905 and 1920 could be assembled, he says, you would have a "one-to-one scale map of the non-urban United States then in all its splendor and misery." Photos, strung together, tell us a story—usually one we must work a little to construct. It is this work we must do, searching for what may be missing in a photo, using our imagination and context to color in a scene, which gives the small album its allure. I maintain that many stray far from photographing their own lives, but never fail to offer us a glimpse into someone's way of seeing. There are stories all around me that I want to tell—these are the interesting things, or at least the things that cause me to linger or return later to take that picture. I suspect my photos tell more about me than I know.

A few nights ago, I left my apartment just east of Greenwich Village in the early evening, heading west to run along the Hudson River. I was entering into my third week of living in the city, and had managed to join the river trail at an unfamiliar lot. Following an older jogger, I peeled down a wooden dock, assuming our course would spit us back into the park or the bike trail. Moments before meeting my fellow jogger, I had run past a Latin music festival. I was in a particularly good mood. Now I was staring up at four stories of golfers driving from open terraces towards the water, with towering nets limiting their range. On the opposite side of the narrow dock were the yachts being hosed down after a day of entertainment. The sun was setting, and warm reds and purples coated the white hulls; their wet surfaces were close enough to touch. Continuing back out onto the sidewalks, I followed footpaths through gardens and rounded out and back along each pier that I encountered. At the sound of a small helicopter taking off from a

nearby pad, I braced myself on a railing to watch it fly out over the water as others came in to land. I hadn't brought my camera, much less my phone. These omissions were intentional, but I felt—watching rotors spool up, the sun melting behind a party boat in the distance—a pain in not being able to place some artifact of this moment in among the others accruing in my album since I had arrived. It hurt to think that I might forget the beauty and freedom I felt during my hours spent running along the Hudson.

I saw the power of the city that night—in the youth and money and intellectual vitality that came from the people all around me. How would I ever explain what I had experienced to my father, who I know relishes my enthusiasm in sharing such adventures with him. So much is lost when I try to replace the docks, the joggers, the boats, and the lights with words. Photos bring immediately to the fore that which any writing or drawings I might hope to produce will always struggle to evoke—the air of believability. Because somehow sitting down to tell a story while spreading out proof in photos before a listener alters the entire enterprise of relating an experience. Standing at my desk in my bedroom when my father came to visit me in New York this past weekend, I had the opportunity to pull up my growing album on my computer. It contained only 32 photos; each photo had its place, and many aspects of my story were unrepresented. But this photo essay, as it became when I began narrating to my father, allowed me to focus on telling what I had learned, what I did in the spaces I had photographed, what I now talk about with the people he could see, and what I was thinking when *that one was taken*.

I don't like carrying a camera. But I find a deep satisfaction in reviewing images that I have taken while the memory and emotions surrounding them are readily accessible. These images are processed and retooled before I upload at times just a single

photo. The desire to produce a telling image, even if I must revisit the site of a previous outing, camera in hand, wins out over any timorousness I might retain as a New Photographer. Each time I upload new photos to my albums, I am able to review my progress, and see the story that I have lived take form. And ultimately, these photos are for me. When I look back over those I have taken in *New York*, I can't help but poke around farther back in my photostream. Pictures taken as I rolled through North Carolina back roads put me back on my bike, back in my races. I can see my campus come into view at the end of a long day in the saddle. My photos give back to me more than they could ever offer the user who happens upon them as they browse. My memory steps in to fill in what lies beyond their borders, to give a voice to the people laughing in my photos or conjure up emotions that I had felt when I took them. I take these photos because they strengthen my own stories as I encounter them again and again. I share my photos because I want to connect with the people in my life, by offering snapshots to ride along with my emails and social media.

The striking difference between the troves of images shared in communities like Flickr and the photos we are presented with from our friends and family—the ones pouring in from our various social media platforms—is the irrefutable feeling of intention that emanates from the former. The images found on Flickr are often plucked from an individual's online gallery, posted in the hopes of reaching—and redirecting—a larger audience. Though, many contributors use Flickr in the same vein as I do: as a free one-terabyte repository. By careful selection, the contributor concentrates our perusal on discrete statements, which may be arranged in any number of ways: order, quantity, and even spatial layout on the screen. Technically perfect photos with balanced histograms,

tack sharp focus, and richly saturated colors may impress, but they often tell little. The shared characteristic of nearly every photo that is picked out for the Explore section of Flickr is simplicity. The most successful photos seem to quickly plant an idea into the viewer's mind, or reach out and connect them to a single subject staring back at them. Spaces presented to us have lines that guide our eyes and let us easily inhabit them. All of this happens in an instant. The purpose of the successful photo is breathed in. When placed among others in an album, we quickly flit from frame to frame, coming back to those whose message seems to have changed in light of the others. The comments, the number of views, and the varied path a photo may take as it is shared in various groups and subcommunities on Flickr all seem to come about when things are simplified—distilled for power, for ease of transmission—in order to tell stories. A young Afghan girl whose green eyes lock with the viewer's, a kayak about to crest a waterfall, an abandoned diner on the side of the highway—these images do not fail to tell us what exactly their creator thought was important. What is missing in each picture is the context and story that must be filled in as we encounter them. As with reading, looking through these albums seems to be an active, rather than passive preoccupation. Sometimes the details we fill in amount not to a sweeping consciousness of 1920s Americana, but instead yield a smaller tale—one of a father and a son on their first deep-sea fishing trip. When we take the time to study an album, eyes wondering over the tiled wall of images, we can't help but fabricate our own story. We will make sense of what fragments you, the author, have left us. Surely we paint a bit of ourselves into it as we go. The less you give us, the more we will imagine. We will weave in a story—perhaps personal, and maybe political. Flickr

allows me to share my life while attempting to understand the lives of others around the world—and all this without words.