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Cure Ignorance

Slow Seeing

How a 'rephotography' project taught me to go beyond looking
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On July 31, 1870, the geologist Joseph LeConte got up 'at peep of day' to see the sun rise from Glacier Point on the south rim of Yosemite Valley. He and his students from the young University of California had left the Bay Area 10 days before. They traveled by horseback, camping along the way, even though railroad service most of the way there had recently opened. LeConte went alone to Glacier Point to watch the sunrise, and after 'about one and a half hour's rapturous gaze,' he went back to the camp for breakfast. Then, he reports, the whole party 'returned to Glacier Point, and spent the whole of the beautiful Sunday morning in the presence of grand mountains, yawning chasms, and magnificent falls.'

How long does it take to see something? I've wondered about that for a long time, watching people stroll through art museums, or stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon for a few minutes or so, then turn around to whatever's next. If there's one thing our culture's given us, it's the opportunity to have something else that's next, or just multitaskable right now. The way one casually meets people at parties is how we mostly meet the world's places nowadays. But LeConte's long vigil on the rim of the valley represented a desire and then perhaps a realization of that desire to know the place more deeply.

I too have been spending time in Yosemite, working on a project with the photographers Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe for a couple of years now, and one of the singular pleasures has been sitting around while they make photographs. Because of the technical nature of the work, we spend from a couple of hours to a couple of days at each location, and while they're working I'm mostly doing what LeConte was doing, the hardest thing to do in this culture, that thing often only done when sitting in a stalled car or waiting for the doctor to see you: nothing. Of course anyone who's ever tried to do nothing knows that you can't do nothing, but you can slow down and pay attention.

In LeConte's time, even those who could afford to have lots of next things they could be doing were good at doing nothing, or rather at doing something very slowly, as he himself did on the rim of Yosemite Valley. The great fad for panoramas and dioramas of the late 18th through the mid-19th century came out of a visual appetite that didn't need anything to happen: There was a lot of scenery you paid admission to see, and when you got in you looked at it. In Europe these theaters were often 360-degree spectacles -- the I-Max of their day -- that viewers walked around; in vast new America people sat in their seats as mile-long rolls of canvas painted with the Mississippi or some other appropriate

subject rolled by. No car chases, no emotional dramas, no uplifting moral, no narrative, except to the extent that travel itself, space itself, is narrative. It was as though they inhabited a world in which nothing was enough, as long as it was beautiful.

Of course the perception that nothing is happening usually means that the observer is moving faster than the observed; something is always happening, even if it's on the timescale of light changing, trees growing, rocks eroding. Only in paintings and photographs is there real stillness, but up in Yosemite we have been pursuing the changes between one photograph and another, the exacting art of rephotography. Mark and Byron are rephoto-graphing some of the definitive photo-graphs of the place, an astounding technique for understanding what Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston were up to, and how the ecology has changed in the time between their pictures and ours, down to the trajectories of individual trees.

I say 'we' because I work on scouting locations and logistics and because the meaning of the project comes out of our conversation; but once the tripod is up, I am idle. That is, I am doing nothing. And the form that nothing takes is looking. Or perhaps we need distinct words for looking and seeing, just as we do for wistful envy, whereby I wish I had what you do, and seething jealousy, whereby I wish you didn't have it.

Looking might be the business of glancing at things long enough to take them in as information; seeing, the art of soaking them up, of letting them sink in, of feeling them. For what I found during our slow photographic sessions is that afterward each place had imprinted on me -- it wasn't that I could recall the place with some sort of photographic accuracy, but that it had become part of me, that when I thought of it there was a definite feeling, not an image of place but a sense of place. Imprinted: One could think of the mind as akin to photographic paper. It takes time. It takes a long exposure, generally, for something to make an impression, which suggests that we who are so busy go around blank, unimpressed. Painters, photographers, fishers, and birdwatchers, among others, seem to have developed their pursuits in part as sidelong strategies to do nothing, to be in a place long enough to see it.

I've been equally interested in how long it takes to see a work of visual art, since few artists outside advertising make their art for someone to pass by at a slow saunter, the pace that museums seem to dictate (and the more popular the show, the more necessary it is to keep pace with the rest). Last spring, teaching a group of writing students at the visually spectacular, acoustically challenged San Francisco campus of the California College of the Arts, I took them far and wide in search of a quiet place, and toward the end of the semester we ended up in the school's gallery, where artist Roni Horn's close-ups of the Thames River were showing.

A few years ago, I had strolled past these photographs in their more conceptual version, with tiny footnotes in the ripples corresponding to a long series of accompanying texts, and I'd strolled through this new exhibition as well, but the images didn't seep in until we lingered with them. Around us on every side as we sat on the concrete floor and read aloud and talked -- not so much looking at as coexisting with these photographs of the green surface of the Thames -- they came to life, throbbed and churned with power, pressed in on us, alluring and threatening.

There's a political aspect to this, naturally: Factory workers used to protest or strike with a work slowdown, a refusal to keep pace with the management's profit pace; as the world comes to resemble a factory more and more, every act of lingering, of deep engagement, of doing nothing, of neither producing nor consuming according to any marketable rate, is a metaphysical work slowdown. A good consumer should have a short attention span, forever requiring the next thing. But beyond politics is pleasure, and perhaps this slowness is the discipline of pleasure.

Rebecca Solnit is a recipient of the 2003 Lannan Literary Award. Her project with photographers Byron Wolfe and Mark Klett is the subject of a forthcoming book. From Orion *(Nov./Dec. 2003). Subscription: $35/yr. (6 issues) from 187 Main St., Great Barrington, MA 01230.*