From Curlers to Chainsaws

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Published by Michigan State University Press

Walls, Elizabeth MacLeod, et al.
From Curlers to Chainsaws: Women and Their Machines.
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Noted photographer Edward Weston claimed in 1932, “Man is the actual medium of expression—not the tool he elects to use as a means.” His sensuous photos of nudes, shells, vegetables, landscapes, and even a toilet emphasize curves and textures. Something about the artist, his vision and technique, is clear in Weston’s body of work, yet critics have commented, too, on the effect of Weston’s tools. In *Weston’s Westons: Portraits and Nudes*, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. writes,

> Weston had carried his exploration of nude form as far as he could with his small Graflex camera. Charis Wilson recalls his saying that he had been frustrated that he couldn’t work more precisely with the nude until he had better equipment. Thus, in 1927 he set the subject aside for a time and, working with equal intensity, turned to an exploration of growing natural forms as he began his famous series of shells, peppers, and other vegetables.\(^2\)

Had better equipment been available to Weston in 1927, would he have continued his focus on nudes? Would he have turned his camera to vegetables? Would he have taken his famous *Pepper No. 30* in 1930? Of course, no one can answer these questions definitively, and surely the subjects and objects of Weston’s photography were influenced by factors—the people in his life, where he lived, the work of other artists, luck, and more—beyond his tools. But his equipment (its quality, size, weight) certainly had an effect on his art.

The first time I looked closely at, and reflected on, Weston’s work was when *Pepper No. 30* was chosen as the cover art for Susan Griffin’s *The Eros*
of *Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society*. A suggestive black and white, the photograph presents a green pepper as strangely sensuous, with lighting and curves that mirror some of Weston's photos of nudes. Light, shadow, curves, vegetable flesh, a close-up with little context—Weston's photograph, for me, was now informed by Griffin's questions: “How and what do we choose to see? What do we value, celebrate, anticipate, mark? By what measure do we express our love for the living?” In asking these questions, Griffin was not referring directly to Weston's photograph, but more generally to a divide between the sacred and the profane, and the ways in which that divide narrows one's vision.

In 1943, Weston expressed a more nuanced view of the relationship
between artists and their tools, acknowledging, “Each medium of expres-
sion imposes its own limitations on the artist—limitations inherent in the
tools, materials, or processes he employs.” Here, his focus shifts from an
earlier focus on the artist as the means of expression to the limits imposed
by the tools.

More than sixty years later, as I reflect on the place of photography
and particular tools, especially cameras, in my own life, I want to erase
the divide between the artist’s (sacred?) vision and the (profane?) limits
imposed by tools. Rather, through personal reflection, I wish to consider the
multidirectional interaction of physical body, personality and preferences,
and the limits imposed, as well as the possibilities created, by available
technology. The focus on either the artist or the tools, to the exclusion of
the other, limits rather than expands knowledge.

**Kodak Moments**

Pocket-sized cameras have been available my entire life. In 1972, the year I
was born, Kodak introduced five different Pocket INSTAMATIC cameras, and
eight years later—the year Kodak celebrated its one hundredth anniver-
sary—they introduced the camera I used to document my late elementary
school years.

This camera was a Kodak Ektra 200, a black rectangle that used 110 film
cartridges easy enough for an eight-, nine-, ten-year-old to load. It debuted
in 1980, retailing for $24.50. Eighty years earlier, another Kodak camera,
the Brownie—which sold for one dollar—was marketed for personal use
with the promise that “Any school-boy or girl can make good pictures
with one of the Eastman Kodak Co.’s Brownie Cameras.” Kodak’s early
advertisements often featured children, girls and boys, to demonstrate
the camera’s ease of use.

The print advertisement for the Ektra featured Michael Landon—to me, Pa from *Little House on the Prairie*—holding the camera but not
obscuring his familiar face: the wide smile, his brown wavy hair not quite
touching his shoulders. Advertised as “big on convenience, smaller in size, new all around,” the Ektra was perfect for my petite hands. It came with a wrist strap, too, though I carried it in a navy blue crossbody bag, outfitted with pockets on either side for the plastic film cartridges and a front pocket in which I carried Orange Crush- and Dr. Pepper-flavored Lip Smackers. Each 110 cartridge held just twenty-four exposures, so I was selective, taking pictures only of what was important to me: my dog, my baby cousin, school friends, and Niagara Falls.

For two decades, and through a series of thirty-five millimeter cameras that I remember far less clearly than my Ektra, I believed strongly that photos should either be of loved ones (and not shots of them opening presents) or landscapes. I puzzled over the men in my family who took pictures of vehicles, the women who took pictures of food (especially birthday cakes) and who wanted to document every gift-opening experience (to the point that some already opened presents had to be opened again and a look of surprise approximated for the camera). Birthdays and Christmas, I hid behind gifts, embarrassed, trying to avoid the electronic eye that seemed to demand a performance.

I didn’t understand that my parents were doing what I was doing: seeking to preserve what mattered to them. My father, an auto-body man, can name the year and make of any car that passes; his pleasures in life are antique car shows and motorcycle rides. My mother plans for Christmas much of the year, and when the day passes, she leaves her tree and decorations up until late January. At least one year, she left the tree up until Valentine’s Day, when the dry, brownish limbs and needles could be replaced by pink and red construction-paper hearts, boxes of chocolate, and valentines for her children’s classmates spread across the kitchen table.

This past year, my mother asked if I was putting up a Christmas tree, and when I said “no,” she went silent for several seconds before saying, with a note of sadness, “Well, I love you.”

“Even if I don’t put up a tree?” I asked, simultaneously confused and amused.
“It just hurts my heart,” she responded wistfully.
To each her own Kodak moment.

**Still Life**

After two decades of dog, friend, family, and landscape photos, I was surprised when—after buying my first home at the age of twenty-nine—my taste in photographic subjects and objects shifted dramatically. My approach to life was changing. Instead of moving from one rented space to another, I was creating home, my home. I had little money; I had yet to transition from graduate-school, particleboard bookshelves to handmade cherry furniture, from framed pages from art calendars to original art. Yet I imagined each room as its own work of art: a still life in which each pillow, each vase, collections of stones and feathers, and the texture of linens mattered.

One day, I looked at the grapes in a ceramic bowl resting atop the antique drawing table I used as my kitchen table. I nearly cried. So beautiful, I thought and immediately drove to Target to buy black-and-white film for my thirty-five-millimeter-of-the-moment camera. I had never before shot in black and white. But then, I had never before been nearly moved to tears by a bowl of grapes. I shot an entire roll—thirty-six exposures—of grape photos, got back in the car, drove back to Target, put my film in the processing envelope, paid extra for two-hour processing, and browsed the store until my photos were ready. I then sat in my car and ripped open the envelope to reveal photo after photo of greenish-gray, blurry orbs. Perhaps the processing for black-and-white photos is different than color, and the trusty Target technicians did not see what kind of film I had used; perhaps I didn’t focus properly. Whatever the case, I had failed that time. But I didn’t give up.

In the decade that followed—during which I made the switch from thirty-five-millimeter-film cameras to digital—I continued to be moved by produce, especially the tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and basil I grew
in pots or in my front flower beds. Like that first house, they were mine. I loved their colors and shapes and how they grew and changed. I watered, tended, and photographed with care and a sense of wonder.

By 2009, the whole world, the living and dead, seemed potentially beautiful through the lens of my camera: a fallen leaf in a rainstorm, just-harvested garlic drying, a loaf of fresh bread and peaches, a painted turtle on a dirt road, the first spring buds, a pile of cantaloupes—even disturbing finds like the hind quarter of a fawn dropped in front of me by a startled coyote, a fallen fetal bird that would never know life, a large collection of slugs. I took pictures of it all.

**The Power (Shot) of Memory**

The move to digital changed my approach to taking pictures. With advances in memory-card technology (in terms of how many photos each could hold) and consistently decreasing prices for large amounts of memory, there was
no reason to limit subjects or objects “worthy” of being photographed. Although the memory card on my first digital camera held only eight photos, I could quickly delete the pictures I didn’t like and download the others to my computer. Today, I can buy a thirty-two GB card for twenty-five dollars; this card will hold over nine thousand photos taken with my 10.1 megapixel Canon PowerShot.

Such abundance, such possibility. Eleven pictures of my dog eating her birthday treats? Why not? Twenty of the dog opening her birthday squeak toys? Seems reasonable. I’m aware of the irony, how I’ve gone from the child who simultaneously dreaded and scorned birthday-cake and present-opening photos to the adult who wants to capture every changing expression on her dog’s sweet face. It’s about love, yes, but also about a technology that allows for such abundance at such little cost.

Perhaps the greatest change—aside from the number of successive photos I will take of the same subject or object—is that I now have a record of things that, for one reason or another, have struck me as funny: preserved meat with the label “Mini Jesus”; wine sold in small boxes remarkably similar to the juice boxes we have for children in the United States; sugar made by a company called “Daddy”—all of these in a French grocery store.

Despite what the previous examples might seem to suggest, my approach to, and thinking about, photography has not become more casual, even as the number of pictures I take and subjects and objects of interest multiply. Some, like the sugar daddies, are little more than silly snapshots, but a greater number involve more serious artistic intent.

In a 2013 article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Ellen Gamerman writes, “With 4,000 photos snapped every second in the U.S., more than four times as many as 10 years ago, photography has morphed into a second language, a form of note-taking, an addictive habit from cradle to grave.” She writes of individuals who take photographs without artistic intent, but whose work is sometimes used by artists. Gamerman preserves a sharp distinction between snapshot taker and artist.

I would like to suggest, however, that advances in technology have allowed individuals to expand their range, to use cameras (whether digital
point-and-shoots or cameras on their phones or iPads or more elaborate equipment) for “note-taking” and for art. As is the case for writers who often keep an informal commonplace book (or computer file or stack of Post-it notes) for random lines, ideas, overheard conversations, images, and thoughts, many photographers (amateur, professional, and somewhere in between) keep a photographic version of a commonplace book.

The impulse to take many photos (whether it’s an “addictive habit” or not) may be part of the process of practicing artistic awareness—an awareness that the potential for artistic subject matter is everywhere: in grocery stores, airports, homes, on the street, in the sky, or in the peeling bark of a white birch. Not everyone with a camera—as evidenced by the nauseating number of flash-in-the-mirror bathroom selfies one can find on social media sites—practices artistic awareness, but the technology helps create that potential for those who are inclined to recognize it.
Size Matters

The first Canon PowerShot was marketed for the general user in 1996, and since then more than two hundred different models have been released. All of my digital cameras have been PowerShots; my most recent camera, the ELPH 530 HS, which was released in March of 2012, weighs just 5.75 ounces. It’s roughly the size of a pack of playing cards—small enough to use one-handed. I can literally shoot from the hip: pull it from my pocket, press the “on” button, look down at the screen, and take a photo. Its size, portability, relative quiet, and the fact that I don’t need to hold it in front of my face make it possible for me to take photos without drawing attention to myself. The camera does make an electronic “bling” sound when turned on, a slight beep when focused, and a click when the photo is taken, but in a noisy world, the sounds hardly register. And I never use a flash.

The camera’s name—“PowerShot”—seems incongruous with its size. “Power,” to some, might suggest something larger. “Shot,” perhaps, suggests violence. But for me, the compact size of the camera provides a different kind of power: the power of near invisibility. It allows me to remain largely unnoticed as I take pictures. I am not an in-your-face, large-lens, aggressive-stance kind of person. I’m a quiet observer, someone who stands back, sits alone, listens, seeks to “capture” (more violence?) both what others fail to notice and what might be seen when a person is not posed.

Roland Barthes, in Camera Lucida, writes eloquently about the effects of being photographed knowingly, explaining, “Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.” It’s that process of transformation, of posing, that I wish to disrupt through photography—both in my position behind the camera (rather than as the subject of the photograph) and in seeking to remain, as much as possible, unnoticed as I take pictures. Each time I notice someone taking my picture, I feel discomfort and either try to obstruct the camera’s eye or revert to a familiar pose: head tilted, a weak, closed-mouth smile.
Sits Like a Lady. Photo by Melissa A. Goldthwaite.
Even the day my family celebrated my second birthday, I felt the intrusion of the camera. In a photo from that day, I am lying on my stomach, wearing my pink party dress, arms protectively surrounding my gifts, tears in my eyes. According to my mother, this was a familiar pose, one that continues to trouble her. “What were you thinking?” she asks, shaking her head; “Did you think we were going to steal your presents?” I don’t know what the two-year-old me thought, but the photographic evidence from two years later suggests that I still did not like having my photo taken while opening gifts. I took my presents to my room to open them alone. My perplexed parents stood outside the partially opened door to take a picture.

I understand that silence and invisibility are not always seen as positive goals, especially for women who seek to have a voice. But there’s something freeing about not being noticed, especially if one has a camera—or a pen or a computer—in hand. That less-than-visible position makes it possible to see something beyond the conscious pose, beyond either performance or avoidance.

**Shifting the Focus**

The question I’m asked most by friends and acquaintances who view my photos is this: “Wow, what kind of camera do you use?” And in every case, the questioner has seemed disappointed when I name some version of the Canon PowerShot.

I’ve identified two sources of the disappointment. For some, the disappointment comes from realizing that the equipment in and of itself will not create a good photo. Often, the friends who ask about my camera are disappointed because they already have a quality point-and-shoot digital camera and are unsatisfied with their own photos. They want a technology that will automatically correct the faults they see in their own photos. It’s true that some equipment is better for taking photos in low light or from a distance, but no camera or lens will make an artist. The right equipment provides options but not the skill, talent, or artistic vision to make the best
use of those options. This is the point Weston was seeking to make in 1932 in focusing on the artist rather than the tools or the medium.

Yet Weston also understood the limits of certain tools, an understanding that comes with practice and experience. For those who take photography as an art seriously, the disappointment with my “PowerShot” answer is partly a response to my inability to engage “tech talk.” I can see the difference between photos taken with different cameras and lenses and understand something about depth of field, shutter speed, exposure, and other photographic terms, but I cannot talk about the strengths of the Nikon AF-S DX NIKKOR 35 mm f/1.8G versus the Sony E 50 mm f/1.8 OSS. With experience, interest, and significant financial investment, I could certainly develop this literacy, but at this point, I wish for different kinds of conversations.

One of my favorite questions came from an experienced photographer. After viewing a series of my photos, he asked, “Are you nearsighted?” It wasn’t a critique; he wasn’t finding fault. He was curious. And right. I am nearsighted. He was seeing something in my photographs that goes beyond the camera I use. I rarely wear glasses and can’t see far ahead without them, so I get up close to things. And my camera happens to work well for up-close shots. Both kinds of equipment—the camera and the body using it—have an effect.

Photography as an art necessitates two kinds of artistic vision. My camera doesn’t replicate what I see, but it does allow me to share what I notice, what draws my attention. What Edward Weston observed well over eighty years ago remains true: “The camera not only sees differently with each worker using it, but sees differently than the eyes see: it must, with its single eye of varying focal lengths.”9 The technology shapes the photograph, yet the person—body and mind—using the camera and her or his habitual ways of seeing and being in the world have an enormous effect on what is created.

I see the well-dressed man with his pant leg unintentionally hiked up, caught in his cashmere sock. I see how the bridesmaids’ dresses resemble a Degas painting. I see the tiny ant at the center of a pink wild rose. I see the
shadows, the fading light, the snail among stones. Annie Dillard writes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.” Being there, of course, does not require a camera, but having a small camera at hand helps me document those moments, the flashes of beauty and grace and humor in an imperfect world, moments and photographs shaped by my body, my camera, my self.

**NOTES**


5. Details about cameras in the section “Kodak Moments” come from Kodak.com.


