Nubar Alexanian's Topic

About Nubar Alexanian
Nubar Alexanian was born in 1950 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He became passionate about photography while studying at Boston University, and later co-founded the Essex Photographic Workshop in Essex, Massachusetts. He has traveled and photographed extensively in Peru. His 1991 book of photographs from Peru, *Stones in the Road*, has been called by Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, "an authentic expression of our geography and our people, making at the same time a personal statement which is artistically original and morally compelling."

In 1990 Alexanian started a five year project about music, traveling around the world with twenty-five musicians, including Paul Simon, Wynton Marsalis, Philip Glass, Emmylou Harris, and Phish. The resulting book, *Where Music Comes From*, published in 1996, captures the spirit of music, as it explores what inspires committed musicians.

His new book, *Gloucester Photographs*, is about his home town of Gloucester Massachusetts, and will be published in October 2001 by Walker Creek Press. The publication of this book will coincide with an
exhibition of this work and other recent work at the Cape Ann Historical Museum in Gloucester, which opens Saturday November 3, 2001 and runs through January, 2002.

Alexanian's many awards include a Fulbright Fellowship in 1983. His work has been featured in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Life*, *Geo Fortune*, *National Geographic*, and *The London Sunday Times*, among other publications around the world. He has had numerous one-person exhibitions in the United States and Europe, and his work is in private and museum collections internationally. He teaches workshops at the International Center of Photography in New York, and in the Boston area. Alexanian lives in Gloucester with his wife and daughter.

**Nubar Alexanian Links**

*Nubar's Website*

[www.nubar.com](http://www.nubar.com)

"*The Gloucester Photographs*"

[www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0108/nubar_org.htm](http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0108/nubar_org.htm)

*Conversation with Jay Allison on WCAI/NAN's "The Point"

[www.atlantic.org/nubar/index.html](http://www.atlantic.org/nubar/index.html)

**About Nubar Alexanian’s Friends**

**Abigail Heyman**

Abigail Heyman became the feminist eye/voice of photography with *Growing Up Female; A Personal Photo-Journal*, the landmark book which documented the female experience from a feminist perspective, and challenged assumptions about being a woman. While much of the book is autobiographical in theme, her photographs "transcend the strictly personal and assume public posture." Photographically, as Andy Grundberg said, it "tested the line between reportage and personal expression."

Her book, *Butcher, Baker, Cabinetmaker: Photographs of Women at Work*, is about women who hold jobs that children commonly assume are only done by men, and is aimed at changing those expectations for a new generation of school children. *Dreams & Schemes; Love and Marriage in Modern Times* penetrates wedding rituals to examine the underlying emotions and widespread implications they often conceal. Photographs of her own family were the genesis of *Flesh & Blood: Photographers' Images of Their Own Families*, an intimate and poignant collection of many contemporary photographers' work, which Ms. Heyman co-edited and produced.

Heyman has participated in solo and group photo exhibitions; her work frequently appears in publications in the United States and abroad. She is a former member of Magnum Photos, and at one time directed the Documentary and Photojournalism Studies Program at the International Center of Photography in New York City.
Jeff Jacobson

Jeff Jacobson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1946. He graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1968, and from Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C., in 1971. While practicing as a civil rights lawyer in the American South in the early 70’s, Jacobson became interested in photography, shooting in Southern jails and rural areas. After completing a workshop at Apeiron with Charles Harbutt, in 1974, Jacobson quit his law practice to devote full energies to photography.

In 1976, Jacobson began working in color while photographing the American Presidential campaign. It was during this personal project that he began experimenting with strobe and long exposures, a now familiar technique that he pioneered. Jacobson joined Magnum Photos in 1978, and in 1981 he left Magnum, along with photographers Charles Harbutt, MaryEllen Mark, Burk Uzzle and others to found Archive Pictures. He continued his color explorations in the United States throughout the 80’s which culminated in the publication of his monograph, "My Fellow Americans," in 1990. During this time, and continuing to the present, Jacobson regularly accepted assignments from magazines, such as The New York Times Magazine, Fortune, Time, Geo, Stern, Life, and many others.

Jacobson's photographs have been exhibited or are in the collections of museums around the world. He has taught workshops regularly at ICP and other venues in the United States and Europe, and has been awarded grants from the National Endowment For The Arts and The New York Foundation For The Arts.

In 1990, Jacobson moved to Los Angeles and began a series of complex, mostly urban landscapes from all over the world which appear as if they were digitally altered, even though all are straight documentary photographs. These photographs raise questions about the influence of the computer upon our notions of photographic reality, and will be published in the book, You Are Here, in 2002. In 1999, Jacobson returned to New York where he now lives. He has begun a series of photographs made mostly at night, pushing Kodachrome film as far as possible.

Jeff Jacobson’s Website
http://zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografotos/jeff/default.html

A Word From Jay Allison

08.09.01

Okay he’s a photographer, but it seemed a fine idea to invite Nubar Alexanian to come talk about storytelling. For one thing, when I first met him he was in a rare position: Official Photographer on a radio project (“Vanishing Homelands”).

But more than that, when I would ask him about documentary photography, I learned something about narrative, point of view, authorship, revelation of character, journalistic ethics, creative spirit, interpreting life. Useful stuff for radio.

You can read all about his work on his webpage, but what I can say is that Nubar is full of heart, tells the truth, and doesn’t like compromise. He’s a teacher. He came to our local station recently and we did a
call-in show together. Photography on the Radio. And the Web. We posted his pictures, with backstories from Nubar, so listeners could look at the photos and hear Nubar tell their stories. People really liked it. We invited him to Transom.

Nubar will be inviting some of his photographer friends over to join the discussion. This is fitting for the Internet, as all the tools converge, as the lines get fuzzy, as writers, radio producers, photographers, videographers become one. It is particularly useful now to talk about the images embedded in stories and the stories embedded in images.

Please welcome Nubar. You can even ask him what’s the best camera to buy and how to take better pictures of your kids. He won’t mind.

Nubar’s Manifesto

Nubar Alexanian
08.14.01

Picture - Sound

A few years ago, a radio producer friend and I were testing High 8 video cameras. We were both new to the medium, he coming from radio and I coming from photography. Standing side by side, we planned to shoot the same thing with each of our cameras, switching tapes back and forth to see if there was any difference in quality. He had a small single chip Sony High 8 camera with a large Sennheiser microphone on top. I had a large 3 chip Sony High 8 camera using the on-board microphone (three chips are better than one for picture quality). Puzzled by how we might identify who was shooting what with which camera, I suggested we shoot our feet and thereby identify ourselves by the shoes we were wearing. Perplexed by the extravagance of this, he said, "Why don't we just say our names?"

Ah, the presence of a microphone. It wasn't long before I learned the painful lesson that a story can be told with bad footage and good sound, but not with bad sound and good footage - no matter how great the footage looked! My bewilderment aside, this was a wonderful example of the different worlds we live and work in: to look or listen, to notice what we see or hear what's being said.

I love the saying, "Where there's a life, there's a story," and I believe it's true. It's kind of overwhelming when you think about it. Six billion different stories taking place at the same time, beginning, growing, ending. I am fond of stories about regular people that are done well. This, along with the news, is why I listen to public radio. I am particularly interested in the "ordinary lives done well" part of this, because the storyteller must be at the top of his/her game in order to pull it off. To do this, they are, by necessity, challenged to celebrate the medium they are working in - in this case, radio. So I am not only entertained
and informed about the subject, but also about the medium. *This American Life* is a wonderful example of this.

**The Subject, The Photographer, and Photography**

But I'm here to wax eloquently about photography, not tell radio journalists what they already know. I love to joke with friends who are radio or print journalists about how dependent they are on facts to tell a story. It confounds (and perhaps irritates) them. As a photojournalist, I am not dependent on the literal facts of a story to take honest pictures of subjects within the story. Besides, narrative has never been one of photography's strengths: as a medium it is much too ambiguous. (There are exceptions. Gene Richards - www.lifemag.com/Life/eisies/1998/cat09f02.html - and Sebastiao Salgado- www.zaz.com.br/sebastiaosalgado/ - their work being some of the best.)

There are, of course, different kinds of documentary photographers, but many of us working today are what I like to call first-person photojournalists. We rely on our experience of events to make images that translate how we feel about what's happening in front of our cameras. This is one way to make honest pictures. I use the word honest here because I believe acknowledging one's presence, whenever possible, makes for a fuller, truer description. There are, arguably, other, more noble approaches. But what I'm most interested in are photographs that are not dependent on captions -- images strong enough to stand on their own. When the experience of the photographer is included, the content includes more than subject and medium: it includes the photographer as well. This is what all strong photographs have in common. They are about the subject, the photographer and photography.

**A Voice To Call Your Own**

When I talk about photography, I like using the phrase "finding your own voice" rather than "finding your own personal vision." I think it's because the former is more universally understood, but we are talking about the same thing here. We are all born with a voice that identifies us. And yes, we each develop a singular point of view. But this doesn't necessarily mean we have our own way of seeing - not photographically. Having your own vision as a photographer means acquiring a visual vocabulary that has evolved over time. (I don't mean style here, but a way of seeing. They are different.)

About fifteen years ago, I had a young woman working with me whom I liked very much. Sarah had majored in photography in college and was very competent and made a great assistant. But her work was boring. Back then, I insisted that my assistants work on long term documentary projects so that our relationship involved more than making money and learning the trade. She was working on a project about a Vietnamese fishing family that immigrated to Boston. After six months, I felt like things weren't working out. Her work was not progressing and I was out of suggestions. Sarah expressed frustration
with what she called a "protective shield" that surrounded her and kept her from taking risks - even visual risks. After some discussion, I asked her to name the shield (my wife, Rebecca, is a psychotherapist). Having been raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, Sarah thought it had to do with her upbringing.

We made a deal. We would keep working together and she would find a Jewish family in Brookline to photograph for a year. She would put away all of her equipment, her Nikon cameras and lenses, and take pictures only with a Canonette camera. The Canonette is a small inexpensive rangefinder with a fixed lens and limited choices. It was a difficult year. I was impressed by her commitment and tenacity to stay with this project. During this first year, she watched as her peers went to New York to show their portfolios, trying to advance their careers. It was painful. I have always discouraged showing a portfolio to magazine editors. It is far more effective to show a completed photo-essay, about a subject that called you and kept you over an extended period of time. In those days, the staff at Life magazine received about 100 competent portfolios per week for review. (Photography is a relatively easy to be competent in, especially when it's viewed as a technical medium.)

Sarah produced an extraordinary body of work that took three years to complete. Though she couldn't see it at the time, her photographs described her experience of what it was like to be a woman in the Hasidic Jewish culture. Every time I edited her contact sheets, I could see her development as a photographer - her ability to include more emotional elements and translate them visually. When it came time to go to New York, photo editors loved the work and every magazine she visited wanted to find a way to use it. She produced a memorable body of work while at the same time launching her career as a documentary photographer.

**Photographer As Witness - Storyteller As Witness**

In 1968 photographer Eddie Adams took this photograph of the execution of a North Vietnamese spy. It's a powerful image, one which not only describes the horror of war, but the power of photographs. Also present at the time of this execution was a television news crew, who, it seems, were standing right next to Adams when he took his photograph. When you view their footage, what you see is an event with a beginning, middle and end, a journalistic document in the purest sense. Perhaps because it describes this event in its entirety, and certainly because there is a contextual relationship between each moment (the strength of film) there is relief in ending - of being allowed to move on. In the photograph, there is no end, no beginning, no moving on. In the photograph, there is no context, there is only the present, carried into the future, by one five-hundredth of a second. This photograph, along with the image by Nick Ut of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running naked from Napalm being sprayed in her village went a long way toward stopping the war. It's impossible to imagine photographs being more effective in the world.
Seeing such pictures published today is almost unimaginable. Yes, the act of witness is important. And there are many photographers documenting important events around the globe, creating sensational images. Yet there is reason for caution. The greatest threat to documentary photography has always been illustration. This is more true today than ever. In fact, I would argue that illustration has won over all forms of documentary photography, generating photographs that look and feel like photojournalism, but are, in fact, conceptual ideas of how to describe a subject or an event. (I'm talking about what magazine editors find appealing, rather than what photographers are willing to do.)

On the other hand, perhaps documentary photography is going through a growth phase, being challenged by other media. For example, no recent single photograph or body of work covering civil wars or atrocities around the world has effected me as much as the story I read recently by Leroy Sievers, Executive Producer of ABC's "Nightline" - re-posted here on Transom. Photography certainly has it's own way of transporting the viewer and, as described above, can be very effective. However, the intimacy of this story had a profound effect on me. Perhaps because it is so personal, it provides what none of the photographs seem to offer - a place to stand within the horror of this event, creating a way for the reader to become a witness through telling. This is a powerful example of the effect of first-person journalism, which is what I think it is.

A Thousand Words

Photography is an odd and fascinating medium. As Wim Wenders once said about a friend's photographs: "Whoever came up first with that saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' didn't understand the first thing about either one." I'm not sure what Wim Wenders had in mind when he wrote this. But if a photograph were worth a thousand words, it's entirely possible they would have nothing to do with the truth.

So what's the truth here? Do you have any idea what's going on in this photograph?
Peru

I was seeking a kind of personal truth when I began my first long-term documentary project about Peru. I first traveled to Peru on assignment in 1974 and fell in love with the place - deeply in love. I was taking landscape photographs back then with a view camera, the kind of camera you have on a tripod with a big black cloth over your head. These photographs were very beautiful, but it's easy to take beautiful pictures of beautiful things. Besides, I felt like I was taking and not giving, as if I had secretly slipped into the country, taken a few jewels, and slipped back out without being noticed. I didn't have to interact with anyone. So beginning in 1978, I spent 15 years traveling back and forth to Peru on my own. I accepted no assignments to subsidize this work because I wanted to see in my own work why I found this country and its people so compelling. I wanted to take pictures that were about them that also told me something about me.

I am proud of this body of work. In 1992 it was eventually published as *Stones In The Road: Photographs of Peru*. Peru taught me about photography. It was there that I learned and developed my own visual vocabulary. And it was this body of work that helped establish my career as a documentary photographer (even though it wasn't published until 1992). I am flattered that my friends in Peru feel strongly about how well these photographs portray their country. However, it's also true that no one in these photographs benefited by being in them. This disturbs me about this work and a lot of photographic books published in the last 20 years.

Inside Out

Many of you will probably find this surprising, but I believe that in radio the greater good is greater than in photography. I am aware of the editorial struggles radio and print journalists go through. We go through them as well. I am also aware that there is basically one outlet for radio. But everything I've been talking about can be summed up this way: what dedicated radio journalists and dedicated photo-journalists have in common is the willingness to work from inside out rather than outside in. This means not looking at the marketplace to see what will sell. Rather, to do stories we all feel passionate about, allowing the subject and content to dictate what is necessary whenever possible.
The rub is, although there are many more magazines being published today than ever before, there are none publishing this work. You will only see this work in books - books that are mostly purchased by other photographers. There is basically no mainstream audience for the work we do. So when I'm sitting in my driveway, captivated by a piece on NPR, I marvel that you have this one outlet that connects your work with me and most of the people I know.

Talking Pictures With Nubar Alexanian

Sensory Simpleton
Viki Merrick  08.19.01

Sometimes I feel like a sensory simpleton. I know that pictures can get in my way if what I am really trying to do is listen.

I like radio stories because of how they play on our emotions. The stories that are told aurally may be less ambiguous than a photograph but some photographs let the imagination travel, opening so many windows that you can smell stuff. The story we concoct might be "right" - or not - but that seems less important than the fact of having wandered there.

Can you talk about an editorial choice you made that - the lone woman in the shawl from Chinchero? You probably took more than one of her - why that one? The way she is looking outward? Because her mouth has or is about to utter a sound? Her head nearly turned away from what she sees?

Sight and Sound and Commotion
Nubar Alexanian  08.21.01

In 1980 I was covering the Democratic Convention in NYC for one of the news weeklies. There was so much noise and commotion, I found it very hard to shoot. Sony had just come out with the first Walkman and I thought I would experiment to see if this new contraption could help me focus visually. So I bought one and shot the second and third day listening to music while I was shooting. It changed it for me, but only slightly, because I was still being stimulated by sound, just in a more pleasing way.

This was really an issue when I shot Where Music Comes From. For five years I traveled with musicians and though I could not tell when I felt I was making interesting pictures (you can never really know this), I could definitely tell when I wasn't. If I was aware of the music, I was not inside the camera. Even a ten percent reduction of concentration can affect me adversely. I'm either in the zone, connecting visually with a subject, or I'm not. So when I am shooting musicians making music I don't feel a strong connection with, it is easier than, say, shooting jazz musicians, because I love jazz. It took me three times as long to shoot jazz for that book than any other kind of music.

Regarding the picture of the old woman in Chinchero, let me say this. First, one of the reasons I've always liked this image is that people can't tell whether it's a man or woman. More than this, she was the
reason I changed from shooting color film to black and white. In color, what you would notice more than anything would be her shawl, called a manta in Peru. These mantas are really beautiful, but I wanted people to see her face, not be distracted by the beauty of her manta. There's an entire life's story in her face, in the lines, the shine of her skin. I know it sounds like a cliché, but she looks so weathered by living outside most of her life, working and sometimes sleeping in the fields at an altitude of 11,000 feet.

Total Snob
Viki Merrick  08.21.01

Beyond the obvious distraction of the shawl of many colors, all of Stones in the Road is in black and white. Please say more about that choice. I am a total snob for black and white. For me, color is like adding ANOTHER sensory thing that might distract from the essence of the subject. We see in color, usually. So why do I want to look longer at a black and white photo?

Color is Stereo
Jay Allison  08.21.01

I wonder if there's an audio analogy for color vs. black and white. Possibly stereo. Or high fi / low fi. Some stories are enhanced by brilliant three-dimensional sound. Others benefit from graininess. And it doesn't always follow that a rough subject should be recorded roughly. Some of Dave Isay's work in hard places - prison, flophouse - is magnificently recorded with a very high end microphone through good pre-amps into Nagra or HHB Dat. The sheen of the sound, the warmth and proximity of the voice, stands in contrast to the harsh story told.

On the other hand, diary pieces like Carmen Delzell's piece here on Transom or some of "Life Stories" or Joe Richman's work have a "brownie camera" feel because there's hiss and mic noise and p-pops that enhance a sense of improvisation. They'd sound false if they were too "good."

Color is a Verb
Nubar Alexanian  08.21.01

I think I said this in our live show on photography, but color and black and white are two different languages, like speaking Spanish and Portuguese: they share some words and phrases but they are different. And Jay your analogy in sound is a good one. However, the difference between color and black and white is that in black and white the image is abstracted one step further from the subject. Just as you said, Viki, we see in color, but we don't see the way color film sees. So the use of color film is already an abstraction of sorts. But there's a real separation between reality and image in black and white, which can engage the viewers' imagination more fully. However, there are color photographers who are so good, that just because of the way they use it, they can abstract the subject almost as much, and in some cases more, than a black and white image. Jeff Jacobson and Alex Webb are two of the
best color photographers working today. And, for now, I would simply say they don't use color as an
djective, but as a verb. The color is active and represents action much of the time.

The Separation of Senses
Jake Warga 08.22.01

I've always fancied the separation of senses. Radio gives the audience credit for imagination, to give
picture to voice. Radio works because of that lack of image. TV allows no credit to the imagination -
giving the audience pictures, sound, and even cues for when to laugh. Maybe a multimedia approach to
telling a story is in order, something to keep our senses occupied.

Audience Participation
Nubar Alexanian 08.22.01

TV is a drag for the reasons you describe. However, it's very easy to fall into the groove (or gutter) TV
is in. The more one medium explains, defines, or illustrates another, the less room there is for audience
participation. And since Americans don't like to participate, it leaves the door open for TV and films,
etc. to occupy that space. This is cultural to a large extent. For example, in my field of photojournalism,
I have had greater support from magazines and institutions in Europe than in the US. (Both my books
were published by a British publisher.) Culturally, the audience in Europe is much more active, perhaps
with all their senses, than in the US. Jazz has always had more support in Europe than the US. And I was
astonished to find that when I was traveling with Emmylou Harris in Europe, she has larger audiences
there as well.

Go Shoot
Jake Warga 08.24.01

How do you market yourself? I've got loads of images and would like to learn more of how to share
them with the world (and make accidental $ by extension). Did someone load you with film and say go
shoot X? Are you self-edited? Are all your images iris prints, or do you manipulate in post? What's
your b/w film choice?

Accidental Income
Nubar Alexanian 08.25.01

There's no such thing as accidental income. Not in my experience anyway. When I started out, I shot
my own picture essays and dragged them to NY to sell to magazines. I don't believe I've ever shown a
portfolio in NY. Only stories. So I built my career that way. Since then, I've shot on assignment for
magazines in the US and Europe, mostly. So yes, they give photographers film, expenses and a day rate
to go shoot X.
My technique is nothing special: Tri-X film processed in D76 and I don't make Iris prints, but I love to make Archival Ink Jet prints.

Your question about self editing is curious. I've never been asked about it in this way. I always edit my own projects, and when I'm on assignment, I give the client what we call an "A" edit and "B" edit of the film I've shot. They are under no obligation to use anything I've marked. Most editors want to see what the photographer's choices are. And if the editor agrees with the choices, a really good picture editor will fight for the correct pictures. Which raises another question. When I'm on assignment for a magazine, who do I represent? Do I represent the magazine? They think so. Or isn't it truer that I represent the subject (to the magazine) which generally doesn't occur to them.

Who Do I Represent?
Joshua Barlow  08.27.01

Last January, I was asked to cover the Presidential Inauguration for a news Website. Before going out into the field, I was instructed by the editors to keep an equal balance between protests in the street, well-wishers, and just plain witnesses to the event.

As it turned out, instead of the 20,000 demonstrators DC police had predicted, it was somewhere near 100,000 and there was not one inch of parade route that was not marked by protesters, and their slogans and signs. I remember having to debate with the editors over how to assemble the photo-gallery, having to defend my shots by saying, "No, that's what was happening. Trust me, I was there. I have the pictures to prove it..."

Have you ever had a situation where the goals of your editors, and the reality of what you found on site came into conflict? I always enjoy a bit of shop talk about expectation/reality management between artists and editors. I suppose it's different depending on what kind of scene you trying to capture, but it is a scenario radio journalists often find themselves in as well.

What Picture Editors Want
Nubar Alexanian  08.27.01

It's a common occurrence I'm afraid. However, if you were the picture editor, what would you have asked for? Coverage. That's what you need. That's why the news weeklies have a dozen photographers or so covering something like the Inaugural. First because no single photographer could cover the entire thing logistically. More important, they need a broad view of the event. In situations like these, I think it's important to give the editors what they need, and then some. The latter has more of what I'm interested in. But if I accept the assignment, I have to deliver the former.

For example, sometime in the 80's I was on assignment for Fortune, covering a story on Rev. Jessie Jackson. I was with him for five days at Operation Push headquarters in Chicago. Jackson was promoting a boycott of businesses that did not hire or negotiate to hire a percentage of blacks that was
commensurate with the ratio of black consumers of their product. Kentucky Fried Chicken and a few other large corporations agreed, while Annheiser Bush did not. So Jackson asked the black community to boycott Annheiser Bush. The managing editor of Fortune wanted me to take a picture of Jackson eating Kentucky Fried Chicken with one hand, while crushing a can of Bud with the other. After getting to know him, I felt I couldn't do this, that his mission was more noble than that kind of picture. Alice Rose George, one of the finest picture editors ever to work in the business, told me I had to produce that picture, but to get her one that was better and she would fight for it. And it worked. They ran a portrait of him sitting near a large white column with lots of light thrown on it. Interestingly, I don't think Jackson really cared which picture they used, as long as they ran the story.

**Doing Business With Real Backstories**  
**Jay Allison  08.27.01**

I love that sort of backstory. Pictures *do* have narratives of one kind or another.

Nubar, what happens when your sense of the truth is unflattering to someone who has given you unusual access? For instance, in your book *Where Music Comes From* you certainly must have encountered an asshole or two. How are you able to reveal that in a fair but honest way? In radio, we could simply let them talk, stand back and let the asshole moment play out, along with all the other moments. We have time on our side, which lets us create a portrait with some dimensionality and contradiction. How do you achieve that with pictures? Or with *one* picture?

**Don't Ski Behind The Boat**  
**Nubar Alexanian  08.28.01**

This was a huge problem with the music book. And getting access was a nightmare because publicists and managers want to control everything. I met Wynton Marsalis on assignment for *Life* magazine. As I say in my introduction, I was told no pictures on the bus, in his hotel room or during sound checks. "What's left?" I argued. Publicists say it this way: "If you even ask about any of these things, we will never work with you again."

My way around this was to bring a copy of my Peru book to his room. I wanted him to see the kind of photographer I was. When he answered the door and saw two cameras around my neck, he said, "You're not comin' in here with those," or something like that. I just handed him the book and left. One hour later there was a knock on my hotel room door. It was Wynton. He said I could do whatever I wanted. And he meant it. In his case, we also went on to become good friends.

Now I know this story is kind of cute. But part of the point I want to make is that most celebrities/musicians/public people have never been photographed by a documentary photographer. They are guarding against photographers who build their own careers by skiing behind their boats. Look at Annie Leibovitz's pictures. What are they about? The subject of her photographs is about what she can get famous people to do: they are about her. And if you go into a situation after her, you have to clean up
the mess she left behind before you can begin working. So I learned very quickly not to react and to understand why they are not entirely wrong in protecting themselves.

Photographing women was different than photographing men in the music book and, though I did not give approval to anyone in terms of which pictures I used, I did agree to show them, especially to the women. For example, Emmylou Harris objected to the use of one picture I took because she looked tired and jet-lagged. This was, indeed, the point of this photograph. She was working hard and I wanted people to see her this way. In the end, she didn't want that picture used and I had to argue with her manager - either that picture is in, or none of the pictures of her would be included in the book (this, after spending a week with her in Europe on my own dime). He agreed.

I do have some "asshole" moment stories not directly related to celebrities. But they're kind of long.

Our Favorite Asshole Moment Stories
Jay Allison  08.29.01

We got time.

Don't %#$&@ With The Photographer!
Nubar Alexanian  08.31.01

Don't #&*+ with the photographer! An asshole moment: so I'm on this oil drilling rig off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico, shooting an assignment for GEO magazine back in 1983, I think. I'm supposed to spend two weeks shooting life on an off shore oil rig and things are going fine for the first few days. The men (and one woman) work twelve hour shifts/days for two weeks and then get two weeks off. The boss on the rig is called the tool-pusher. He was a real hard ass with a strange sense of
humor. He was riding me from the moment I stepped off the helicopter. On the fourth day, he told all the other workers that I was GREEN, which to them meant I had never been on a rig before. I argued that I had (I was lying). There's an initiation that someone green has to go through. They pull your pants down and wipe this tar all over your butt that won't come off. It has to wear away. Takes months, I've heard.

So the tool-pusher provoked the crew and they chased me around the rig with this huge dollop of tar that they use when they're drilling. I was panicked. So I climbed up near the top of one of the legs of the rig and hollered down to the tool-pusher that I was his responsibility and if they came near me, I would jump. I further stated that I was the guest of the Governor of Louisiana, and not to be messed with.

They backed off. Near the end of my stay, I saw the tool-pusher fishing off the edge of the rig. He pulled up a small red fish. A very small red fish. I asked if I could take his picture. So there he was, wearing a blue jump suit, white hard hat, a little fishing rod and a tiny red fish, with a big, little boy's grin on his face.

Back in New York, I pleaded with the art director to run that picture with the others and she agreed. I arranged to send 12 copies of the magazine to the helicopter pilot who delivered them to the rig. I could almost hear the crew laughing all the way back in Massachusetts and I got a phone call from the tool-pusher himself, right from the rig. He was really pissed and told me if he ever saw me in the state of Louisiana again....

And I said, "Man, don't mess with the photographer."
Ha!
Jay Allison  09.03.01

I remembering seeing that picture in GEO way back when and remember the little boy quality of it. It works on its own, but I'm especially glad to have the backstage view.

In fact, while you say that photography is a non-narrative medium, I often sense narratives in your work and other photographers. Is photography truly non-narrative? Aren't we compelled to create our own narrative, our own caption, in the absence of one?

A Sense of Truth
Nubar Alexanian  08.29.01

Jay asked about what happens when an artist's sense of the truth is unflattering to someone who has given unusual access. After thinking more about it, I realize that the place where a sense of truth is most compromised is with the magazines. There are times when I've had to be protective of people who’ve given me access, fearful that their generosity will be betrayed. There have even been times (here goes my career) when I've held out images that I know a magazine would use and use badly, betraying the trust AND my experience of the subject.

This gets back to the idea of photojournalism vs. illustration. Can a photographer and a writer work on the same story and have different experiences of the subject? Of course. The real question is whether photojournalism is journalism in the eye of the editor, and able to hold sway with the writing. Aren't photojournalists reporters? Don't they gather information, reveal things about the subject, just like writing? Walker Evans and James Agee proved the power of these two mediums working within their strengths, in a parallel way, neither one explaining or illustrating the other. This rarely, if ever, happens in the real world of documentary photography. And it shouldn't matter whether the subject is a celebrity or a dairy farmer. If the magazine already knows which pictures they want before the photographer goes into the field, then why go at all? To illustrate what they think they know about the subject. And this is where truth is compromised.

What is Romance?
Josh Barlow  08.29.01

I have always found it more intriguing to capture the human (non-glamorous) side of celebrities and, inversely, to relay the grander (poetic) themes present in the lives of "ordinary" people. Your work seems to achieve a wonderful balance that doesn't exploit in either direction, but do you find that some photographers (especially younger ones), have a tendency to over-romanticize, or project through their subjects? At what point is the photographer no longer being true to the subject?
'Taking' Pictures
Nubar Alexanian  08.31.01

At what point is the photographer no longer being true to the subject? What a great question! There are so many ways to answer this, yet no one way seems adequate. A photograph dignifies everything. And it's not really true that my work doesn't exploit my subjects. I exploit to the extent that the work is about me and what's important to me. I don't mean to keep beating this drum, but being honest is what matters. So I don't ask subjects to do anything for my camera unless it's obvious in the image, as in a portrait. However I did exploit the people of Peru to the degree that photographing my experience of them taught me what I know about photography. Some photographers take a harsher view of what they do, calling it "taking" as opposed to giving. Of course, photographers take photographs. But they make no bones about how much photography involves "taking" from people, and giving little else in return. It's a compelling way to look at one's work. And perhaps difficult to argue with, though I do wonder whether this lets them off too easily.

Regarding personal projection, I don't see how a photographer who cares about what he/she is photographing can't project to some degree. And if the photographer's visual vocabulary is adequate, this will be obvious in the pictures.

Verbs and Narratives
Viki Merrick  09.03.01

When a radio documentary reveals what is in a human's dark place, or a photograph reveals austerity or sorrow in a human face or body pose, the artist "takes" the revealment and "gives" it to the world. But your use of these verbs sounds like a much larger moral one. Your work is remarkably eloquent - giving back a story with heightened poignancy. Isn't that your "giving"? Isn't that enough? Are you simply talking about the difference between decency vs. pillaging? I don't really think so.

Also, how can you say photography is non-narrative? All these years of wasted mental wandering? I always thought photographs, more than other visual art, get to tell a story, beyond the image, through intimation, suggestion and that you photographers were in fact urging a narrative in the viewer.

Also: more asshole stories, please.

Dignity
Jay Allison  09.03.01

Nubar, you said, "A photograph dignifies everything." This is an interesting thought. What exactly do you mean by dignify? I can see how it codifies, preserves, even elevates. I wonder how a story works in the same way.
Photography and Narrative  
Nubar Alexanian  09.04.01

Most of the photographs we see day today are used in a narrative way. And some photographers use it well.

When I say narrative is not one of photography's strengths, I'm comparing it to writing, radio, film, etc, where narrative is the heart and soul of these media. Photography is much better at metaphor, at the poetic. I'm not just talking about art photographs here, but documentary work as well. So I'm not saying that photography is non-narrative.

Jay's point about us creating our own narratives from work is true for all art, especially the visual arts. What constitutes meaning in a photograph has a lot to do with what someone expects from or brings to the work. Is this enough? Kind of goes back to Joshua's question about projection. It just happens.

I am talking about decency but not pillaging. With the correct amount of narcissism and equal amounts of talent and ambition, a photographer can leave behind a pretty nasty wake. Perhaps this is also true in radio or other forms of journalism. I know it to be true in film.

I believe this is cultural as well. Our culture supports the surface over substance. For example, it really astonished me that after the civil war ended in Peru, among the first things the government did along with building medical clinics in poor neighborhoods was to give out grants to artists, poets and writers. Right at the top of the list. I know this is a tangent and not really part of this topic, but it just popped into my head.

Regarding my own work, I have never thought of it in terms of giving, only receiving. Perhaps this is because I'm so focused on "process" rather than "product."

More asshole stories to come.

The Gloucester Project  
Jay Allison  09.07.01

Nubar, can you tell us a little about your ongoing current project - documenting your home town? Some of us have undertaken longitudinal radio/tv documentaries, following stories over time, but time tends to be part of the finished product. I'm wondering how the Gloucester project is different or the same.

When Words Emasculate Meaning  
Jeff Jacobson  09.09.01

Nubar asked me to talk about my view of narrative in documentary photographs. They aren't [narrative], except in the mind of the viewer. A photograph means whatever the viewer decides it means, no matter what the photographer intended. I am speaking about a photograph unencumbered by words that direct
us how to interpret it, such as captions in magazines, or text in advertisements. For example, the fact that
the umbrella in Nubar's picture is black means absolutely nothing to me, even though it has meaning for
him. You see, Nubar was there when the picture was taken and he draws meaning from facts outside the
frame of the photograph. I have only the photograph to go by. Hell, all umbrellas are black!

There is a weekly column in the *NY Times Magazine* entitled "What Were They Thinking", in which the
point seems to be that the meaning of the photograph hinges on what the subject of the picture was
testing at the moment of exposure. The only problem with this exercise is that the meaning of a
photographic image becomes completely dependent on words, in this case the transcribed thoughts of
the subject. I would argue that this limits and emasculates the potential meaning of the photograph and,
of course, its viewer. Many photojournalists and photo editors would probably disagree with me. They
feel that photographs and words work well together to create a narrative structure. I am just more
interested in the pure photograph alone, where it functions more like poetry than journalism.

I am always as interested in what is not visible in a photograph as in what is visible. For me, the most
interesting photographs are those that create supreme tension between the real and unreal, reality and
fantasy, visible and invisible. It's the unseen presences that haunt certain pictures that intrigue me. Words
get in my way when I look at photographs; they interrupt my reverie. If the photograph, or sequence of
photographs, move me, their meaning comes from the way I am moved, not from someone else's words
directing me how to interpret them.

**Potential Meanings**

*Nubar Alexanian  09.09.01*

First of all folks, let me introduce Jeff Jacobson. He's not only one of my dearest friends, but as a
photographer he's doing some of the most interesting work in color documentary photography today. I
believe he is one of a few photographers whose work advances our understanding of the possibilities of
color photography.

Jeff, I'm fascinated by your use of the work emasculate, when talking about the affect words have on the
potential meaning of a photograph. Strong word. Say more.

**The Ability to Reproduce a Multiplicity of Meanings**

*Jeff Jacobson  09.09.01*

So the word "emasculate" elicited a particularly strong response in you, eh, Nubar? I mean that I am
struck by the ability of great photographs that document a fragment of real space and real time to give
birth to many different meanings to different viewers. Words can attach specific meaning to photographs
which may inhibit their ability to reproduce a multiplicity of meanings. I love the paradox of ambiguity
in an image that is a direct representation of the reality before the photographer's lens. The combination
of that ambiguity and specificity, that paradox, is what I feel gives photography its most unique power.
Preaching To The Choir
Nubar Alexanian  09.09.01

Well said, Jeff. I love the way you describe the tension that results from the paradox of ambiguity and specificity in photographs. To echo your point, I feel like photographs are more like dreams, in that the power of their effect can be subtle, even unconscious for the viewer. I love this about photography.

Jay, I'm not sure what you mean by longitudinal radio/tv documentaries, and following stories over time, with time ending up being part of the final product. Can you say more?

The Curve of Time
Jay Allison  09.09.01

If I spend six months chronicling an event or a place for a radio or TV documentary, the curve of time will become part of the story. The time I spent there will translate in some way to the sense of time in the piece itself.

You're spending years documenting your town in pictures. I assume your perspective and understanding change over time. Is it possible to chronicle that in your finished product? Can the chronology, the story, of your experience be part of what you do?

Do you even think like that? Hey, it's a radio site, so I'm asking radio-type questions.

Defensiveness  09.10.11
Abigail Heyman

Jeff's statement, "The combination of that ambiguity and specificity, that paradox is what I feel gives photography its most unique power," is so valid but for the word unique. I'd prefer to say this combination/paradox may be what gives photography its greatest power. It also gives good writing, and probably most arts, their greatest power. This discussion is increasingly isolating photography, trying too hard to define it as different from any other form, defensive, as though in the larger world of combined forms and multimedia, photography feels threatened. Perhaps even "emasculated"?

Common Strengths
Nubar Alexanian  09.10.01

Let me also take a moment to introduce Abby Heyman, another dear friend and great photographer. Her book Growing Up Female, published in the 70's, remains one of the most influential photography books published.
So Abby, can you say more about how photography is similar to other media? I agree that the discussion isolates photography somewhat. I separated it as a way to examine it. But it would be great to talk about how photography’s communication strengths are shared or held in common with other media.

**The Threat to Documentary Photography**

**Jeff Jacobson  09.10.01**

Abby, I'll go with "greatest." But photography is different from any other medium in that it can render a still image from real space and time. That ability is what gives photography its uniqueness.

As for photography being threatened, it is - at least the kind of documentary photography I care about. The computer has undermined the basic assumption underlying documentary photography, i.e., that the image represents a moment from real time and space. It cuts the legs from under photography. Look at the magazines; most of the pictures are conceptual, set up images. Its becoming rare to find powerful documentary photographs. Maybe its a phase, a fascination with the new technologies. In the interest of truth, justice and my bank account, I hope so.

**The Gloucester Project Through Time**

**Nubar Alexanian  09.10.11**

Time functions differently for me on long term projects than the way you describe your experience, Jay. Although certainly time does allow me to get to know people and place more intimately, sometimes revealing a deeper, more complex story.

If I were working, say, in the old National Geographic style, and doing a story for them on Gloucester, I would spend this time getting certain required pictures - the mayor, the librarian, the city councilors, the best beaches people frequent, etc. But to me, this is boring and predictable, and why the best photography can always be found in books.

I am really photographing my experience of Gloucester. Time is a factor in that it affords me the luxury to wait and watch things develop. The story about the picture of Ten Pound Island is a good example of this. I followed the tide for a year before it was low enough for me to get the picture I thought I wanted - thought I wanted is key here!

The other difference is that photographs don't always build on themselves in a project as they might in a radio documentary. For example, when I commit myself to watching the tide's affect on a rock for a year, it's an idea that may or may not produce an image I'm interested in. Again, let me say, I'm interested in the power of individual images without captions other than place and date. So how, then, do I know when a project is done? I published the Peru & Music books when I felt I came to a place where I could leave them and they felt complete. There was no real arc to the story. Could I have included more/different musicians in the music book? Of course.
With the Gloucester book, I see it as part of a volume of small books. There is so much to photograph here, so many things changing so fast, that if I were to wait until I had a body of work that looked/felt resolved, it could be ten years or more.

Yes, my perspective and understanding change. But I discover these things in the photographs, not from being with people and places. So my perspective and understanding are chronicled to that extent. The reason I like to use the date each photograph was taken is to let anyone who might be interested see how the subject affected the way I see and how I translate my experience visually.

**The Possibilities Still Seem Thrilling**

**Jay Allison  09.10.01**

It's an interesting idea - photography as isolated and threatened now. Nubar has told me that he thinks photojournalism is dead or dying. At least at the magazine/newspaper level. Maybe not in books. (Or on the Internet?)

Of course, radio is used to dying. We've been dying for a long time. Ever since the Golden Age. Ever since pictures began to venture through the air. Strangely, though, we refuse to give up entirely, and some (public radio publicists) would even say we're in a Second Golden Age. I might dispute that (too few venues for adventurous stuff, too few artists working, general risk aversion), but there are plenty of days when the possibilities still seem thrilling.

**A New Week Has Begun**

**Jay Allison  09.17.01**

There has been silence here since September 11th, which was fitting.

In the coming days, it will become more important to talk about images and stories and how they are used, properly and improperly. Television, print, radio, and the Internet function to describe and even define a national attitude and approach to events.

**The New Yorker**

**Nubar Alexanian  09.20.01**

As a way of breaking the silence, I'd like to suggest a look at *The New Yorker* coverage of last week's events. There are many things to say about it, most pertinent here is their thoughtful and provocative use of photographs and words. They let each do their thing and do it well.
A Thousand Times They Flew
Robin White  09.20.01

One of the big questions for me about last week was to do with the repetition of the footage of the planes flying into the WTC and then the subsequent collapse of the buildings. I was nauseated at the number of times the images were repeated - it really must have been thousands of times over a few days. So I avoided the television mostly to try to preserve my own sanity.

But the question for Nubar is what do you think it mean that those images were replayed over and over? Did it increase people’s sense of outrage? Did it numb people? I preserved the meaning of those images for myself, by not watching them too many times.

Is This Journalism?
Nubar Alexanian  09.22.01

I can tell you that I was - how can I say - sickened by how television used the image of the WTC collapsing as a background graphic, while showing live footage in front of it. What could this mean? Is this journalism? I, for one, could not watch the coverage on tv. I know reporters were referring to the television as our collective campfire, helping us through this horrific event, keeping us connected. Not true for me. Repeating those images over and over has an astonishing affect on peoples' psyche. Does it encourage belief or disbelief? It certainly does not create an environment for understanding, let alone collective grieving.

Memory
Jay Allison  09.23.01

I'm wondering if memory consists of stills, not video. The horrifying pictures burned in my mind are frozen, not moving.

And the peaceful pictures of memory too, those are stills. Like today on an empty beach on Nonamessett my children set against the sky, a storm moving in, our green skiff resting on the water.

I think of Joel Meyerowitz, who photographs stillness as well as anyone I can think of, and his pictures in The New Yorker of the towers, and of the beach here on Cape Cod, all resting, floating in time.

The Televised Images
Susan Jenkins  09.24.01

Anytime I see a skyscraper image now, I’m a little unnerved, because my mind is making it into a target, my mind is even running a little airplane into the building, it doesn’t matter which building—any tall
squarish building that stands out, even on a book spine, my mind topples it. I can’t look at these buildings right now, because they just trigger those televised images that played over and over again.

Yet, as haunting as it was to handle Joel’s prints, which I delivered personally to The New Yorker, I found them to not trigger that reaction. I’m not really sure why.

**Photographs Are Their Own Reality**  
Nubar Alexanian  09.24.01

**Susan,** I wonder whether you would have had the same reaction if you had delivered Gilles’ or Susan's pictures to The New Yorker, which were taken on the day of the attack? One of the fascinating things about photographs is that they are a thing unto themselves: they are their own reality. Yes, a photograph is about something. But it is also a something - an object which could also be a subject. The still photograph of the second plane about to strike the WTC is not just a haunting event captured on film. That photograph exists in time, in our time, in our reality, which makes both the event and the existence of the image part of our own record and personal history.

Let me give another example. I was in Auschwitz a couple of years ago with Errol Morris working on his last film. We spent two weeks commuting every day back and forth to this death camp. It was indescribable. In the archives room I saw beautifully rendered architectural drawings of the death camp, right down to the gas chambers and ovens. They were even hand colored. It was more horrific than I could have imagined. I even saw an original carbon copy of a letter sent from the builder in Auschwitz to Berlin. On this carbon copy, the word Vergasungskeller was underlined in red pencil by the person in Berlin who informed the builder never to use this word again in any correspondence. Vergasungskeller means gas chamber. I held this original carbon copy in my hand and decided to photograph that word. The image is enclosed.
I'm still thinking about Jay's comment of whether memory consists of still images not moving images. It's interesting.

**After The TV is Turned Off**  
Robin White  09.24.01

Jay, it's interesting what you observe about stills vs. video. I wonder if we're physically incapable of remembering sequences of film. Put that together with Nubar's comment about tv not creating understanding and you start to have a picture of the medium of tv. Perhaps most of the thinking and understanding comes after the television is turned off. While it's on, it's hardly even possible to breathe.

**Triggers**  
Susan Jenkins  09.24.01

Gilles' images in the New Yorker are "somethings," they exist in their own reality, yet refer us to another reality through the suggestion (in this case) of timing and text. Susan's cathedral-like image, too. But they don't act as triggers to my skyscraper dilemma, since they don't depict something tall, sticking out, unscathed, like the image on the spine of my book or close-up images of the towers.

Joel's images also are their own reality. But the scale of city/landscape, of vast, color-filled, sometimes turbulent sky, is able to overpower the other subject, the towers sticking up there in the center. The WTC buildings are a significant feature, but they are still less than 1/16th of the image. This doesn't diminish the subject matter, but gives it a different POV. While the images are "about" the WTC, they are about it in a larger context of the city's universe. Plus, the effect of setting land against sky flattens the overall perspective, so that the buildings lose their 3-dimensionality. I think it is the perspective, his perspective, that does an end-run around my skyscraper quirk.

**Now Now Now Now Now**  
Nubar Alexanian  09.24.01

Susan, in this discussion we've talked some about photography and story telling. However, we haven't really discussed that most people relate to photographs in terms of memory - in family pictures, personal events and so on. Photography is good at this. Photography is also good at describing someone's experience of a subject because experience and photography both happen in the present. Meaning they both happen now, now, now, now, now. Joel's pictures of the WTC hit on both of these cylinders, but because of the events of Sept 11, memory begins to play a larger role. What we now bring to those photographs has changed. I wonder how this plays in radio: memory and experience.
The World Trade Center, 1991
Nubar Alexanian  09.24.01

Jay Allison  09.25.01

silence

Stories Into Pictures
Jay Allison  09.25.01

Susan's comments on Joel's perspective make sense to me. Much of his work, his landscape work, is like still life to me. Literally. Still. Life. Perhaps that's what protects it from our projections (like Susan's quirk which I bet many of us share). His images hold an internal peace.

I have been thinking about how sound and story reside in memory, how they linger differently from images. Interestingly, I think some stories abide as pictures. We make the translation internally. The story becomes image.

I think of a 75 year-old TV repairman I once interviewed. He told me how he still likes to climb up on rooftops to fix antennas because of the way the wind feels blowing his pants legs. I remember the
enthusiasm in his voice when he said this, but mostly, it's as if I actually saw him up there on a windy day, which I didn't.

We hear the story and we make the picture.

The Back Of My Neck
Susan Jenkins  09.25.01

The view that I remember best of the towers was the New Jersey Turnpike/Train view - the appearance of the towers in the distance meant being close to New York. As a teenager traveling to the big city, that view was anticipation of a place I didn’t know but desired all the same. As a resident it meant I was close to home. The other view that I remember from personal experience was being down between the towers a couple of months ago, looking for the Borders bookstore and marveling at my smallness, at everyone’s smallness relative to them. And their darkness against the white of the plaza. That plaza seems fantastically white in my memory.

Joel’s view from his 19th Street studio was never one with which I grew acquainted in the way that I am intimately acquainted with the view of the Hudson and water towers outside his current studio. It was before my time. I saw it once, a week before, when he returned to what is now a book publisher to make one last image for the show. It was a beautiful pink-gold early autumn sunset glow, the kind of basking color you rarely notice from the ground, and I yet was hardly taking notice of the towers so much as reminiscing about the studio that once was, and what a cool office it had become.

So to say that I relate to the photographs in terms of memory would be inaccurate. My memory is not of that view, or the myriad views from Jersey City, Brooklyn Heights, the water, etc. that we all have seen in photographs. I relate to them the way I would relate to a photograph of the back of my neck - I know it’s me, but I don’t really have a memory of how it looks that I connect to the image. I know those towers, but I don’t connect to those particular views through my experience of those views. I connect to them through my other experiences of their subject. The connection is indirect, or less direct. When we say that we relate to photographs in terms of memory, I think there are different relationships at work, depending on how the image relates to personal experience.

I’m not sure that photographs "describe" experience well. They seem more a result of experience, but as your missionary example above shows, we cannot really know the experience of either the photographer or the people in the image without some help, either in a text, or in another narrative created by placing several images together, or accompanying an image with sound. The photograph only stands alone as an object. As a photographer I often feel my whole life’s experience goes into each photograph I make as my "eye" reacts to things I have become subconsciously predisposed to see and coordinate into the image. So while each image refers to our experience, it doesn’t necessarily describe it very well.

Thus photographs always refer to the past, even if it is the immediate past. They always hum ‘then, then, then’ rather than ‘now, now, now’. However, our experience of the photograph is like our experience of anything; it is just ‘now’. Even when we experience memory, we experience ‘now’. Usually the
humming is quietly running in the background, or else we would never see a photograph as an object, a "something." The tension between the now-ness and then-ness becomes too distracting.

The thing about radio programs that seems at first distinctly different from still photographs is that they are multi-media. The experience of a radio program is first of all one that unfolds over time in what seems to me a much more pronounced way than it does in the viewing of images. It also incorporates and layers discrete elements: a voice or voices, text/words, silences, sound effects, noises, and music. Each of these on their own have qualities that give them their "somethinghood." These voices, silences, sounds, and music can each trip memory, both of specific experiences and of general states of emotion. It amazes me to think of the possibilities given so many elements, both for making a huge mess as well as for making something as tight and seamless as a TAL program. Producing a program piece that uses one or two elements is like writing a song; producing one that uses most elements is like writing a symphony.

In photography, I would suggest street photography is more akin to the symphony because there are so many elements you have to be aware of, and they’re constantly moving; whereas maybe still life would be on scale with songwriting. But enough of the oversimplified comparisons. It seems that a radio program is effective in its ability to orchestrate the experience of many listeners through the selection of elements and their deployment in a cohesive pattern (such as narrative) over time, within a time-frame.

Nevertheless, Jay's post reminds me of what Ira Glass says: "Radio is our most visual medium." This quote was brought home for me two weeks ago, when at 10 a.m., having just learned of the disaster from my neighbor moments before, I was in a taxi on my way to work. The radio was on. A woman on 1010 WINS was describing the scene. She stopped abruptly, then, her voice cracking, said, "and, we have just, yes…the south tower has just collapsed." The sound of destruction bloomed in her subsequent silence.

The image in my mind at that moment was in many ways far more devastating than anything I later saw on the television, or in print.

Then Then Then Then
Nubar Alexanian 09.26.01

Susan, you are wonderfully articulate. For the most part we are saying the same thing in different ways. I have never considered the hum of "then" but the unconscious process of "now". Perhaps they are the same. In either case, it is this process which distinguishes photography from other media, making it more immediately self reflective than others. In terms of experience, my choice of the word "describe" is less accurate than to say that photographs can "reflect" a photographer’s experience of a subject.
A List of Palliative Aphorisms
Jay Allison  09.26.01

We in radio have many palliatives to reassure us in the face of television's overarching power. Generally, their point is that in radio the pictures are better. Improvising a list of related aphorisms here, I'd say:

*The imagination trumps all the senses.*
*Sound has a key to the imagination.*
*The unlocked imagination creates an indelible realism in memory.*

Like the falling building on the radio.

In my gig as curator in the NPR Lost & Found Sound series, I heard hundreds of people call up to tell us about their captured voices of the dead. Often they said of the bits of tape, "It's all I have left." It wasn't, of course. They had photos and memorabilia, no doubt. But those were outside of them, objectifiable. The sound of the voice lives in the air, invisibly, like a ghost. You can't hold it in your hand. But it's real. It can surround you and be inside your mind simultaneously.

There's power in that, and a compelling reason to keep on working in public radio, one of the few places able and willing to explore that power in broadcast.

Existential Aloneness
Ara Oshagan  09.27/01

I heard Gilles Peress interviewed on NPR. When the reporter suggested that there is a tremendous silence in his photos of the WTC aftermath, he seemed to agree. But seeing the photos later I feel they are about something a little different or perhaps larger than just silence. The overwhelming feeling I get from them is one of aloneness. Not loneliness, but an almost existential aloneness in face of tragedy and an absurd, massive and incomprehensible universe.

The image that I find most compelling is on *The New Yorker* web site (but not printed in the magazine), of people coming out of the dust with no rhyme or reason. Together but utterly separate from each other. The other photos seems to add to that aloneness tenfold, especially the one of the two medics.

Perhaps I am placing myself and my emotions, in his photos. But that is the only thing I can do. I feel it in me and I feel it in his photos. And it is through his images that my imagination is moved to these feelings and not the airplane seconds before impact or the explosion afterwards. Horror overwhelms all other feelings while Peress' photos elicit something totally different. And, as Nubar has said here, there is poetry in that. There is poetry in my looking at scenes of destruction and horror and feeling something much larger, connecting to a larger human reality. And, as it has been said here before also, this is the power of photography.
I also truly appreciated the fact that the photos and the text for that issue of *The New Yorker* stood together, but each on its own terms. Photos were NOT in an illustrative, secondary position or forced into some rigid chronology.

**Then And Now**  
Jay Allison  09.27.01

It's encouraging to read these passionate, articulate notes about the pictures and stories being made. How desperately we want to craft meaning, poetry, order, peace.

**Television News**  
Nubar Alexanian  08.29.01

Regarding television news - it's unbelievably bad. It's narcissistic to the point of being about them, not about us or even the events they try to describe. This is why public radio is so important to so many of us. I understand some of the difficulty independent producers have working with NPR. There are real concerns here. However, it's the closest accessible alternative news will every get to a mainstream audience.

**Rejections That Don't Feel Righteous**  
Susan Jenkins  10.01.01

One of the things that great narrative radio programs do really well (great photography, too, for that matter), is to step off the hard sell and just suggest ways of looking at things. Suggestion doesn’t preclude bias, but it provides avenues for acceptance that don’t feel cajoled and for rejection that don’t feel righteous.

**digitaljournalist.org**  
Nubar Alexanian  10.04.01

For anyone interested, the October issue of the *digital journalist* is up on the web and there are some amazing photographs from Sept. 11 in NYC. Some very fine photojournalists were covering the events of the day and the week that followed. There is also a very fine editorial, which describes the effect the events have had on photojournalism.
Your WTC Photo
Nannette  10.22.01

Nubar, yours is the only photograph I've seen that gives me the experience of what it was like to be there, awed, in a day-to-day way.

A Corporate Photograph
Nubar Alexanian  10.24.01

I have always looked at this image of the WTC as a corporate photograph, perhaps because it's color; that I shot it on a corporate gig, and the form overwhelms the content. Talk about meaning having much to do with what we bring to a piece of work - this image has changed because of the attack. I love this image now. It describes a moment where someone - a figure - is running up into the building. Freely. On a mission. In safety. That seems important now.

When I look at this picture, I also think of the firemen who rushed up the stairwells as people were going the other way, trying to get out, never imagining what would happen.

I think photographers have done a very good job covering this story. I was particularly happy to hear that Joel Meyerowitz has been given complete access to the site. We couldn't have a better photographer documenting what's going on there. He knows when to bring his vast experience into play and when to leave something alone.

A Long Journey and Twelve Worthy Companions
Nubar Alexanian  11.07.01

Rebecca and I lived in Seattle for three years, beginning in 1984. How we got there and why is the long version. She started her first therapy practice after finishing grad school. I had had the career every photographer dreams of, traveling all over the world for great magazines. But I was unhappy with the work I was doing. I decided I didn't know who I was without my cameras. So I put them down for a year and a half while seeing a Jungian therapist once a week. Everyone who saw this wise man had to travel five hours round trip - drive to the ferry, take the ferry, and drive some more. It was like being in therapy all day.

We started with my dreams. After a year or so I brought in new photographs I was taking, which replaced my dreams as the subject of our work together. Convinced that my career in photography was over (no flair for the dramatic here) I ended up selling everything except my two Leicas. This included my entire library of photography books. I love poetry books, especially because you can carry them with you (unlike photography books). Besides, I needed the money. I sold all but twelve books, which I couldn't part with. Perhaps that makes them the most influential photography books in my career. These books are listed below in no particular order:
Travelog by Charles Harbutt
The Americans by Robert Frank
Gypsies by Josef Koudelka
Growing Up Female by Abigail Heyman
Dorchester Days by Eugene Richards
Falkan Road by Mary Ellen Mark
Public Relations by Garry Winogrand
Fifty Years of Photography by Cartier Bresson
The Photographer's Eye by John Szarkowski
Solos by Linda Connor
Edward Weston Monograph, Aperture Books
Landscapes by Paul Caponigro
   - this last remains one of my favorite books of all time

Thanks
Jay Allison  11.08.01

I hope Nubar will continue to hang out here as he sees fit. His friends too.

This discussion about story and image occurring in the midst of the most devastating stories and images of our time has been helpful in organizing thought and action, and confirming the need and purpose of documentary evidence.

Carol Wasserman sent this note after editing Nubar’s issue of The Transom Review:

I am working on the posts of September 10. Did you realize the extent to which our little virtual community was a miniature version of American culture? Did you remember that before September 11 we were fascinated by celebrity and celebrity gossip? That what we wanted most from our Special Guest was "more asshole stories"?

Then everything changed.

And we found ourselves in the ruins. Bereft of narrative. Clinging to image.

Finally, here's an image I like. It's from the Spring, before September 11th, taken with my foggy-lensed 110 cartridge camera. It's Nubar with a striped bass and a cigar in my wooden skiff off Naushon. He'd like the fish to be bigger, I know. There's always next Spring.
About Transom

What We're Trying To Do
Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for WCAI & WNAN, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of WGBH-Boston.

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