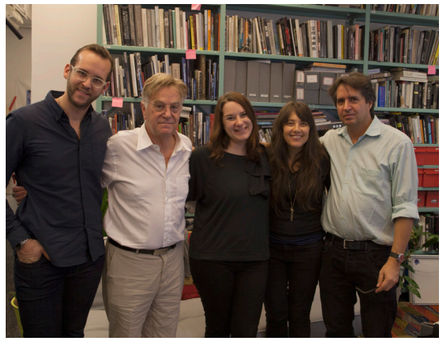
# A SENSE OF PLACE


DINA KANTOR, *MINING POSTCARD, MAILED TO SGT. ADDO H. RIKER IN 1952*, 2012



MATTHEW HERRMANN, CHARLES TRAUB, DINA KANTOR, MAUREEN DRENNAN AND ANDREW MOORE

**IN THE SUMMER OF 2014,** Andrew Moore and I had a short conversation about the idea of place and how it affected our students' work. We decided it would be interesting to gather a group of photographers to share their experiences of, and reasons for, discovering unfamiliar settings. Alumni Maureen Drennan and Dina Kantor, current thesis student Matthew Herrmann and Department Chair Charles Traub agreed to talk about practices and philosophies and recount some of their journeys. The following are excerpts from the day.

Randy West, faculty

## HISTORY AND EDUCATION

**Andrew Moore:** I've been speaking to Randy, Charlie and various students about the role of "place" in photography. Let's start by talking about a general sense of place in photography and how that has changed over time.

It's interesting how photography was wrapped up with nationalism and how the British went out to the colonies and photographed India, Egypt and places in South America and Asia. Most French photographers photographed monuments of France because they didn't have that kind of empire, but they did have a kind of empire of culture. So photography was very much engaged with national ambitions and those were often directed at places and things of physical possessions. It was very outward looking. And then things changed in the 20th century.

**Charles Traub:** In the 19th century the camera revealed the world to people that wouldn't otherwise have been able to travel.

**Dina Kantor:** I think of place less as a geographical location and more of an area that's been changed because of the people that inhabit it and because their histories are intertwined with that location. Place is more about the connection of community and less about what the landscape looks like.

**AM:** With a more sociological bent? Looking at the patterns of behavior?

**DK:** Personal histories too. I've been photographing a former mining town of about 140 people. The land is directly connected to the people. Being there was not just looking at what the land looks like after years of mining, but also about the stories of grandparents and great grandparents who grew up in the mines. That's how I, as an outsider, understand that pile of tailings. As you hear the stories you start becoming connected to the community.

**AM:** Do you ever feel hemmed in [with] these images of coal mining towns and the baggage of photo history that surrounds that? Are you self-conscious about trying to avoid clichés and not repeat imagery?

**DK:** That should be the goal of any photographer no matter what your subject is. You should want to add to the conversation.

**AM:** Even from the early inception of photography people complained that there were too many pictures. In the 1860s they thought the photographic process was a machine of image making. Though we complain about that today, it's been part and parcel of the process.

**Maureen Drennen:** They were so smitten with photography at first and now we sort of go through pictures quickly. We don't linger.

**CT:** It's true that young people are conversing through imagery. We need to start understanding better the language of visual imagery, be teaching it more aggressively from K through 12, to understand how imagery works. Intuitively they probably do, but they don't know how to discuss it without discussing it through other images.

Dina's photographing the town in Kansas; Maureen's photographing a part of New York. Andrew's currently working in Nebraska and Matt's doing the Hudson River. You're all staying with these projects over a long period of time. Most amateurs never do. The in-depth part is the total of all pictures.

## WAYS OF WORKING

**Matthew Herrmann:** One difference between my undergraduate and graduate education is how images are looked at. It is a depth of understanding what those images are responding to. In undergraduate there could have been an assumption you were creating an original dialogue and not necessarily responding or adding to one. I think that is how my work has been framed recently—responding to something within a context, versus being a lone ranger out making my own work, which is entirely unique to me.

The work I'm doing now is using the Hudson River from beginning to end. I'm building it to serve as a metaphor of the idea of progress. Some [images] are literal landscapes and places anyone would recognize if they were in that area. There's another side where I'm constructing places. One of the things that interests me is that you can flatten a place. I composite imagery using three or four locations, sometimes a hundred miles apart, and flatten them into a single photograph to be viewed as a single place.

**AM:** They're spatially continuous. That's an interesting way of approaching place because if one is shooting for *The New York Times* you're not allowed to take a dog from one picture and put it into the another, even if the frame is right next to it. You're not allowed to alter what the camera captured. You've gone to

LEFT TO RIGHT: **MATTHEW HERRMANN,** *SUMMER BREAK ROOM,* 2014; **MAUREEN DRENNAN,** *STILT HOUSE,* 2013

the opposite direction where it's all synthetic, but you still have a defined territory.

**DK:** What's interesting is fragmentation, splicing together locations. I think that is where memory works. Memory is connected to place. We have bits and pieces that come together to build up our history of a place. To merge them together as one and create a fictional place is what our memories are.

**CT:** In the *Day in the Life* book series you're a parachute photographer. You come into this place, have some objectivity, but there's no personal depth other than the ability to make a strong picture. You may have parachuted, but you're staying. You're trying to discover your relation to that place over an extended period of time. That process seems to be missing from the bigger image production of our culture.

**AM:** This is referred to as slow cooking, slow journalism or slow photography where one spends years. It's evolved because something is missing.

### LOCATION AND LENGTH OF A PROJECT

**MH:** I selected the Hudson River originally from an interest in where I had been. I was raised in rural Indiana and had never been to New York City before coming to SVA. Within a matter of months, not only do you have to figure out life at school, you have to figure out life in New York City. One of the things I reflect on is where I come from and where I am now.

Over the summer I followed the Hudson north to find its original source, and began focusing on the variances that comprise the Hudson from end to end.

**AM:** Being between two places comes up a lot with students. They're from one country but they live in New York. I see it often, this topic of place, but it's about being placeless.

**MD:** I'm in awe of people who are affected by their environment – people in smaller communities, fragile communities, economically or environmentally. I've been working on Broad Channel Island in Queens. It's multi-generational and was a hot spot during the prohibition because the houses are on stilts and you could bring in alcohol. That's what's appealing about a place. They're defined by the water and affected it. The "other" is something I think about. Watkins and Curtis were making pictures and people were thinking, "This is what Native Americans look like." There was always the sense of the "other."

**AM:** Charlie, when you go to Rome, what is your take vs. the body of work you make?

**CT:** The Italy of work I did in the early 1980s doesn't exist anymore. Italians look at it with nostalgia; Americans say "I remember going there." The Met just bought some copies of my book, but the costume department bought it. I asked why they wanted it and they said "you have a great record of style that's not self-conscious." We're globalized today. Everybody's in the same jeans, have the same haircuts and same shoes. The food's the same. A few landmarks remain that are indigenous to the place but basically every city is homogenized into a global idea, which may have economic benefit, maybe people are living better but at the same time the individuality and idiosyncratic issues are all disappearing.

In the 1960s we had what we called the salad bowl period. Everybody is different, and that would be harmonious, good and balanced. Now someone took that salad bowl and threw it in a blender. The interest in place is perhaps rediscovering the effects that are clawing to survive in remembrance of our past.

**AM:** North Dakota is not the North Dakota of 10 years ago. Now there are fracking locations and flares everywhere. It went from this idealist landscape to this industrialized refinery of pipelines in a very short period of time. As photographers that's good for us because we see those changes within our lifetime. Within a period of a project we can record that.

**CT:** Nathan Lyons coined the term, and did an exhibition called, "Toward a Social Landscape." The landscape is a social landscape affected by human beings. It's changed by its sociology, psychology, and political history.

**AM:** Usually I'm looking for places where I feel there's some kind of ripeness historically, something in flow where the scales are moving in terms of its history. Cuba and Detroit were a good of example of that and now the High Plains—places in transition.

**MD:** There's usually a dichotomy happening. There's vulnerability and resilience.

**AM:** Historically, journalistically, sociologically speaking?

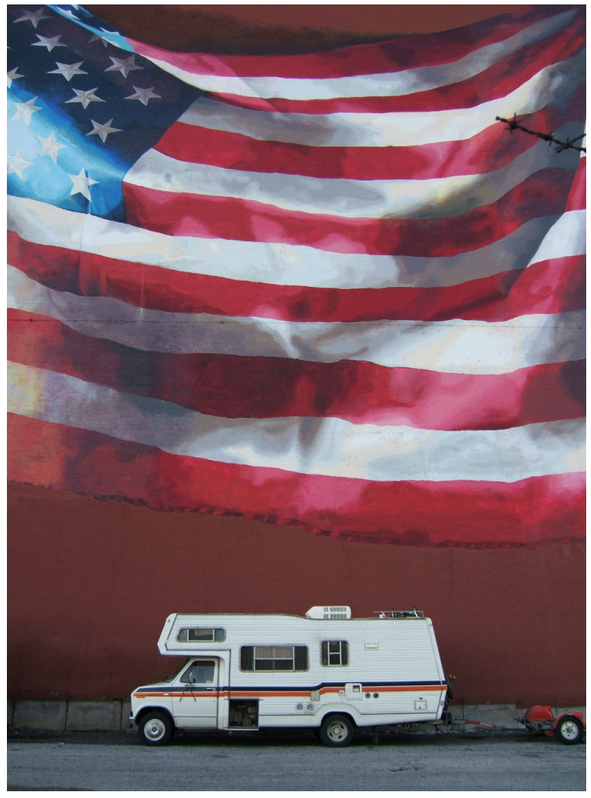
**MD:** And environmentally too.

**AM:** Like with the pot farmers in California.

**MD:** Yeah, they're totally in transition.

**AM:** Legal. Illegal.

LEFT TO RIGHT: **CHARLES TRAUB,** *ROME,* 1981; **MAUREEN DRENNAN,** *ADAM,* 2009




**MD:** They're walking both lines. A lot of them have been doing it for a long time and there is a big shift.

**AM:** Your [pot farmer] project is historically important because this industry will be different.

**MD:** It hasn't been corporatized yet but it will be. It's kind of like the Gold Rush. Place exists but, what we put onto it becomes a whole other thing—stories and memories—sociologically and politically. The question is how do you know when you're done. I can't imagine not doing a project for a long period of time.

**AM:** Detroit was two years; the High Plains project has been 10. I get to the point of diminishing returns and I feel like I've really exhausted something. But I do like to squeeze every drop from it.

**MH:** I'm dealing with a very historical subject within a location. The narrative has already been developed. General Electric had been dumping chemicals into the Hudson River and was forced to stop. There has been dredging but primarily it's a historical period that ended in 1977. I'm more focused on talking to people who remember that period. That brings up issues of memory and how reliable that is.

**CT:** I think the word 'place' implies the establishment of a social involvement with the physical landscape or city. In other words, landscape photography is something slightly different or can be part of landscape but when you mention "place" you're talking about a topographic space that has been socialized by our presence.

My first knowledge of the use of the word "place" as a title would be Wright Morris's *The Home Place,* which was about the family farm. He went back to investigate the aurora of his roots. Place is kind of a marker, that has memory, that is human.

**DK:** I consider myself a portrait photographer, someone interested in how photography contributes to our understanding of identity—community identity in particular. But it's hard to separate place from community. They are so enmeshed.

I was photographing a small community in Finland, which began as an investigation of my heritage because my mother was born there. I was also looking at Finland's Jewish community because my father is Jewish. I found people who share these same cultural characteristics and found myself straddling a line between being an insider and outsider. I was learning about them and about myself.

With my work about Treece, Kansas, I had no past connection to the place. The curiosity came from an article in *The New York Times* about what was happening in there. Destroyed by mining, the entire town was about to go through a government buyout. Over several years I photographed as people packed up and left. Their homes were demolished and the roads were torn up. Now it's an empty landscape. This investigation was about a place that had no connection to me, but I become a part of it.

### THE GREAT FAMILY ROAD TRIP

**CT:** We can't get away from our personal interest. The great family road trip of the 1950s when my father took his vacation and we would travel west and see the great sights of the American landscape. As a child, it opened my eyes to understanding that there was something other than where I live. I've repeated that trip in various forms since. I went to Oklahoma because I'd never been to Oklahoma. That's the curiosity and the thing that motivated my father [to] hit the road every summer.

**MH:** When I moved to New York it was the densest city I've ever been in. My wife and I lived here for four or five months before we left. When I started thinking about work, it felt like "is there anything left outside of the city." I drove upstate, taking every side road, every back road. I just kept going and going, days of driving mountain roads. I think I stumbled onto Glens Falls. That's a big part of it, following those prompts of curiosity and learning to pay attention to those snags.

**MD:** There is so much here [NYC] that people don't feel like they have to go any place else. I was photographing surfers in the Rockaways, taking the subway that goes over Jamaica Bay; it's an odd sensation because you see water on both sides. I met a lot of wonderful people. I've been to First Communions, weddings and funerals. I get quite close to the people that I'm photographing and love hearing their stories. There's a lot of serendipity.

**AM:** Sometimes it's just a random accident. For instance, when I started taking pictures in Times Square I remember coming out of the subway, this was in 1995, and they were rebuilding the steps of the New Victory Theater. This is where they had Kung Fu movie theaters and marquees like you see in *Taxi Driver.* I got a sense that something was going on so I contacted the architect and the people who were renovating this particular theater and they put me in touch with an organization that was dealing with the "new" 42nd Street. I got to go into all these other theaters. It was just one of those random things where I was just walking down the street and something clicked.

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LEFT PAGE: **DINA KANTOR,** *ISABELLA, HELSINKI,* 2006
ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FORM LEFT: **CHARLES TRAUB,** *NEW YORK CITY,* 2003; *TENNESSEE,* 2007*;* **ANDREW MOORE,** *CONTACT, TIMES SQUARE, NYC,* 2002

## CURIOSITY AND ONESELF

**CT:** Curiosity seems to be the common denominator. The five of us represent an outward looking direction: interested in the place, interest in the other—sociology, history—and, indeed, the personal memory that probably stirs all of us. But many young people come to New York and photograph fascinating things that are new to them and then they turn [their images] into more psychologically personal narratives.

We recently landed a modular on a comet and we're going to see things in space and the sun that no one has ever imagined to see. That's landscape photography. It's not place yet. But it will be place as we start dissecting it and getting images back and re-contextualize it. It's amazing what can be seen in a world we know nothing about. It's wide open. That's the human curiosity of wanting to explore. That's the most human thing about us.

**AM:** Charlie and I feel a certain anxiety that fewer photographers are actually looking at the external world. The whole dialogue of photography has shifted toward an inner narrative.

**MH:** Take New York as a subject, there are about nine million people here and there's a concern that if I pick New York as my subject, the second I internalize it, it becomes more autonomous and unique.

**AM:** But traditionally hasn't photography been the medium where it was more outwardly directed?

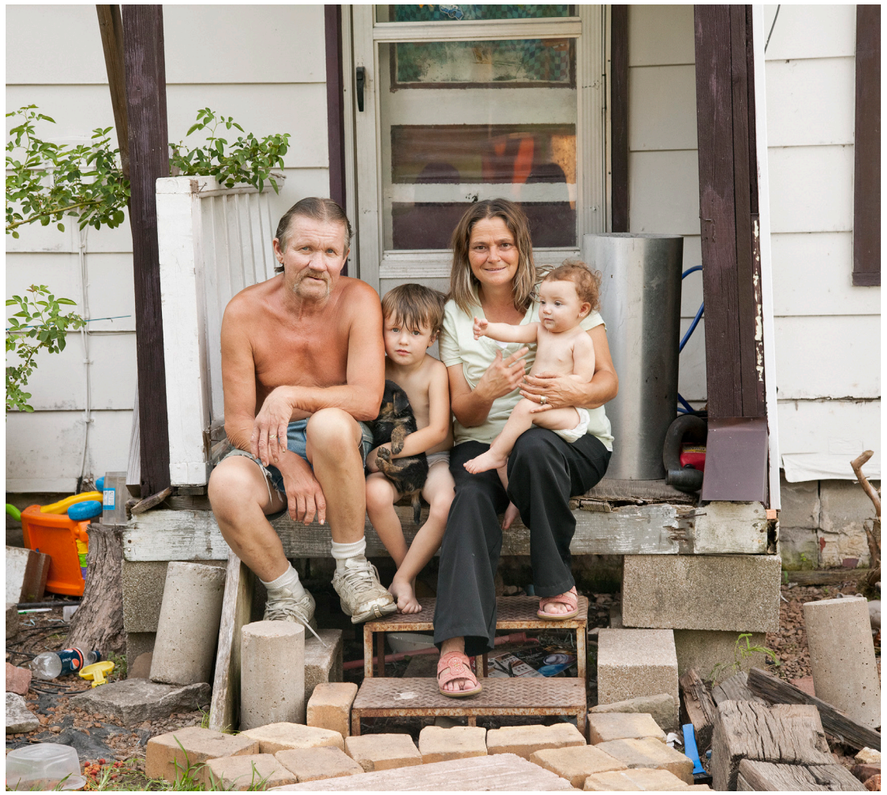
**DK:** That's the nature of the medium. Photography is so indexical; you're recording something that exists in front of your lens.

**AM:** Maybe photography has become less indexical. We can reshape our pictures as permitted or open up this space for artists to do more self-exploration. It's one of those perfect storms.

**CT:** Some of it reflects a kind of narcissism of our society. The whole mechanism of the art world seems to be focused on what I would call an idea of adolescent behavior, adolescent objects. There's a lot of big finance and commerce in all of that. One thing seems to beget another. Maybe "road trip" is an adolescent revisiting my childhood or not letting go of it.

## PLACE AND PEOPLE

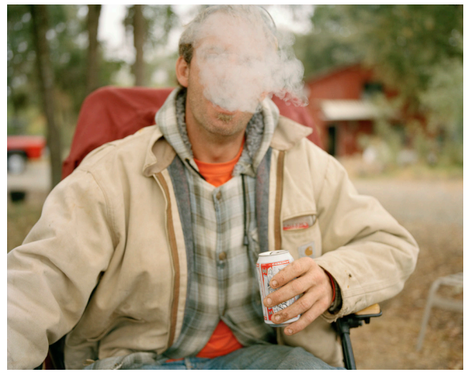
**MD:** I, like Dina, consider myself a portrait photographer and that is how I gain access into place. Being an outsider helps: they know I don't know their mother, their husband, and they can say pretty much anything to me. That's what's great about it. It speeds up our relationship because they feel I'm not going to judge them. They get intimate very quickly. It's almost like they've been waiting for someone to talk to. And we'll talk for a long time before I take any pictures.

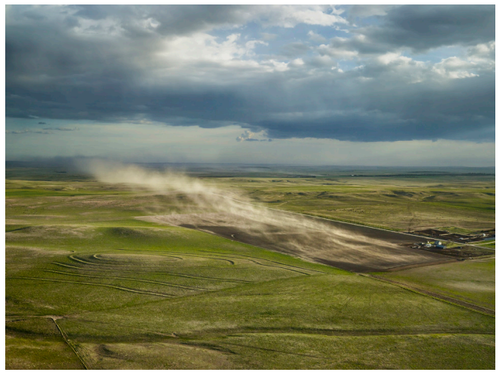


Of course you can't help it, but we have an idea of what a person is like or place might be like. With the pot farmer I had no idea what kind of person I was interacting with. I tried not to have any kind of judgment. Now that I've really gotten to know him he's a very dark person but I didn't know that at the beginning. People have to let down their walls for the interaction to happen and for it to be successful.

**AM:** They also have their biases. When I'm traveling in the Midwest people ask me where I'm from. They have their anxieties about outsiders. People really do want to connect. Once you show interest they overflow. Part of being out there is you have to be a good listener.

**CT:** Any artist has to interpret it through their eyes. Aaron Siskind said, "I'm not interested in truth, only my own reality."





CLOCKWISE FORM LEFT: **DINA KANTOR,** *BOB, BRAYDEN, CARROLL & BROOKLYN, TREECE, KS,* 2010; **MAUREEN DRENNAN,** *JERRY,* 2009; **ANDREW MOORE,** *STORM BLOW, SHERIDAN COUNTY, NE,* 2013; **ANDREW MOORE,** *THE YELLOW PORCH, SHERIDAN COUNTY, NE,* 2013

**DK:** Part of people opening up is seeing that genuine curiosity—when you really want to know something and are interested in what someone has to say. It's very different than when you're coming in for a minute as a photojournalist and taking three pictures and leaving and having the article run. People want to participate, or get to know you more, when it's clear you're invested in the people and space you're photographing. It's incredibly important to be mindful and respectful of your subject; that you do owe something to the people who've agreed to stand in front of your lens; give you their time.

## LITERATURE AND STORY

**CT:** All of these curiosities have narratives and I'm wondering about the role of the story, literature itself. If you think of the first road trip, it's *Ulysses.* What role does literature play on both your decision to do it, how to evolve it, or set it into context?

**MD:** The things I read are Southern. I just read *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers. The idea of place is so heavy. It affects the people and the people affect it. There are wonderful metaphors, like in *The Bear* by Faulkner: place is changing and people are changing. Forests are diminishing; there's more industry. What the "bear" means; what it signifies and how long it takes to kill the bear. It's kind of like *Moby Dick* where he [Ahab] has to get this creature and what it means to him and how "place" is its own personality.

**DK:** I don't know how I could separate literature's influence from any part of my life and history. One thing that's interesting is reading books that have a relationship to places I've photographed. After the work in Treece, I started reading *Winter's Bone.* Though the story is completely different from the story of Treece, the description of the landscape felt very similar. It was interesting to read words depicting a landscape close to the one I was photographing.

**MH:** I've recently been more interested in reading stories I read in high school, like Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, older science fiction. Its kind of "adventure and discovery." Literature serves as like a foundation to creative ideas. Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City* talks about the human pursuit of what happens in the city and its ultimate rebellion to God. To me that applies to the [GE] dumping upstate and who cares about anyone else. That's a narrative that could apply to a lot of places, not just the Hudson.

**AM:** I don't want to be too encumbered. I want to know enough but not overly informed. Once I'm into the project I'll start to look to books such as Kent Haruf. He's writing about the high plains of Colorado. When I was reading some of those words I could feel in it my bones, the connection of those words to place. ●