

Remarks

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Opening of *The Way to Wanakena* Exhibit

Saturday, September 1, 2012

3:00 p.m., The SUNY-ESF Ranger School

Thank you so much, Mariann, and hello everyone.

I am thrilled that we are here together. Thank you so much for coming. I'd like to thank my partner, Sue Washburn. Love makes all things possible. Special thanks to the Ranger School for all that the team here has done to provide a wonderful venue and to make this exhibit happen. I'd like to recognize Sandy Welter, my program advisor at Skidmore, who drove up from Saratoga Springs to be here today, and to acknowledge the Master's in Liberal Studies program at Skidmore. And, not least, I'd like to give special recognition to the 34 people who agreed to be photographed and interviewed for this project. Could I ask those of you who are here to stand?

In the next 15 minutes or so I'd like to talk a bit about my journey as a student in the cultural history of photography, explain to you what *The Way to Wanakena* attempts to do as a project focused on the concept of community, and ask for your help since this project continues through the fall. I know many of us would like to get down to the fiddlers at 4, so I'll move it along.

When I first began my studies, I was fascinated by how photography was invented, how it spread around the world, and who used it for what purposes. Very early both men and women used the camera to record different communities—some examples would be Edward Curtis's famous photographs of the North American Indian. Or the work of Frances Benjamin Johnston with the African-American community at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Gregory Bateson, married to Margaret Mead, and working in Bali, was one of the first ethnographers to use extensive photography, to the tune of 25,000 images, to study another community and culture.

Of course, eventually, the camera was often employed to make images with a socially activist message, attempting to create change or support certain causes. Many historians refer to this as concerned photography. A great example of it is the work of Lewis Hine on child labor. Not so well known is the work of Japanese-born George Masa, who photographed in the Great Smoky Mountains and was a major player in helping the public understand the necessity of protecting that land as a national park. Many of us know the work of the Farm Security Administration, or FSA, photographers, who were sent out around the country in the 1930s and '40s to record images of the Depression to support Roosevelt's New Deal agenda. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* is perhaps the most famous of these images. The powerful imagery of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War also come to mind.

From this very brief introduction we see that the camera has been used to record, or document, individual people and places, including whole communities and movements, and also to bring attention to certain issues. And, it's important to understand that photographs can help us learn—can expand on an idea—an idea such as memory or identity or patriotism or human migration. For me, a major idea throughout my studies has been this concept of community. What do we mean by community?

Well, let's look specifically at Wanakena. It's not just a geographical community of roughly 530 acres, 160 of which is water. Or 160 permanent and seasonal dwellings, according to the county planning office, or a population that varies between 50 and maybe 200, depending on the time of year. And it's not just a community of people with shared interests, a unique history, a certain pride in how we got here and how we survived. It's a living, breathing, functioning community that can shape itself in many different ways, depending on our level of engagement and commitment.

So let me see if I can demonstrate some of how this concept of community can be interpreted specifically through photography. (Lift the camera.) Here I am with my camera and we are at a community event and I will simply record the event. (Click across the room). But, here we are, and I have the notion that I want to photograph more of the idea of community, as I might perceive it—let's say the community engaging with each other. So I ask you to say hello to the person next to you (everyone please say hello), and I photograph that moment. (Click across the room again.) But, let's say I decide that I don't want to determine ahead of time what community means, I want the camera to help me learn. So I photograph some aspect of community from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.—maybe I shoot at the porch of the general store, for example. And then I blow up the images and I study them. I take notes on everything I notice. I form some hypotheses about what I am seeing, and I return to take some more pictures to test if my assumptions are correct. What I have just described, albeit quickly, is inductive, follows a methodology, and is known as visual ethnography.

But, let's say I take an even different approach. Let's say I decide to learn something about community, but instead of taking photographs of a lot of people together doing an activity, I merge art and ethnography. I take a series of individual portraits. And, in addition, I ask people to sit down and have a conversation about this specific community, Wanakena—how they came to be here, what they like about it, what concerns them for the future, and so on. And what if I add to that a little twist? What if I hang all those photographs, 24 of them along with people's own words, on a wall somewhere and invite the entire community to come and see the images, read the text, and respond? Now I have a very different kind of project. Now I have a project that for me is deeply meaningful because there is dialogue, because there is consequence.

Let me tell you a bit about what I learned in the interview part of this process. And then I'd like to come back and talk for a moment about the significance that the portraits themselves have in this study.

Some background: There were 34 people interviewed in the 24 portraits since some were in a single portrait and some in pairs. 24 of the 34 were year-rounders and 10 seasonal. There were two kids younger than 12 and the rest of the kids were in their '20s into their '80s. I chose people for the mix, and for their availability, sometimes on the spur of the moment. Interviews were not just on the topic of Wanakena but were also about personal histories.

On the topic of the Wanakena community, the top four positives, in order, for those interviewed were:

- First, **location**, and by that we mean recreation and all the things you can do here, wilderness, and the natural beauty and the contrast of seasons.
- The second positive, ironically, is **community**, as in—we are a community, we are friendly, we are on a first-name basis, people will help you no matter who you are, Wanakena is home.
- Third, **Wanakena is a great place to raise kids**—it's a safe environment where the kids can be happy and where they can learn important life lessons.
- And fourth, there is a strong sense of connection to, distinction of, and pride in the **Ranger School**.

The top four concerns were:

- First, **attracting more year-rounders and families with kids** (in this category are the many related subsets: affordable housing, desirable and available property, jobs, quality education, technology, and keeping the hospital)
- The second was **the difficulty of running a business or doing business here**, with issues such as remoteness, technology, resistance to development, difficulty of attracting new business)
- Third, people **bringing city ways to the country or wanting city conveniences**
- Fourth, **not wanting too many people to discover Wanakena** or for Wanakena to expand too much

Let me note here that one of the reasons I did a project in the social-activist tradition is this. I am idealistic enough and socially minded enough to believe that a community like ours has the ability to work together to create the positive future that we want to see. So I used the camera to teach me more about this community and to help me test some of those ideas. I want to be clear that I don't think this project is in any way the sole instigator of positive change or advancement for Wanakena or even the broader community. It is a contributor to everything else that is going on here, historical tours, music on the green, the Ranger School centennial, fundraising for the church building and the hospital, economic development, broader discussions about the future of the Park...everything. Ultimately, however, it is not what I think but what you think about what you see and experience in *The Way to Wanakena* that matters.

Let me now make a few quick comments about why I did this show in portraits.

Portraits are powerful, aren't they? Especially, for me, they are often most meaningful when they adopt a straightforward, unaffected style; when you are looking into someone's eyes; when the photographs are not highly stylized or perfected or sentimentalized; and when they have no commercial purpose. Rendered this way, they help me as a viewer, just like you, establish a certain relationship with the person I am looking at. I have time, in a fast-paced world where images swirl around us so quickly and so impermanently, to spend some time with a person in a portrait—to think about who that person really is, what he or she values, where I am like the person or where I differ. Good photographic portraits have often been thought to capture something of a person's soul. Whether that's true or not, I meet the person's eyes and I am engaged; I am often transformed. This happens to me when I look at the image of Polly Hamele in this show. I feel that she is asking us what we will do to honor this community. I feel that she is our guardian angel. And I feel she raises each of us who see her very honest gaze to a higher standard. That's how powerful a portrait can be for me.

Portraits of individuals also signify of course that while we are part of a community, we are each responsible individually for our actions and we each have personal power and authority—our own special voice—to create change. And I like the idea of shooting and showing portraits, because once they are hanging there, I, as the photographer, move away and what is important then is the relationship you have to that person when you gaze into those eyes. What is your commitment as a fellow member of a community to work with that person for the future of this or any place? And since the people who are in this show are only representatives of all of us (I could have photographed any 34 people), what if that were your face there instead? How would you want people to relate to you—to cooperate with you on issues that matter?

Now, you can help me and all of us continue this exploration of community by taking just a moment to fill out a very quick survey. Since the show is moving from here to the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore in Saratoga Springs in October, I will be speaking again but to a different audience. And I would like to be able to share your reactions to this project to help spark their own feelings about community. So we'll pass out the survey and a pencil that you should feel free to keep. Your answers are anonymous. The surveys can be dropped off in or near the big box. And as soon as you are done, we can gather for refreshments or head back to the show or off to the fiddlers. I'll be around to answer any questions and to chat. Also, please note that there is a website with all the photos and written material at www.thewaytowanakena.com

It's been my privilege to do this project. I've learned so much. And I'd like to leave you with a final thought: If I had wanted to take a photograph of every person who is important to the Wanakena community, I would have needed to take everyone's picture.

Thank you so much, again, for coming today.