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# Clues to Catalogues

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# Clues to Catalogues

**by**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**August 2014**

# Dedication

This report is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Natalie Brooks Barringer, and my aunt, Natalie Kernan Brooks.

# Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the support of many individuals, including but not limited to my parents, Stephen and Irene Brooks; James Scheuren and Christine Collins; my committee Chair Bogdan Perzynski; Dr. Ann Reynolds; Anna Collette; and Mark Goodman, who taught me to think of pictures as verbs and nouns.

# Abstract

## Clues to Catalogues

Lily Peacock Brooks, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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This Master's Report is a discussion of the ideas, research, and methods I have developed over the course of my three years of study at the University of Texas at Austin. As an artist I am interested in systems and structures of control–personal, political, economic, and environmental–and our efforts to understand, escape and navigate them. I use photography in an attempt to visually describe what is un-seeable: love, loss, desire, anticipation, fear, and failure. Throughout this time, I have made pictures as a method for exploring varying systems of categorization, cataloguing, and the translation of emotion into images.

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As an artist I am interested in systems and structures of control–personal, political, economic, and environmental–and our efforts to understand, escape and navigate them. I use photography in an attempt to visually describe what is un-seeable: love, loss, desire, anticipation, fear, and failure. Making photographs is my way of beholding, appropriating and fixing the world so that I can rearrange it, keep it and make it new. I use the camera to look closely and slowly at my subject. Through the process of photographing and editing I create a new system of order, governing the images like words in a sentence. Doing so is my method of understanding what is in front of the lens by transforming or multiplying its potential meaning.

The impulse to catalogue and categorize through photography has been a part of my practice since I began making pictures in a serious way over ten years ago. Roland Barthes, who "emphasized photography's indexical relationship to the world," calling it an "evidential force", also "believed that, ultimately, 'the photographer bears witness essentially to his own subjectivity.'" (Dyer). I use my personal experience as a starting point for thinking, as an engine for photographing and a guide for making initial decisions. "You get little clues," said Emmet Gowin, and "pretty soon, you're doing something, and you say, almost by surprise, 'I guess this is where I was going, but I didn't know it at the time.'" (Blaustein).

Last August, a friend asked me where I saw the link between my two current bodies of work. There were marked visual and conceptual disparities that distinguished *We Have to Count the Clouds* (photographs dealing with our relationship to the natural world) from *Say Yes* (photographs made of pawnshops in Austin). Finally able to articulate the connection (after admittedly being confused myself), my reply was that they were both about a feeling of futility. This simple answer had taken months of mental fumbling for me to realize. John Szarkowski said that, like writing or chess, photography

is “a matter of choosing from among given possibilities”; the problem being that “in the case of photography the number of possibilities is not finite but infinite.” (Sontag 192). During my time in graduate school I have learned to sift through my initial instinctual acts and follow them from one body of work into another, finding links and bridges between them. This began with the idea of heat.

In August of 2011, conversations about the heat were ubiquitous and as tedious as the temperature itself. The state of Texas was enduring the worst drought since the 1950’s, and I had just relocated from Boston—the climate consumed my thoughts as well. On the hottest day of the year I carefully cut the weather map from the Wall Street Journal with a razor. It was 112° outside the window of my apartment, where I pasted the map with saliva to be photographed. Backlit, the delicate shape of the country was all pinks and reds, the paper’s verso showing through (the sports section–an image of a football player); this sandwiched imagery was then collapsed by my camera upon the window, screen, and landscape.


Figure 1: *The Hottest Day, Wall Street Journal,* Archival Pigment Print, 40x50", 2011.

For me, the picture spoke about displacement, history, and the near obsolescence of printed matter. I saw the newspaper weather map, this outline of the country filled with cartoon symbols, as a kind of tarot card. Buried amid the record of what had happened in the preceding 24-hours, the map was a published prediction of what might come next.

Certainly people have been fascinated for centuries with wind and rain, these changeable, essential, often unseeable aspects of weather. This preoccupation exists for good reason: meteorological outcomes affect every facet of our lives—from the price of corn to politics or my decision this morning whether or not to pack an umbrella. We all encounter the air as it presses itself against us, but the consequences of climate change

are both personal and global. An inscription at the National Weather Service station in New Braunfels, TX reads, “He who shall predict the weather, if he does it conscientiously and with inclination, will have no quiet life any more.” We strive to understand it, perhaps to control it, as a means of survival or a way of making sense of the tangible world.

The photograph of the map sat on my studio wall for months. (Figure 1) I studied all that data—now rendered by little suns and the scalloped edges of cold fronts—and wondered where it came from. How was it collected? What did it look like in raw form, before being translated for the masses? Whose responsibility was it to decipher wind patterns and snowfall into something that made sense to a pedestrian audience? In an attempt to answer these questions, I began working with meteorologists at the National Weather Service. They generously allowed me access to both their contemporary instruments and their historical archives.

Looking through the ground glass of my large-format view camera, I started to study the devices and records of weather prediction slowly, with curiosity. In the resulting large-scale color photographs I produced, they are abstracted and isolated. The marks and instruments that conjure our history and future are transformed in form and purpose—a transcription of wind looks like a polygraph test or heart rate monitor, a rain gauge is cut like a menacing crown, the handwritten notation of the first “killing”, or frost, of 1931, appears tender, like the record of a child’s height recorded on a door jamb. (Figure 2, Figure 3)

Figure 2: *Rain Gage*, Archival Pigment Print, 30 x 24", 2012.

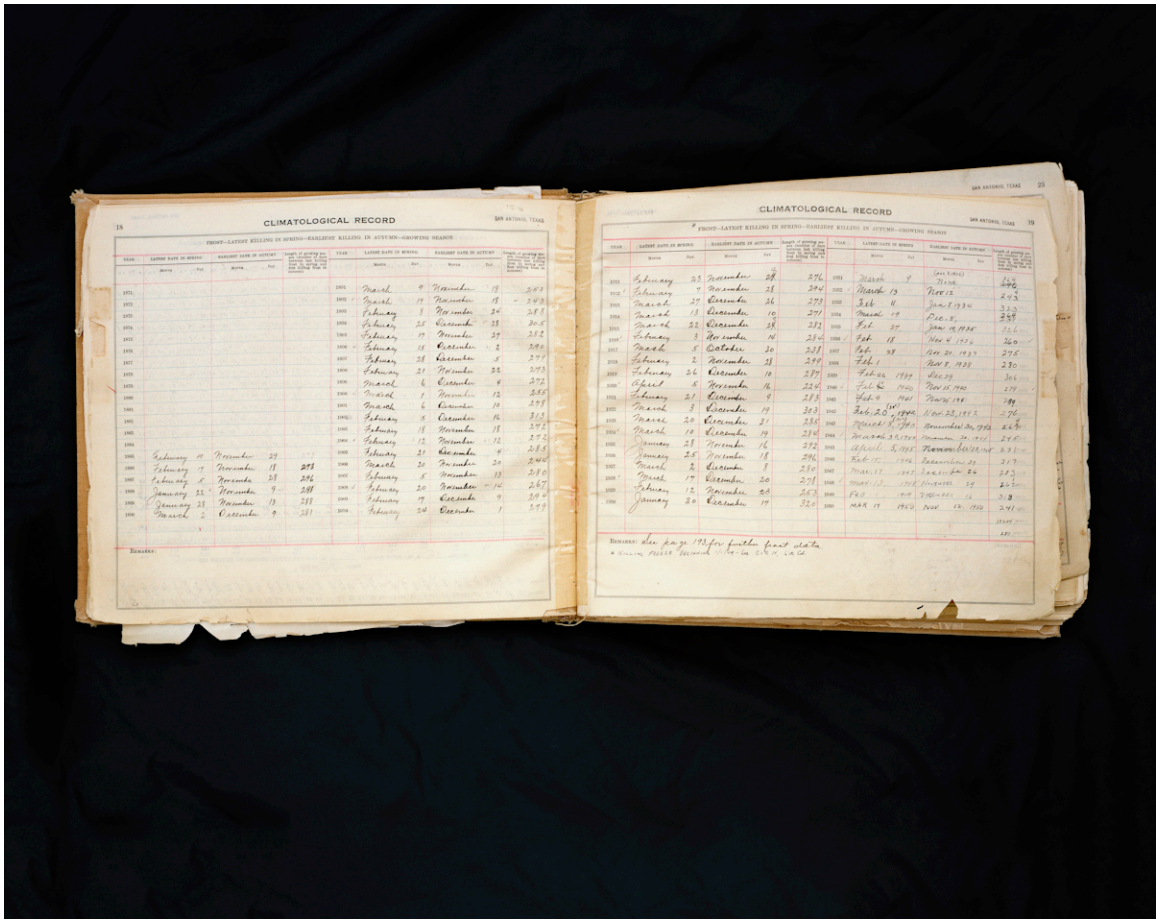


Figure 3: *First and Last Killing (Frost), 1885-1950,* Archival Pigment Print, 24 x 30", 2012.

My pictures are about our desire to know: to see and predict what we cannot; what is wily and shifting, beyond our command. The act of making these photographs is a way for me to participate in the sense of wonder and uncertainty that saturates the weather stations where I work. My camera is a simple machine: a wooden box, bellows, lens and glass, but the 4x5" negative yields a result that is highly detailed and meticulously crafted. From under the dark cloth I take measure like a scientist, making material what was once mysterious to me, and sometimes obscuring what was once simple and clear.

The effects of the weather can also be personal, intimate, a physical experience. They are our goosebumps, sunburns, and beads of sweat. We all encounter the air as it presses itself upon us, even if only for the brief moments we spend away from air conditioning. For many people on many days, those moments of pleasure (or discomfort) might be the only times we connect with and consider the natural world.

I looked more closely at this relationship as I made another body of work during 2012. As I considered my daily interaction with the weather, I remembered a specific personal experience: walking across the Harvard Bridge in Boston. The span of this particular bridge is almost a half-mile, and the flat space of the dammed river creates a wind tunnel of sorts—gusts whip across, churning the gray-black water below. Pedestrians are thrust from the congestion of the city, exposed to the elements as they cross the bridge, the sky suddenly unobstructed above, the view expansive. In winter, the wind can be more deafening than the traffic and cold enough to make one's eyes water. For me, this loss of the ability to hear and see clearly transforms an often crowded public space in to a private one. Luc Sante describes the phenomenon of being alone in a crowd in his essay *The Planets*: "When you walk out on the avenue you are navigating a current of bodies, but you might as well be on a tundra, or alone in the cosmos" (Sante). I find a stand-in for myself in *Untitled*. (Figure 4) A woman walks toward the viewer, arms by her side, blonde hair blown across her face. She is shiftless against the cold, not bothering to pull the hair from her eyes. She is made anonymous, presumably blind and deaf by the wind, no longer protected by the vertical city.

Figure 4: *Untitled,* Archival Pigment Print, 24x30", 2012.

Though a relatively short-lived project, *Measure* was important to my practice in that it marked a turn from my typically slow and methodical way of making work into a faster paced one. It was also my first experience making pictures of strangers, of truly looking outward at an experience outside my own. Initially I looked for a stand-in for myself in an attempt to reference my own experience, but I soon realized that other viewers saw themselves in the pictures as well. Most importantly, I realized that these photographs could easily have political and social content, triggering thoughts about class, surveillance, and technology (among many other things) in the mind of the viewer. This body of work, which had started from a very personal impulse, allowed me to think

about larger political and social ideas. This transition from the personal to the political is a pattern that I began to recognize and embrace in my practice as I moved forward.

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The catalogue of my possessions called *What's Mine Is Yours (Is Yours Is Mine)* is the most personal work I've ever made. I came to it sideways, by way of another project, precipitated by my interest in the socio-political. *Say Yes* started with an observation from the car window. I noticed a ring around the city made up of pawnshops, gold buyers, and payday lenders.

> Title Max, EZ Loan, Loan Star, Speedy Cash, Pawn America, Check n' Go. Their dollar signs face each other across lanes of traffic, so abundant that one hardly sees them, driving down Burnet or Airport, Ben White or Seventh.
>
> These are houses of exchange, places of transaction. They make up a secondary economic infrastructure. Something quick and necessary happens inside. Red and blue and green and yellow, the storefronts are all the same and all different, constructed with vinyl, aluminum, carpet and neon. Six hundred dollars in fifteen minutes. Fast, easy, now, less, more, get, reward, existing, you, we, together.
>
> My pictures are made from the outside, quickly, close enough to obscure. Words change or lose substance, symbol falls apart. That neon dollar sign is just air and wire and gas and glass. It doesn't even seem to mean anything anymore.

In the beginning I made many pictures, using a digital camera in order to work quickly. I didn't know what I was after but felt compelled to keep going. I printed each frame 4 by 6 inches (the same size as a drugstore print) and rearranged them like playing cards. After a few months of making pictures, I had twenty-odd photographs of dollar signs. I grouped them in a grid. I had fractions of words and phrases, pieces of symbols, that when seen together, repeated and broken down, abstracted the meaning intended by their original makers. In the photograph *Untitled (Airport Boulevard)* (Figure 5), the letters that spell out LOANS appear to spell OASIS instead, as the viewer's mind fills in

the gaps made by absent letters. The reflection of the serene and barren landscape in the windows is a second illusion in itself.


Figure 5: *Untitled (Airport Boulevard),* Archival Pigment Print, 60x180", 2013.

I wanted to slow down, to look more closely at the words and materials that are so ubiquitous and seem so menacing. The surfaces are the skin of our America, the same as a chain restaurant or dry-cleaner's, and their texts act on us, appealing to our desires and fears. Their glass and laminate keep us in or out, establishing a threshold to cross. Crossing it means giving up some control; it means paying an exorbitant interest rate for a cash loan. It's convenient and fast and acts as a stopgap for many of its users.

You go in (crossing that threshold) with your kid's bicycle, a lawnmower, your grandmother's silver, car title or proof of a paycheck. You go in with that thing and leave with cash. The cash changes hands again and again, and the object you leave stays behind, maybe forever. Maybe you never come back and maybe that's what you want.

I wanted to see evidence of what I imagined to be a set of circumstances, a map of decisions that resulted in this exchange of objects and cash. I thought the items themselves might be the subject I was really looking for, a way of seeing with the camera material evidence of loss or vulnerability. I thought I might treat the pawnshop as its own kind of archive, one that I might curate without knowing the histories associated with objects that had been given up for one reason or another. What was hard to let go of? What must have meant something significant to someone else? Instead I decided to start with myself.

What if I exchange all the old things for new ones.
What if my history goes away and never comes back.
And so I lose all my old habits and
My old taste.
What if I could replace the entire contents of my adult life?

I sold something with market value that was of no use to me anymore. The ring seemed perfect: sort of funny but cathartic and appropriate. I made a picture of it before taking it in. This small thing symbolized ten years of my life but took only fifteen minutes to pawn. I had to show my driver's license and sign some paperwork. I walked out of the pawnshop with seventy dollars in cash and immediately knew it could be an engine for making work. I decided to go back with the money and replace something that I had given up. When I was married, I had a record player. I didn't have one anymore.

At this point I started to look at the things I own, to think about what they witnessed, how they were handled, where we had been together. Rehoboth to Providence to Somerville (Porter Square) to Salem to Somerville (Union Square) to Austin. Then to a

storage unit. I remembered unpacking my belongings when I moved into my current apartment, alone. I had been away for the summer after the divorce was finalized. I unpacked boxes that still held the smell of our old house. I hated the inanimate objects that made up the contents of my adult life. The toaster oven, the sieves, the couch pillows: they had seen too much. They belonged in drawers or on hangers from another life, one I no longer wanted and didn't want to be reminded of.

I considered the everyday objects that populated my household. I took inventory. I broke them down into categories:

Things he gave me

Things given to us

Things we divided

Gifts from others

Things I'm still paying for

Things bought as replacements

Things I bought for myself

and so on...

Figure 6: *Silverware,* Archival Pigment Print, 11x75", 2014.

The silverware set seemed particularly important; I photographed it next. We registered for it because I thought for sure I would have big dinner parties and feed our children with it. It gets used every day. It goes in your mouth. There is a gravy spoon.

*For Thanksgivings*. In my studio, I laid out the spoons, forks, and knives on a pristine white backdrop. The camera captured fingerprints, water stains, and the small scratches of five years of use. (Figure 6)

Many other objects fell into the categories I had defined. The pots and pans. The vacuum. The television that sat unused in my single life. A drawer of mismatched tools. My new pink bed sheets. There is a mirror, an engagement gift from my grandmother that was given to her as an engagement gift in 1946, an antique even then. There is the underwear I bought for myself when I became single, suddenly realizing that I would want and perhaps need to be attractive again half-naked. There are the books I purchased after my separation from a man who didn't believe in education or spending money for it, a symbolic stack of the intellectual freedom I expect to have without him. (Figure 7)

Figure 7: *Books,* Archival Pigment Print, 37x16", 2014.

Figure 8: *Suitcase,* Archival Pigment Print, 36x23", 2014.

Some things are still missing. Some I never wanted. Some I have too much of. Some were only used once or have never been used. Some get slept in. Some are broken. Some I could not afford in the first place. I look at them alone, isolated. I remember that they are only objects. Now they are also images. I pulled them out of the house, brought them into the studio, put them on the white backdrop. I printed them to scale. This simple (and laborious) act of replication made me look closer. They were abstracted, becoming almost uncanny when rendered in two dimensions. The images created a distance that opened up the potential meaning of these objects. They had weight, resembled the body, and became more sad or uncanny or humorous. They were my things, but they could belong to anyone.

I thought about the collection of prints as a kind of estate sale. (Figure 9) As I laid them out, they took up so much surface area. More often than after a divorce, the aftermath of a death is the time we have to deal with other people's things and what they will mean, to make decisions about what to let go of and what to keep. I remembered Joan Didion's description of dealing with her husband's clothing. Getting rid of the possessions was "part of what people did after a death, part of the ritual, some kind of duty" (Didion, 36). Making the photographs of my belongings felt very much like a ritual, slow, meditative and sometimes excruciating. The pictures that make up *What's Mine Is Yours (Is Yours Is Mine)* are evidence of that act, they record another type of grief.

Figure 9: *What's Mine Is Yours (Is Yours Is Mine),* Installation Photograph, Visual Arts Center, 2014.

Together, these pictures track the passage of time, both short and long-term. Some objects are meant to last; some are practically disposable. The photographs show the patina of use. They expose the banality of my middle-class taste. They reveal the expectations I had for myself in for my married life, of the "stories" I was living by and the fact that the "story itself did not fit" and "no narrative [could] hold the two together" (Steedman, 139). I could not make it work. I could not realize the intended use of the silverware. The few things I own that are precious are old; they are the items given to me by family members: material evidence of a different time. Raymond Williams' concept of *structures of feeling* helped me to understand this.

Figure 10: *Sugar Bowl and Creamer,* Archival Pigment Print, 5 x 8", 2014.

As a child, I associated financial stability and the remaining traces of that (the furniture, the silver set, the pearls) with the emotional stability that once existed for my family. These objects in particular, the ones that made it into my parents' home, were evidence of an existing structure of feelings, one that is shared among my family members and has been passed on to my generation. (Figure 10) It has to do with loss. Both my parents came from upper-middle class families, their grandparents from affluent families. But tragedy, for both of my grandfathers, meant that much of that financial and emotional comfort disappeared. The stories of wealth, the loss of it and the memory of it, were pervasive during my childhood. They were a sermon repeated verbally and accompanied by silent glances between adults. Both my parents grew up more or less fatherless, and I was made aware early on that I was lucky to have both a mother and father. In my mind, this window of easy childhood would surely be brief. I prepared myself. I set out to be perfect and to protect my parents who had suffered enough.

My version of family "history" was incomplete, and it was frightening. It was a "re-worked and re-used personal history" (Steedman, 128). It was a story told to me over and over again by my mother and grandmother, and the inherent gaps were filled in as I was left alone to rifle through drawers and photo albums. I realized how important this was to my psychological development as well as to my identity as I read Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*. I am the oldest in my generation. I was the first to learn the family secrets. I was the first in line to reenact those stories. I was the first to get married too.

I am interested in the fact that I curated this archive according to my own subjective process of decision-making. I picked up literally every item in the apartment and asked myself if it was related to the divorce. So the archive is not simply a portrait of my life as a 32-year old female consumer (single, in graduate school, without the income to afford her middle class taste). It's not simply a catalogue of objects related to my divorce. It's also an indicator of how close I am to that life event. I am still pretty close. I can't forget where the Dutch oven came from. Making this work is a way of solidifying my story, using photography to fill the gaps.

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The pictures I have made over the past three years present an opportunity for you and me to be closer and look longer than we ever would: at a stranger on the street, at the rust developing on a rain gage, at the scuffed edges of a carry-on sized suitcase. Throughout graduate school, I made work in response to my personal experiences with the hopes that others would be able to access and see a commonality in the resulting pictures–be it shared anxiety about climate change or the fact that we all have too many belongings in our homes. My hope is that this work functions as evidence of existing

structures of feeling, and that for that reason the viewer will recognize herself and her own experiences in the pictures, as if in a mirror, walking alongside my subjects, pulled into an experience that is close to life but made accessible by looking at the photographs.

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