

This Book

is about waking up.

And seeing.

Not seeing pictures.

Seeing what is all around us and what's inside us, and letting it all show fully in our photographs.

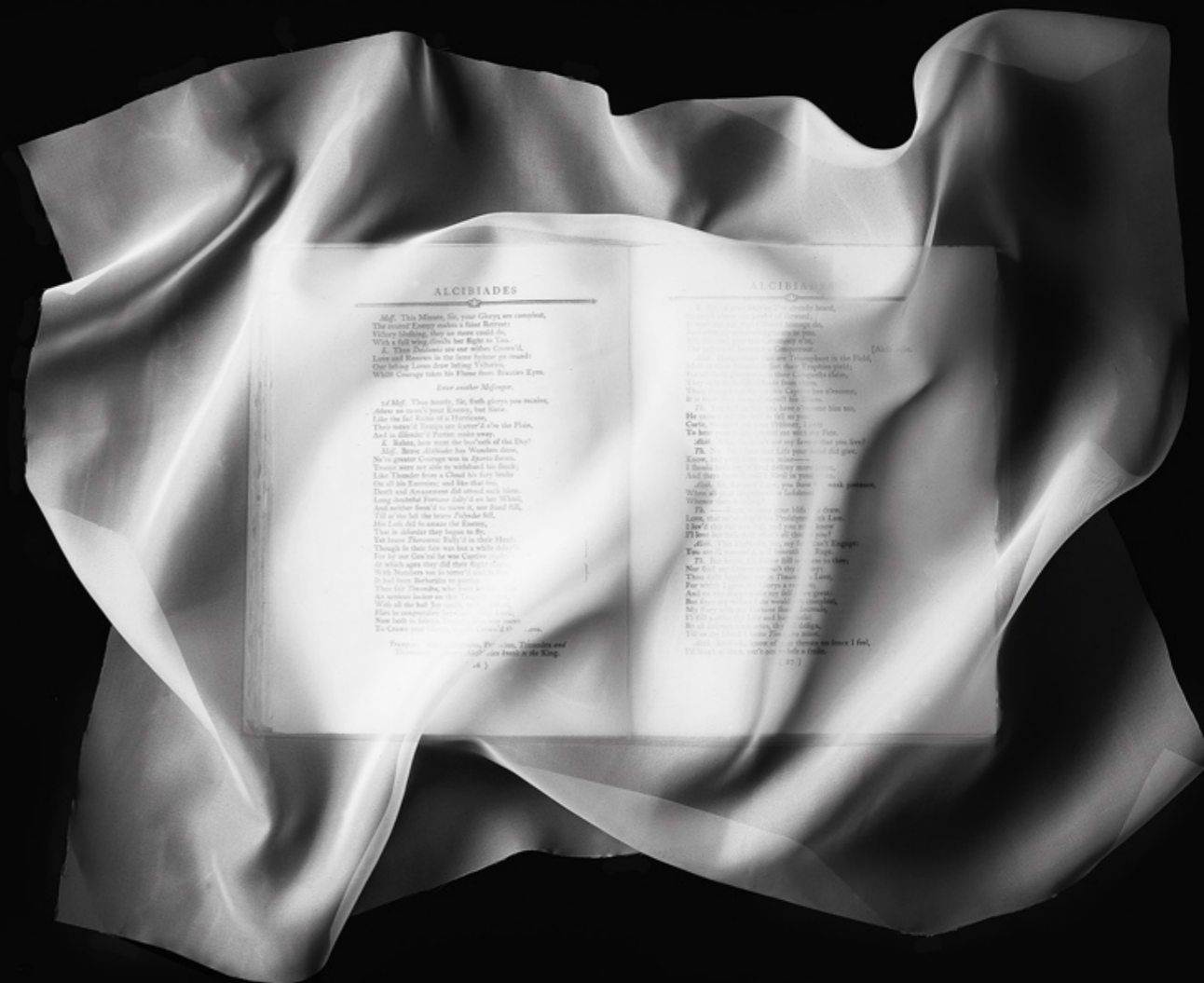
It is about letting our minds be quiet and spacious, moving out beyond what we think and then making work from there.

It is a basis for a creative practice, in photography or anything else.

I looked for this book for years but was unable to find it. So I've had to write it.

Photo: Sean Kernan

(Photographs not otherwise credited are by the author.)



Seeing
is forgetting the name
of the thing one sees.

Paul Valéry

Creativity is much more than arranging the things you know, it's how you came to know them. It's a means to secure and enlarge and deepen your grasp. When you face something you think you can't possibly do, and then go ahead and manage to do it anyway, creativity is the tool you use. It is how you can get beyond the self made up of ideas that you have accumulated and lived by.

No one has to teach you creativity. It is in you and functioning when you are born. You very naturally use it as you lay in your cradle, wiggle your toes and contemplate them thoughtlessly, wordlessly. It gets you from helplessness to where you are today, an upright, walking, speaking, thinking human being.

This is quite a far-reaching statement, I know, and I will clarify it as we go along, but a thing to realize is this: you're not done with growing and becoming yet. You never will be.

Creativity is what lets me make my very best photographs, the ones that surprise me and get me out beyond myself. It does exactly the same thing for writers, musicians, scientists, entrepreneurs, and everyone who produces things that somehow seem to come out larger than they think they are.

The book uses photography as the main vehicle for exploring this phenomenon, but the exercises and insights in it work in other areas of art — and life — not just picture-taking. They release awareness and seeing, whether you use a camera, a brush or pen, a computer or toe shoes to capture and express your experience. No matter what medium you work in, you can use the exercises in this book to wake yourself

up and be a better artist, or scientist, or anything else.

For now, though, let's talk about photography, which is what I know most securely.

Sometimes I call the workshops I teach *Setting the Photographer Aside*. Here's why: when most of us photographers see something exciting, just at the moment that we are opening to it, we put a machine in front of our faces. At that moment the camera, and photography itself, can get in the way, and we are no longer apprehending the life that lies outside the frame, or listening, or feeling the air. We give up a full sense of the space we're in and we ignore atmospheres, resonance, and things that might yet happen — all the stuff of poetry. We stop time's flow, as opposed to slipping into it.

It is fullness that makes our good photography good, but here we are cutting off our wider awareness. We don't have to. We can stay in wide awareness with a very little practice.

The best indication that creativity operates beyond our consciousness comes when we find an image in our files that is transcendent. It is as though a tall man in a black cape had slipped up to us when we were making photos and said, "Excuse me, may I borrow your camera? (Click.) Thank you," and handed it back. And later, we find an image in our files that goes beyond anything we thought we could make. Yet we did.

"Well ... it's an accident," we say. At least, we do in the beginning. And we hope for another.

But what if it was not an accident? And what if we didn't wait and hope but went out looking?

Well, we can ... not merely to find photographs, but to experience that state of wider awareness in which our perception expands.

Here's a way to think about such unencumbered awareness. Imagine a function room in a hotel ballroom where a political candidate will speak in an hour. And imagine a photographer walking into

it, saying to himself, “Where are the photographs going to happen here?” He sees one version of the room one of light and angles and things.

Good, now imagine a Secret Service agent walking into the same room. He looks around and asks, “Where could someone sneak in here? Where could someone hide, how could he escape?” He sees quite a different room.

Both photographer and Secret Service agent are full of intention. They are there to see what they are looking for.

Now imagine a two-year-old child wandering in. No intention, nothing at all to get done. He looks around, but not *for* anything. There’s a kind of spaciousness in his mind that has room for sounds and smells, other people, everything. He is not listing things, not analyzing, not seeking meaning. He is just ... *seeing*. The whole room.

And that’s the seeing we’re after. The tasks and assignments that this book sets out are designed to

take you back to that childlike state, one in which you could come home sated by a long summer bike ride with many stops and digressions, and when your mother asked you what you’d been doing, you’d say, “Nothing.”

And you weren’t evading. That ride was not so much about what you’d done or where you’d been as about also the state that you’d been in.

That’s the state we are going to look for again.

How might we get to it? Through a few ideas, some exercises that provoke it, and from practice, the very format of this book. It is all a reminder that the state is still there.

The ideas are there to give a sense of framework to what underlies the active heart of the creative process, and also to give things some intellectual respectability for the part of us that wants that affirmation.

And we’ll try out an unusual set of exercises I have gathered over the past thirty years. They are sur-

prisingly simple, and surprising in their outcomes. Some of them are photographic, others are more like kinetic Zen koans. And they all begin with doing things that you already know how to do.

The exercises work to take you to awareness in ways that explanations don't. If you try to tell someone what sweetness tastes like it is impossible, but if you give them a dab of honey, it is clear.

There is some tendency with a book like this to read it, think, *How true ...* and stop at that. I know because I've done it, and I know it has value. But nothing changes us more than doing.

So, best to try the exercises and see what happens in your mind and your results. If the results surprise you, that's a good sign that you gave yourself to the process and something happened.

Over time you'll do some form of these again many times, because they are all steps we naturally use in creating, although things will come out differently in each instance.

Creativity is stochastic, not linear. I have marshaled the exercises into a line, with each building on the ones before, but in the end the line turns out to be

more like a rising spiral, and at any point you can jump ahead or else return to those exercises that you think were most productive, or that most surprised you ... or scared you.

This is not a book about a philosophy, not my construct of *What Things Mean*. It is just a few tools you can use to provoke experiences, and with them you can get to whatever work you need to do. Overall, they should certainly help get you someplace new in your work and your thinking.

At any point in the working process you might start to take livelier pictures, but these will be like footprints. It's quite possible that the doing may be more exciting to you than the outcomes. Still, those outcomes will be what others see of your journey, and the experience may even send them on journeys of their own.

The exercises in this book work by getting you out past your habitual self, provoking new and wider awareness, and giving you a concrete experience of the creative state.

Once you're in that state, that's when you begin to make the work that is alive and truly your own.

I'm a photographer. I like cameras. I was thrilled by my first Leica, a small black machine, so capable and precise. And the sound of the shutter, it sounded so ... French! I thought that with it I could do *anything*. I still have it.

But let's understand that this book is not going to be about cameras or interesting techniques. Photography is the means of exploration, but we'll do it not just to get pictures but to find things out ... about what is around us and in us.

If we just set out to take a picture, and we succeed in capturing what looks something like the whatever we envisioned ... we can stop there.

But when we work in the creative state, we are looking for what is *beyond* what we can think up. And instead of taking photographs we *allow* them to take us. Those kinds of photos can go beyond knowledge and skill. Our best pictures, the ones that insist that we do more do more, surprise us by being somehow bigger than we are. That's the paradox that breaks our vision open.

When this happens, it changes us. That's what so appealed to me when I began photographing. Whenever I took such a photograph it seemed there was more to me.

All this doesn't mean that we'll be anything less than disciplined and completely rigorous when we tighten and clarify what we have expressed.

But as you do the reading and begin the exercises, set aside the way you have thought about your photography and see what else can happen. That's how Art works.