

Exercise 12: The Project Anchors Your Practice

Mostly we just glance around while thinking about other things. Photography gives us a reason to stop...and look...and see. It's a focusing device that brings us to a deeper attention.

The long-form project brings momentum to that attention. Returning to a subject again and again lets us concentrate the power of our awareness and extend it until we see all of what is there.

My first photographs were pictures of anything at all. No pattern, no discrimination, and little intention—an empty house, a tree, my little sister, my little sister in a tree.

I was learning a lot in the process, but you'd certainly never have known it from the pictures.

One day while I was waiting for a train at the New Haven station I took a quick photo on the platform. The energy of lines converging was the whole thing right there. The next time I went to take a train I arrived a little early, looked in the same place and found this engineer looking into the same convergence. That was better. Worth going back, as I learned.



A few days later I went back and hung around the station just to see if I could shake out some more pictures...of anything. This is what I saw:

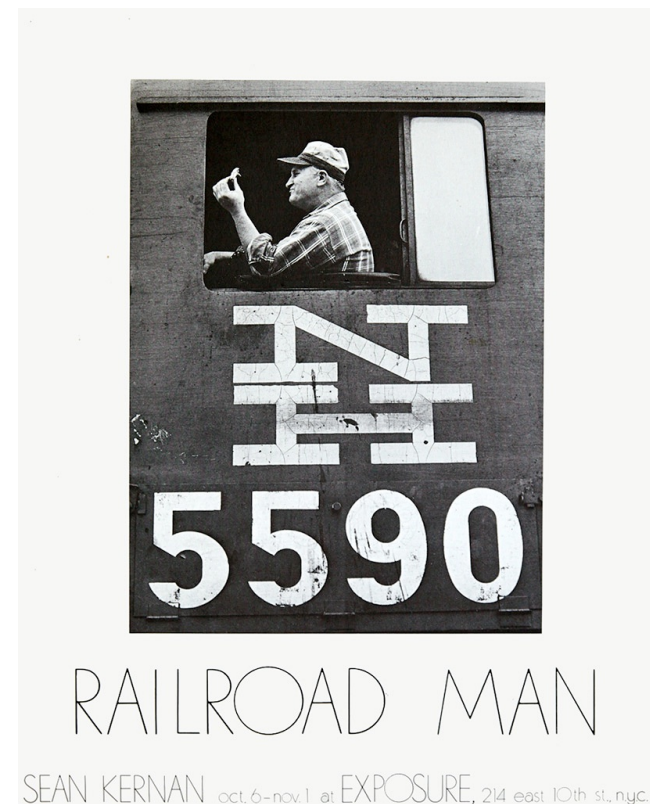


I continued and was well along when I recognized that something coherent was taking shape. A statement? Nothing so grand, but at least something coherent. I kept going back, and by the simple act of returning I got my first published magazine piece.

The fact that an editor found this work interesting made me more serious. I looked further afield and

found a railroad in Tennessee—the Clinchfield—that was willing to let me come and ride their trains.

So on the project went, feeding and growing on every picture. In the end there was an extensive publication of the work in the magazine *Camera* 35, it made the cover story of a wonderful Swiss photography magazine, *Camera*, and led to my first exhibition in New York.



Why did I keep going back again and again? Simple. I took photos that surprised me each time by being better than I thought I could take. As long as that was happening the project seemed to head off someplace on its own, and the only way to find out where was to keep following it.

If there's a lesson in this whole story, this is it: do yourself a project!

I've worked this way ever since that first time. Projects harness the positive side of habit, they form the basis of a creative photographic practice...*and* they get you to take a lot of pictures. Most of them don't come out, but some do, and those are the ones you're after. I don't think I've ever heard of any serious photographer who just makes random photographs without some kind of armature in mind around which they might be molded.

So there's no better way to strap on your wheels than embracing the project. It's a natural way to grow your work. Even the great single photographs

that we see in museums and books today were often born of some kind of project.

A short history of the photography project

My own earliest efforts seem to have mirrored the early history of photography. In the beginning, photographers made individual images, perhaps because they were trying to figure out how the process worked. Maybe Fox Talbot was thrilled to have any image at all turn up in his first photographs. Kind of like me.

Once the early practitioners got going, though, they quickly turned to projects oriented around subject matter. So we got:

Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*

Roger Fenton, the Crimean War

Mathew Brady, the Civil War.

William Henry Jackson, the Western landscape.

Lewis Hine, the urban poor and child labor.

Eadweard Muybridge, motion.e

Eugène Atget's mythic Paris

All of these were subject-oriented catalogs of aspects of existence.

We also had Edward Curtis's monumental work on the American Indian, self-consciously romantic, and August Sander's great German portrait undertaking, which was much more straightforward and equally ambitious.

Walker Evans's work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was a project of austere reportage informed by a modern and painterly vision.

Evans, in his turn, encouraged Robert Frank in his hugely defining *The Americans*, a project if ever there was one. It was difficult for Frank to define it up front. My sense is that Frank defined it by actually doing it.

Jumping forward a bit (but not too far) Diane Arbus's whole work seemed to be in some ways a project of searching for her own vision and, having

found it, giving it full expression. Under some strong artistic compulsion, she stepped away from a career in commercial photography to find a way of seeing that she couldn't envision in advance. In Patricia Bosworth's *Diane Arbus: A Biography*, she quotes a diary entry that shows Arbus's excitement at finding something on her proof sheets that she thought might be what she'd spent a year looking for. But even then she couldn't say just what it was. I'm not sure anyone could, even now. But there it was.

The photos are what others see of this labor, but I'm convinced that for the photographer, doing the work produced in them is what really matters, the consciousness that the seeing makes. Photographs show the journey, but the deepest reward is what comes to the photographer from the work of finding and taking them.

The pictures are what the rest of us get, and if you do an image search for Ralph Gibson, Mary Ellen Mark, Cindy Sherman, and Shelby Lee Adams, with his 30-year-plus project in Appalachia, you can see

the power of the images. Or look at Jim Brandenburg's *Chased by the Light* project, one photograph—and only one—every day for 90 days. No re-loads, no brackets. One shot.

Look these over and you'll get some sense of the power that the project brought to their work

It can do the same for you.

Here are some concrete reasons to pursue a project of your own:

1. When time to photograph opens up you don't need to spend any of it deciding what to do. You just go back to where you left off.
2. As you work on a project, you accumulate experience and understanding that feed right back into your pictures.
3. As your project grows, your vision grows with it, becomes more refined, more subtle, and this seeing shows up the next time you work.

4. If your project involves people, or perhaps a neighborhood, your continual returning means that you start each visit with the rapport you've already built. People become your allies and will look for ways to help you.

5. Simply walking around with a project in your head for weeks and months lets you imagine things—places, images, connections, possible and impossible—that wouldn't have occurred to you on your first outing. It is paradoxical, but focusing more tightly can open you out.

6. Projects carry you beyond your past work, beyond whatever it is you think.

What makes for a good project?

Absolutely anything that speaks to you is a place to start. Just walk around and listen. And once begun, what you do at the beginning is there to be transcended, and the sooner the better. I had a student once who did a semester-long project that involved making pictures for a half hour or so every few days at 5 p.m. in a large and elegant room at the school.

The light changed slowly during the course of the semester, and the result was a poetic meditation on time and light.

Photographers tend to think in terms of discrete sessions of work, at least in the beginning. But work really blooms in revising and extending. First drafts are where you blurt things out so you can see them and see how they actually need to work. So you work with it and look again. And again you see what you should have done, and so on. It's not just refinement, it's revelation.

The process of revision is different for photographers than it is for writers, because the thing you photographed is in a state of constant change, but the principle is the same. We don't really get the opportunity to rework the same scene over, for the most part. Instead, whatever we learn is applied the next time we come back to our subject. Even if the situation is different every time, the sharpening of our senses lets us see the differences and use them. But you have to return to harvest it.

At the beginning your project can be rather amorphous. Leave it that way for a while. I heard the poet Charles Wright talk about the impulse we have to grab a thought, pull it out of the air and nail it down too soon. *Leave things up in the air as long as possible, let them manifest fully*, he said.

So you can start with something as loose as hanging around a railroad station (worked for me), as opposed to a broad scheme like Railroad Man, which is what my project eventually became. Maybe it's better not to attach a name to your project at all at first. Go someplace new, stay a while, go back and do some more, and eventually the project will tell you its name.

There are any number of ways to present a sequence: a slideshow, a video, a website, a book, a line of framed prints on a wall. But no matter how you do it, the order in which you present the im-

When is a project done? The best answer I ever heard was from a painter who said "When it doesn't need me any more," he replied.

ages and the intervals between them is a great source of power and interest.

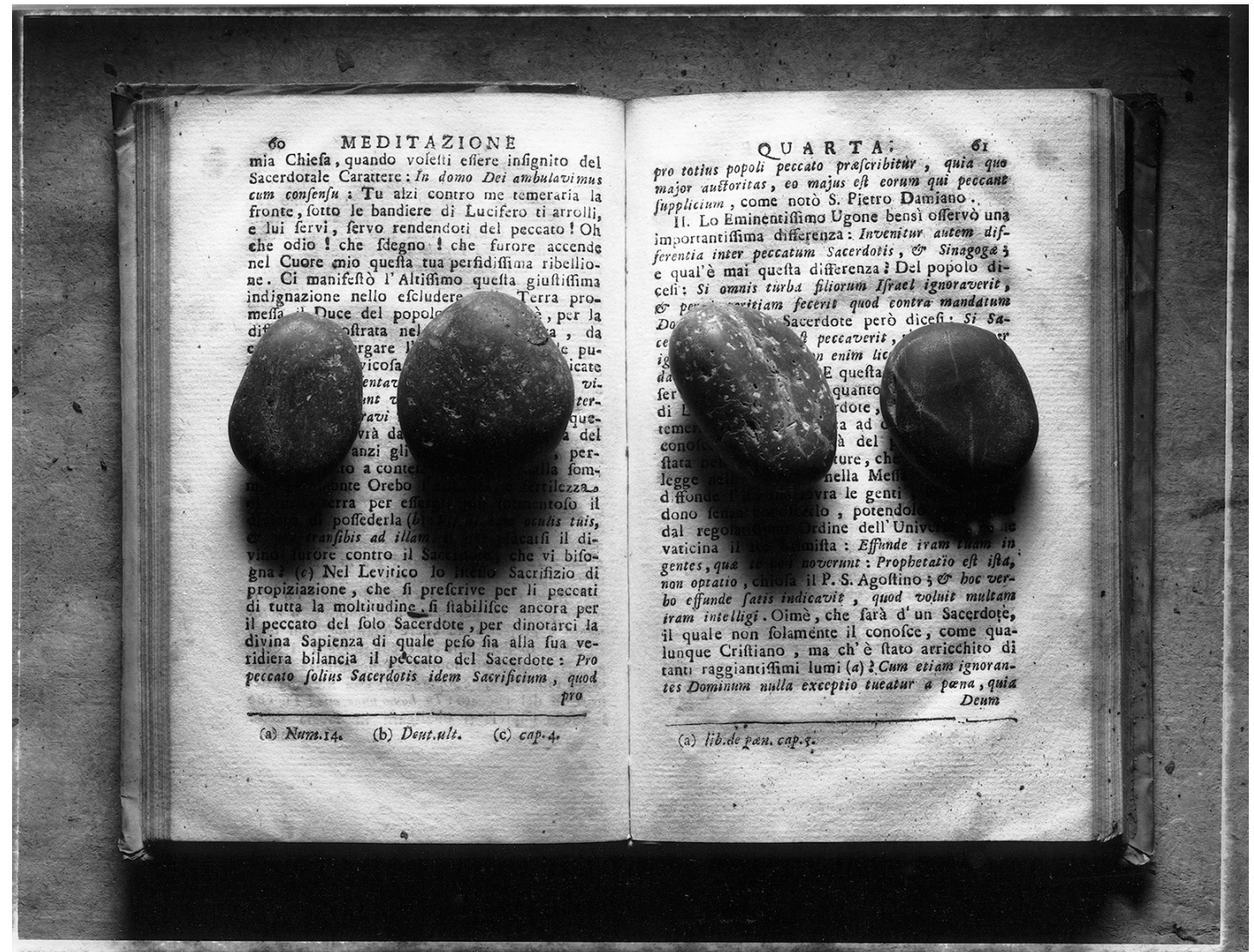
In the next chapter we'll take a look at sequencing and the way that the arrangement of a group of photographs builds the power of the work. Once your project has reached what you think might be enough pictures to achieve critical mass, you can use the chapter as a guide to laying them out and presenting them as a whole.

Meantime, on the following pages are photos from two projects that couldn't be more different. Each began with a single photograph that swept me away. In each case I looked at the first photo I took and knew I had an idea that would lead me to something wonderful and very new to me.

The Secret Books

The Secret Books project began when I took this single image and surprised myself. When you make a photograph that is so beyond what you've done in the past, almost at once you start to wonder if you can do another. And another.

That's how this project grew for the next three or four years. Many good things came to me as a result – travel, exhibitions. But the main outcome was that my conception of myself and my work was changed.



(a) Num. 14. (b) Deut. ult. (c) cap. 4.

(a) lib. de pan. cap. 5.

come ognun di noi vi prega colle parole nel primo Salmo di Terza: *Inclina cor meus Deus in testimonia tua, & non in avaritiam*, così vi pregasse con umiltà, e sincerità di spirito; ajutateci a piangere i commessi disordini, e ad esclamare in avvenire colla bocca, colla mente, col cuore, e colle forze tutte: *Mibi est in Caelo, & a te quid speramus? Deus cordis mei, & Domus mea in aeternum.*

VII. MED.

L'odio è ripugnantissimo
se però si accende
difficilissimo

A Curamente, e con
processo pre
Caino, e l'
delitto, per cui fu
plizj di questa, e di
*Deus: Quid fecisti? Per-
mat ad me de terra: et
super terram. Ma non era
superbia, di rapacità, d'
egli irreverentissimo verso Iddio,
offeriva le biade smunte, le frutta
meno prezzevoli? Tale egli è vero, e
dele assassino, la divina giustizia nondimeno
rimprovera, e condanna per l'odio contro il
fratello: *Opera mala Cain non dicit, nisi odium
fraternum.* Ah, che a confronto di quest' odio*

non

non comparisce la enormità delle altre colpe! perche fu odio ostinatissimo, e concepito nell'Altare tra Sacrificj: L'Altare fu la fornace, che accese il furore, la offerta de' Sacrificj fu la Madre del primo sdegno: *Factum est ut offerret Cain de fructibus terrae munera Domino: Abel quoque obtulit de primogenitis gregis sui; & respexit Dominus ad Abel, & ad munera ejus (a). . . Ira-ramque concidit Dominus in Cain, & concidit vultus ejus.* Se mai si vide il Gesù Cristo Ivenato, orante, e pregando anche de' suoi Crocifissori, e della Legge di Grazia, e della Legge di discordie, odj, e vendette, fare parola nelle passioni, e nelle iniquità, sebbene imitando la giustizia, e le vendette somministrate dall'odio del Sacerdote: *dicens nisi odium fra-* . . . mai non mi occorre l'abito di Sacerdoti di altri peccati la infame . . . Sacerdoti, che mi quelle colpe, che non renderli più diligenti, e . . . E non possiamo, già occhi, mi dice la vostra . . . ancora noi concepire odio, . . . seguire vendette? Signori sì, . . . Caini tra Sacrificj: volete in- . . . vi proponga il preservativo contro . . . H 4 que-

(a) Gen. 4.



142 CONTEMPLATIONS ON

than all the heavenly Mansions, and all
illustrious Inhabitants. If my Heart was
at the Consideration of it's excellency
do all my drooping Powers recover
lightful Thought? The power
seemed to be tottering on the
infernal Pit; is raised,
the Portals of Paradise
trust, will always
der the Influence
quite gone.

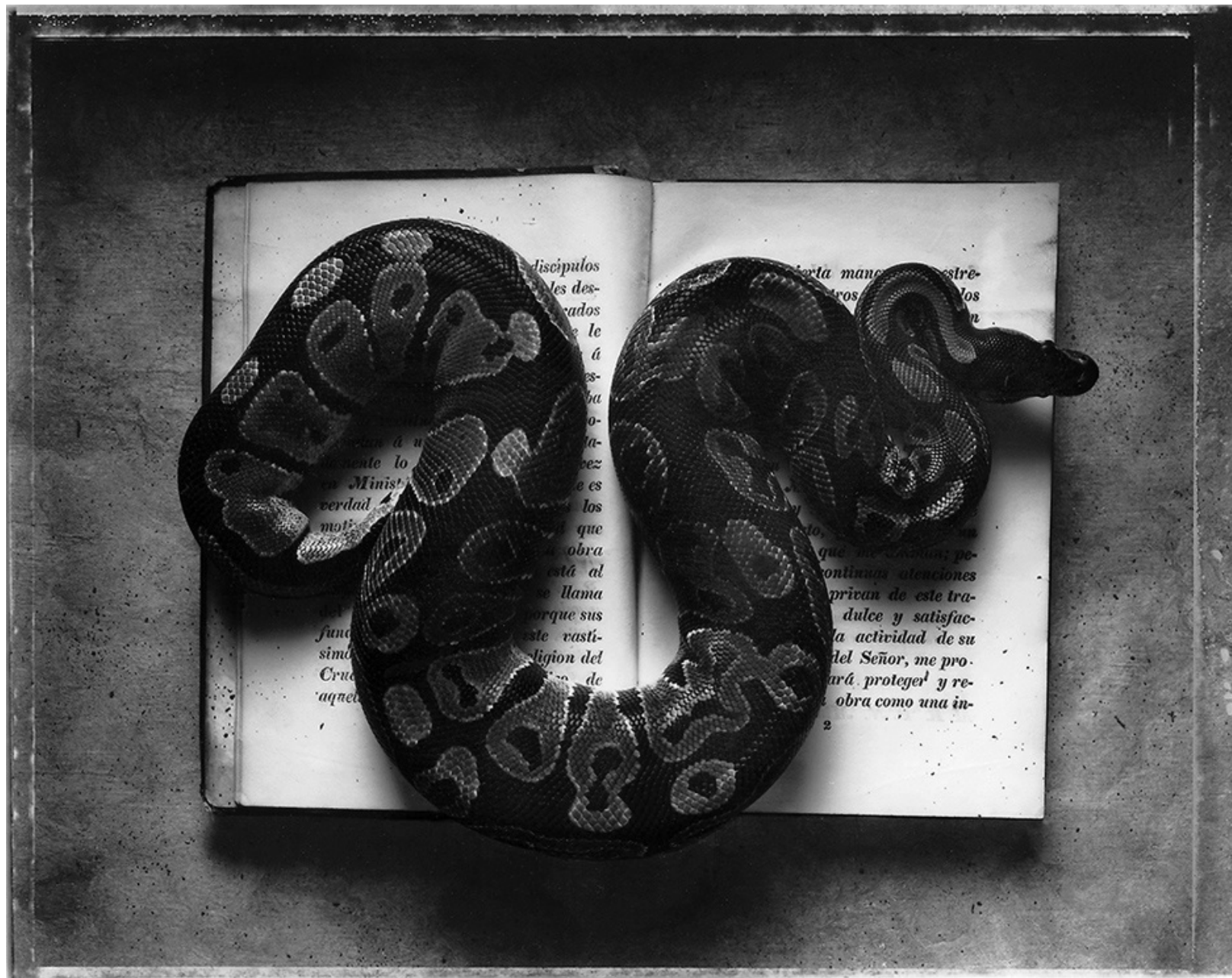
HEAVENS. 143

tion. While I see a
Excellency; and verily
in it's Merits; I know
my misgiving Sur
faith, and joy

quities like
sents, here is more
that prodigious Sum

old
to
Nay,
Deeds,
of the
this
to De-
beyond
with that
which
great,
of

are deeply affected,
am persuaded, our
superiorly vanth
our Hopes brightened, and
enlarged.



discipulos
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está al
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ligion del
de
aquel

porta man
estre-
los
n
to,
que me
continuas atenciones
privan de este tra-
dulce y satisfac-
la actividad de su
del Señor, me pro-
ará proteger y re-
obra como una in-
2

204 *Endelechia*

R. Porque como animal todo el cuerpo, y es pyramidal, y redondo, tiene la fabrica para el exercicio de su ocupacion.

P. Por qué solo en el corazon ay sangre por excelencia?

R. Porque está en el corazon, como en su proprio lugar.

P. Por qué no tienen sangre las molcas, y otros muchos animales?

R. Porque no tienen corazon, ni higados.

P. Por qué no tienen corazon?

R. Porque tienen lo que les sirve de corazon, como las Anguillas, y Peces la espina.

P. Por qué estando ácia el izquierdo el corazon se percibe mejor, y con mas cercania el

As todas las cosas. 205

dilado derecho, q'en el izquierdo?

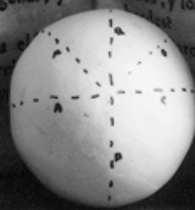
R. Porque el movimiento mayor es adonde se acaba, que adonde comienza.

P. Por qué siendo continuo el movimiento del corazon, de donde nace el espiritu vital, falta esta vitalidad á los caducos?

R. Porque se gasta en digerir los humores gruesos, que la vejez engendra, á falta del calor nutricional, y se resuelve, y apaga.

P. Por qué los animales de pequeño corazon son feroces, y atrevidos, y los de grande corazon co-

modados? R. Porque en el corazon pequeño se recoge, y unido el sangre que le toca, se ca-



dam nunquam occidunt. Denique dies artificialiales & noctes habent inæquales.

Pro diversitate Zonarum tria potissimum hominum genera considerantur, nimirum Perieci, Antæci, & Antipodes.

Perieci, quasi circumhabitantes dicuntur, qui sub eodem Meridiano, eodemque Parallelo, sed in locis oppositis ejusdem Paralleli habitant, adeoque qui secundum Latitudinem aqualiter distant à Polo, secundum Longitudinem verò à se invicem 180 gradibus, seu semicirculo. Tales sunt v.g. Populi Virginie, & Indice intra Gangem, quia sunt ambo in eodem Meridiano ac Parallelo, sed in parte Paralleli oppositâ; item Mexico Urbs celeberrima Indiarum Occidentalis, & Insulæ Cambæ in Asia; sicut & Nova Hispania, & Regnum Persarum.

Ultra ea, quæ Zonæ, in qua habitant communia sunt. Idiversa habent Perieci dies, noctesque initia, media & fines, ut & diversos Ortum & Occasum; quas enim horas isti numerant à Meridie, has illi numerant à Media Nocte, saltem ubi Elevatio Poli non est major 65 gradibus, & in Aequinoctio dum Sol uni loco oritur, alteri occidit; in Vere & Æstate verò, prius unus oritur, quam alteri occidit, e contra in Au-

umno & Hyeme prius uni occidit, quam alteri oritur. II. Locus Orientis unius, respectu alterius est locus Occasus. III. Singulæ Stellæ æquali tempore cenamoranrur supra eorum Horizontem, & eadem Stellæ nunquam ijs oriuntur, & nunquam occidunt.

Antæci, quasi Contrahabitanes sunt, quibus una eademque est Longitudo, ad Meridianam communem, & duabus Zonis numerata, & æqualis Latitudo versus utrumque Polum. Tales sunt incolæ Capitis Bonæ Spei, & Habitatores Moreæ; item Extremam Insulæ S. Laurentii vulgò Madagascariæ, & Mare Rubrum &c. Hi I. Meridiem, mediam Noctem, & omnes horas sibi invicem habent communes; quantitas tamen diei est illis diversa, cum enim dies nostri sunt æquales noctibus nostrorum Antæcorum, & dum nos agimus Ver, atque Æstatem, isti experiuntur Autumnum vel Hyemem. II. In Aequinoctio Sol illis simul oritur & occidit, alijs autem diebus his citius, quam illis. III. Se mutuo, vel ad Aequatorem respicientibus, uni orietur Sol ad dexteram, alteri ad sinistram, & sic de reliquis Stellis loquendo. IV. Stellæ, quæ

Life Without Mercy

Life without mercy, pardon, or parole is the Alabama judicial system's most extreme prison sentence, and it's what I named this project, done in maximum security prisons there and in West Virginia.

Walking through the doors was like entering another universe. And when you suddenly find yourself in another universe, *you pay attention*.

That sustained state of attention was the gift that the work on this series gave me. I was never the same afterward. It made me serious.



