

Uneasy Words While Waiting: An interview with Robert Frank

Sean Kernan

Imagine a young photographer getting to spend a few hours with Robert Frank and being able to ask anything he wanted. That was me. Jim Hughes, editor of *US Camera/Camera 35 Annual*, 1972 assigned me to track Frank down and talk about the impending publication his book *The Lines of My Hand* by Lustrum Press, Ralph Gibson's imprint.

Frank's groundbreaking book, *The Americans*, had been published in the US in 1959, and had been lashed by critics. (Popular photography cited the work's "meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness.")

Within a few years, though, the critical tide was turned—mainly by the quiet force of the work itself—and by the late 60s, when I came to photography, Frank was something of monument.

He was an uncomfortable one, though. He didn't much like being interviewed, and it took a barrage of letters, cables and phone calls to Nova Scotia, plus my wheedling, Ralph Gibson's intercession to get him to agree to talk.

When we met it was awkward at first. I had asked Eva Rubinstein to come along because she already knew him and because she was a catalytic kind of person. The three of us sat around a table at Frank's New York loft. There were some stretchy silences that I nervously filled. Questions were deflected as unanswerable. Eventually, though, things loosened up the conversation became quite open.

The published piece began with my assessment of Frank, which seems unnecessary here. One little observation seems worth repeating, though:

"The photos are not framings of small events. They are fully alive. They don't end at the edge of the negative; one feels pulled into them, as though one could actually slip into the

frame and look around. One is aware that the events are continuing, that after Frank left, things went on.”

Things did indeed go on and here we are. And much of the way photographers picture things has Frank’s DNS in it. Not everyone sees his influence, though, just because it is so pervasive. That’s why anyone interested in photography could spend an eye-opening time looking at Frank’s work, both from the beginning on. I promise it will change the way you see.

RF The book will be out in maybe in July (1972), something like that. It’s sort of...it’s a chronicle of my work and my life. That’s the book’s merit, that the two complement each other. They are part of each other., I mean, one can see a lot about how I am from the photographs.

SK I went to the Museum of Modern Art a few weeks ago and pulled out your file, and I saw all kinds of great work that I’d never seen before. Then the file came to an abrupt end.

RF Because I started to make films them about ’59 or ’60. I stopped gradually, though. You don’t just stop one day.

SK Do you still photograph for yourself?

RF No. I have taken some with a little camera, a little split-frame camera, that I have in Nova Scotia. I’ve just taken a picture for the book. That’s the last picture I took.

SK What about the transition from photography to films?

RF Well, I started making films in ’59, and gradually I just stopped photography. I still did jobs. I think ’62 or so was the last time I did anything in photography.

SK In that file at the museum, I saw a picture of yours that I’d never seen before, and it was incredible. It must have been pretty old. It was taken in New York, and it’s just a line down the middle of 34th street. The line looks like it’s alive, like it has intelligence,

like it just dropped down from Mars and has been sent to lie there and watch us. Is that in the book, by any chance?

RF Yes.

ER What are you doing in Nova Scotia?

RF I'm waiting for something to happen. Well, it occupies you to make a fire and make sure that you don't freeze to death, and to get into town. The little town is 12 miles away. And it's a very bad house, I mean it's an old house and it's in pretty poor shape. There's a lot of work that way.

SK Just trying to keep warm must take your mind off whatever else may or may not be going on.

RF Well, June works there; she can paint. It's harder for me to work.

SK When you say you work there, do you mean editing and stuff?

RF I was thinking of working on a film with the Super-8 that I've been working with. And I have a lot of footage, but I couldn't get myself to do it.

SK Do you shoot Super-8 with sound?

RF No.

SK Somebody, I think Leacock, has made a double system Super-8, so you can really do good sound editing, and apparently when you project it through a TV linkage you can't tell that it's anything less than 16mm. The trouble is, you can't print color.

RF I did a film up in Rochester and used it with 16mm sync sound footage and edited it together, and the Super-8 footage looked just as good as the 16.

SK Kodachrome?

RF No, black-and-white.

SK Does it print well?

RF Yes. If the guy is careful. And you can shoot a lot on Super-8 because it's so cheap, and you can edit very carefully and just have enlarged what you think you will need. And the fact that it isn't sound...you look at it very purely as a moving film. You are much

freer. I mean, you are not so hung up about the sound and the words. It's really pure picture.

SK What happens to your films?

RF Well, I don't show them very often. They are distributed by the New Yorker Theater, and I guess they play them sometimes. They go to universities. I don't show them myself. It's too painful. I don't like to do it. But I used to. In 1971, I used to lecture, go to colleges and show films.

SK There's a thing that happens in your photographs which I guess . . . it's hard to describe . . . it's . . .

RF Maybe you better not describe.

SK I'll try anyway. It's so much a union of you and whatever it is you're facing. Like The Americans. I don't know whether to call it Zen-like, but it's an incredible meshing, everything comes together.

RF Well, if you have conviction, I guess it shows. I don't think it has to do with Zen. Maybe from your point of view. But if you do something with conviction, it probably does change what's in front of the camera because you feel so strongly about it.

SK It's not as though there's a specific witness there. It's as though this one line of the event or person is coming along, and you are not just standing there watching it go by, your own life is a line and the two lines meet and really touch each other, rather than trying to avoid each other, which is more typical of people.

RF Well... I don't really think very much about the pictures.

Actually, I don't look at photography that much any more. It looks back at me. I think I have rather felt something about them, and that means about photography. I've felt something about it, and I couldn't explain what I felt. I mean, once you do something, you don't have to explain it any more because you've done it. People who explain a lot, they are the people who usually don't do it.

ER Like critics?

RF Well, some critics are very gifted to express their feelings. I can't even express my feelings in words.

ER Don't you think that's better? I wonder if people who are in a creative situation should be able to explain so well. The more you verbalize in a creative situation, the more it's going to get dissipated. You talk and analyze something too much and sometimes it stops being. To me it's much more moving when somebody says, "I do something, I don't know why; it happens or it doesn't happen," than to say, "Well, I do this because that," and explain everything perfectly.

Maybe that's because I can't explain anything. I prefer people who can't, either. I guess it would be nice to be able to do it to some degree, but there are photographers who really go off the deep end and the pictures sort of get drained away. They get anemic from all the talk. To me, anyway.

RF I guess when one is a visual person one has a fear of the word, it's natural. But I wish I had lost that fear earlier. I never wrote anything down about what I did or what I felt. I just tried to do it with the pictures, and in a way I feel sorry. And I haven't taken pictures for 10 years or more.

ER Yes, but you've been filming.

RF Well, that's where the words came in, when I became so aware of them, of my difficulty in explaining something.

ER Is there any text in the book?

RF Yes, I wrote something and I forget, or actually I don't want to repeat it. I don't think it's that important. Things often come back in strange places.

People remember what you wrote. Once I wrote a column for an English magazine. And now students say, "You wrote this and this," and it's sort of embarrassing.

I certainly wouldn't write it again, or I'd write it very differently. I mean, one changes. That's why I don't particularly enjoy interviews or being tape-recorded.

ER Most people don't. But sometimes you just want to hear somebody ramble and not lose it all right away.

SK Well, I think that just the fact that you wouldn't say now what you said eight years ago doesn't mean that what you said then was false or wasted.

RF No, that's certainly how I felt then. I didn't write things I didn't believe, but they might be totally changed now.

SK How many years does the book cover?

RF It starts when I started to take my first photographs, which was in Switzerland in 1936.

SK Will there be any more material from what you shot for *The Americans*?

RF There are some, I think five or six.

SK How long did you work on *The Americans*?

RF Well, I got a Guggenheim for two years and I crossed the country once, and I took a trip to Detroit, and I lived in San Francisco for a few months, and also in Los Angeles. And the rest was New York.

SK I'd certainly love to see your pictures of Los Angeles. Did you find it to be another country, as they say it is?

RF Then, I found it to be just another part of America.

SK I wonder, could you do the same thing in Switzerland that you did in *The Americans*?

RF Why should I?

SK No, I'm talking about the heightened sense of things one can get from their foreignness. When I come back to New York from someplace, I see it as a foreign place, I see things that I'd normally go crashing past. I wish I could preserve the newness longer.

RF Well, that certainly had something to do with the force of the photographs, because most of it was really new for me. But I'm still really surprised when I go to Los Angeles. And that surprise surely helps if you're a photographer.

SK Even though your subject was foreign to you, what you managed to do was to somehow tune yourself and your eye to very essentially American things. And that's what makes those pictures so incredible, that they are truly American, not "A Swiss Looks at Americans." They are so lean.

RF *The Americans* was first published in Paris, and then Grove Press published it here, only about 500 or 1000 copies, and it was remaindered right away. And then for years...it's amazing that it got so well known with so few copies around.

SK Yeah, the first copy I saw was French. What was the reaction when it came out here?

RF Well, when it first came out, the reviews weren't very good. People got very angry because they felt it was anti-American.

Nothing happened for 20 years, then Aperture brought it out.

And it was mostly young people who picked it up. And that was the influence on all these young photographers.

ER Does the new book have a name?

RF Yes, it's called *The Lines of My Hand*. It's taken from a photograph of an advertisement for a what do you call them, a clairvoyant, a palm-reader. (The book is being published in the U.S. by Lustrum Press, a slightly different version in Japan by Kazuhito Motamora.)

ER Where do you live? Don't worry, I'm not coming up to visit you.

RF I live in the town of Mambo, Nova Scotia. I've been in New York for a long time. I wanted to get away, to an extreme. New York is one extreme and the other one is an extreme. Toward the end of last summer, I got quite unfriendly to people who came up there to see me. I got one letter from someone in the States who said, "Now don't worry, I'm not coming up." Five days later, he turned up. I had to ask him to leave.

SK One doesn't think of photographers as having that kind of stardom, but I guess that's what it is. With all the same problems.

ER Are your prints available through any galleries?

RF No.

ER You don't want to sell them?

RF I don't know. If I were more analytical I'd try to figure that out. I think I want to hold on to something. Actually I would like to have nothing to do with the photographs any more, forget about them. I'd like to go on, but somehow it always comes back, you know. Like I'm going to have a show in Paris.

ER Where?

RF At the Louvre.

SK Gee, the Big Time. If you want to leave it behind you, why do you bring out a book or have a show?

RF Well, your past haunts you. I was supposed to have the show this year and they did some prints and they were terrible, and I didn't have time to supervise the printing. I'm very glad it didn't happen.

ER But you are having the show?

RF Yeah, I think next year, if I can get myself together, and I think I will, because, you know, Fame and Immortality is hot stuff.

ER You wait until immortality starts battering your door down.

SK Now you'll get people from Paris calling you up in Nova Scotia saying "I was going to be over there for a week anyway, may I drop in?"

RF Well, Mick Jigger called me up.

SK That's right, you did an album cover for them, didn't you?

RF Yes. I was very surprised.

You see, that breaks everything, things like that. I went up there thinking I would find out something by being up there so far away, especially during the winter. I thought it surely would happen, being there for two or three months. So I got up there and after three weeks something happens. Mainly, it's to make some money. I did it with a Super-8 camera and they'll blow it up. And then they'll use some old photographs, photographs from *The Americans*.

SK (As light floods into the room.) Look at that light. It gets harder and harder to find light in New York.

RF Yeah?

SK I'm still curious why, if you feel photography is really behind you, why you bother to bring out a book or to show?

RF It seems nothing is really behind you, girls you have known, or your children, or the town you came from. It's all still with you in some way. Meanwhile, as I said, fame and immortality tend to run off with me, or at least I'm pleased.

ER You allow it to run off with you. You have a great reputation for not going after it.

RF You can't go after it, really. I used to try to go after that kind of thing and get shows when I photographed. I don't photograph any more so it usually comes to me.

SK I wish I could understand where you're going.

RF Back to Nova Scotia.

SK I wish I understood your attitude toward your own work better. It seems to me... you have a sort of off-handed attitude toward these things, the pictures, the films. But the results are anything but off-handed. I'm trying to tie the work to you as a whole. I wish I could understand where you're going with it.

RF I don't understand...that's a stupid thing to say. I mean, how can you understand where somebody's going?

SK Well, you probably understand only after you've been where you came from. It happens afterward.

RF I just wrote the last sentences of the book and I said I wasn't clear whether I'd go back to New York or stay in Nova Scotia and watch the weather or the television. And then I said, "I'll do something. And June is looking through the microscope." And that's accurate. I don't know; I will try to make another film.

ER Why don't you ever want to look at your films? Is it just too personal?

RF Well, I think the films are often disappointing. I see very well what's wrong with them, and it's sort of painful.

ER Why are you more interested now in making films than you are in making photographs?

RF Because it's harder, it's hard to make a good film. There's more in it. There are words in it, the continuation of thought. It was good to make the book. The book is like a diary of 25 years. But I just wouldn't want to photograph now. I would be interested in making a film like a diary.

ER You know you could do *The Americans* all over again. It's different now. I don't really know what I'm talking about, I've never been "there" That's one of my main ambitions, to get across this country.

RF What would you look for?

ER I would look for what you saw, or what hit you, and see how it hit me. I wouldn't take your kind of pictures because I wouldn't know how, but I'd take my kind of pictures. I'm just terribly curious. I've been a lot of places but I've never been to Nebraska, South Carolina, anywhere here. Supposedly I'm an American, but it's very vague.

RF Well, I think one good thing about photography is that it's a natural thing to move. Today that's a big thing. Kids move around a lot and that's great.

SK Why don't you get yourself a grant and some film and cross America again? Not follow yourself. It would be a whole different way of reacting and of recording your reactions.

RF No, past photography would be like a magnet. You have made films, haven't you?

SK Some. Not very much. Not enough.

RF That's a funny question, "Where are you going?"

SK I think I said, "Where do you want to go?" If I didn't, I meant to.

RF Well, I want to have some time to think a little bit, away from New York, just to clear out my head. And then work on a film. I don't really know exactly what it would be.

Something will come up. I don't film very much in Nova Scotia. I film mostly when I come back to New York. New York is really a place that has given me a lot. I feed from it; just walking around the street makes me want to work. But up there, I'm much happier. I just sit there. It's quiet. I like the people there, too.

SK Were you able to get them to accept you?

RF Yes, because we stay there in the winter, you see. When you stay there in the winter it's different. They care about you because it's sort of a test for everybody, how to survive the winter. They drink, and it's long and cold and barren, and everybody knows because everybody's in the same boat.

SK I have some friends who live in Maine—the man's a fisherman, though he's not from there—and the first few years they were there they were known as "year-round summer people."

RF No, up where I am they're very open. What's this interview for, a USA catalogue? A special number?

SK It's an offshoot of Camera 35. They're trying to do something a little more cohesive than annuals usually attempt.

RF Then I'd better subscribe to it instead of "Fur, Fish & Hook."

SK What would you do if some producer came to you and said, here, you can make a film on the scale that you'd like, using all the stuff that is presently available to the director? Would you take it or would you not?

RF Of course! Yeah, I'd take it. You're kidding, sure. I'd probably go to India. Yeah, I'd like to have some fun, not be so serious any more. A few years ago I would have only touched it if I had been totally convinced that it was the right thing to do. But today I think it's time to have some fun.

Work shouldn't be so hard all the time. I have always worked so hard on what I did, and there wasn't too much fun in it, which I think was a mistake. So I'm trying to find a better way. Actually that film I did in Rochester was very interesting to do. Because it

was done Super-8, it was very free, and eight people working together was very hard, very different. In retrospect, I sort of like it. While I was there, I didn't like it. I mean, I didn't like Rochester, the town itself. But I learned a lot from the students.

Each student did his own little piece, and we did a few things together, and then we cut it all together.

SK How did it work? I find it hard to imagine eight pieces of film going together.

RF I've never seen it with an audience, but I had it here and screened it, and I liked it. I hear some people object to it, they don't know what it's about. It's very clear. It's about the students. The film is called, "*About Us*."

SK Have you ever thought of teaching?

RF Well, I've lectured, but I've never taught. I think you have to be very generous to teach. You have to give a lot. And I'm not sure I could do that, over a long period of time anyway. But I have to make some bread, and that resolves a lot of questions.

I probably could come back to New York and start working on a film with a few people, raise some money. That's probably what I would like to do here. If I do, it would be.

because I couldn't work up there, and that I need a town like this. It's the only town I would want to be in anyhow. Here it's all or nothing. How long can you keep that up?

Not very long. I think you have to keep that up when you're 19.

And people call you crazy if you don't keep it up. And you become sort of crazy.

SK Do you find it hard to stop working, to be away?

RF No, I don't find it hard. I do find it hard to work away from here.

SK I find it hard to ask questions, because . . .

RF Well, you're playing the reporter. Play it, Sam.

SK I'm not playing the reporter. No, the trouble is that questions tend to reflect your own preoccupations.

RF What's your own preoccupation? Do you want to do a good job?

SK No. I have no one to please, really. I'm in it for... I guess to find out how other people do the things I do.

RF Do you have favorite photographers?

SK I used to, I don't think I do any more.

RF Well, what made you so hot on my trail?

SK Well, if I did have favorites you'd be one of them, and I guess I do and you are. But what interests me is not only the pictures, which show me things I've never seen, or in a way I've never seen them, but even more interesting to me is the process, probably unconscious, by which they were taken, the sensibility that saw them. I guess I just want to talk with the man who saw those things.

RF Well, I think that all the good things one does are unconscious, one just has the feeling.

SK This may be apocryphal, but I like it. There was a school of, I think, Zen painters who used a very thin paper and a very stiff brush and they'd go out and look at a mountain or a piece of bamboo for hours or days or however long it took them to get ready. Then they'd make a single stroke on the paper and that was the picture. If they hesitated, the brush would go through the paper and ruin it. So that when it was done it had to be done at exactly the right moment, with no hesitation. And this is the feeling I get about your work. I don't know if it's something you worked on or if it just was a sense you had. But to me that's the process, and in a way it makes the end possible and is therefore as interesting to me as the product.

RF Well, being an artist is work, and that is what you are talking about. You get yourself up to the point through work and discipline. You do it and you do it, and when it's there, it's there.

SK But that doesn't seem like work. When it's on I just kind of rise and rise into whatever it is that's in front of me.

RF Then, you're in a state of grace. You get sort of high on it and you do it.

SK Yeah, but it's not controlled.

RF Yeah, but then you go out and do it again and again and it's controlled that way. I mean, you are looking for something, so you get yourself into that state again and you do it again and again.

That's how it gets together. What is it that you photograph?

SK Recently, nothing very much.

RF That's goooooood.

SK No, it's hard to know where you are, really, because we have the all-American thing of having to do measurably better all the time.

RF But how do you know? By what standard?

SK By false standards, usually. More money, more publications, better critical opinion, Or by judging your own growth on your own terms, and that's the hardest.

RF I'm always happy looking back; I'm happy that I see I've done something every year. I haven't just fallen asleep.

SK Do you like your photographs?

RF Yeah, some of them I like. They expressed something about my life, the places I've lived and what has come to me. That's what I like about the book, because it's very clear without using any explanations or justifications.

SK Was it easier to make up your mind about them because you'd stopped?

RF Yes. I have a great fear of repeating myself. I try very consciously not to do it, to move, to use different cameras, make a totally different film. So it was good to give up one thing and move on to something else, and I don't think it matters that much to be successful at it. I'd even try to raise sheep. Actually, I was very happy digging ditches. There's a lot of water coming down the hill behind the house, and I never had such a good time as digging those ditches. I was totally satisfied. I will go up there tomorrow and dig some more.

###

A letter from Frank:

After you left I went downstairs and bought a pair of pants and then walked around the block thinking about the interview. It went like this: Both Eva and you are chained to the idea of a purpose, that what one does must have purpose. In that way it is easy to explain to anyone questioning why, how come, how much, etc. Maybe for me going so far away from New York and its people (vibrations) is to find again a purpose that I will believe in. And then I will work hard to forget and lose that purpose. And then maybe I'll do something really good.

Salut,

Robert