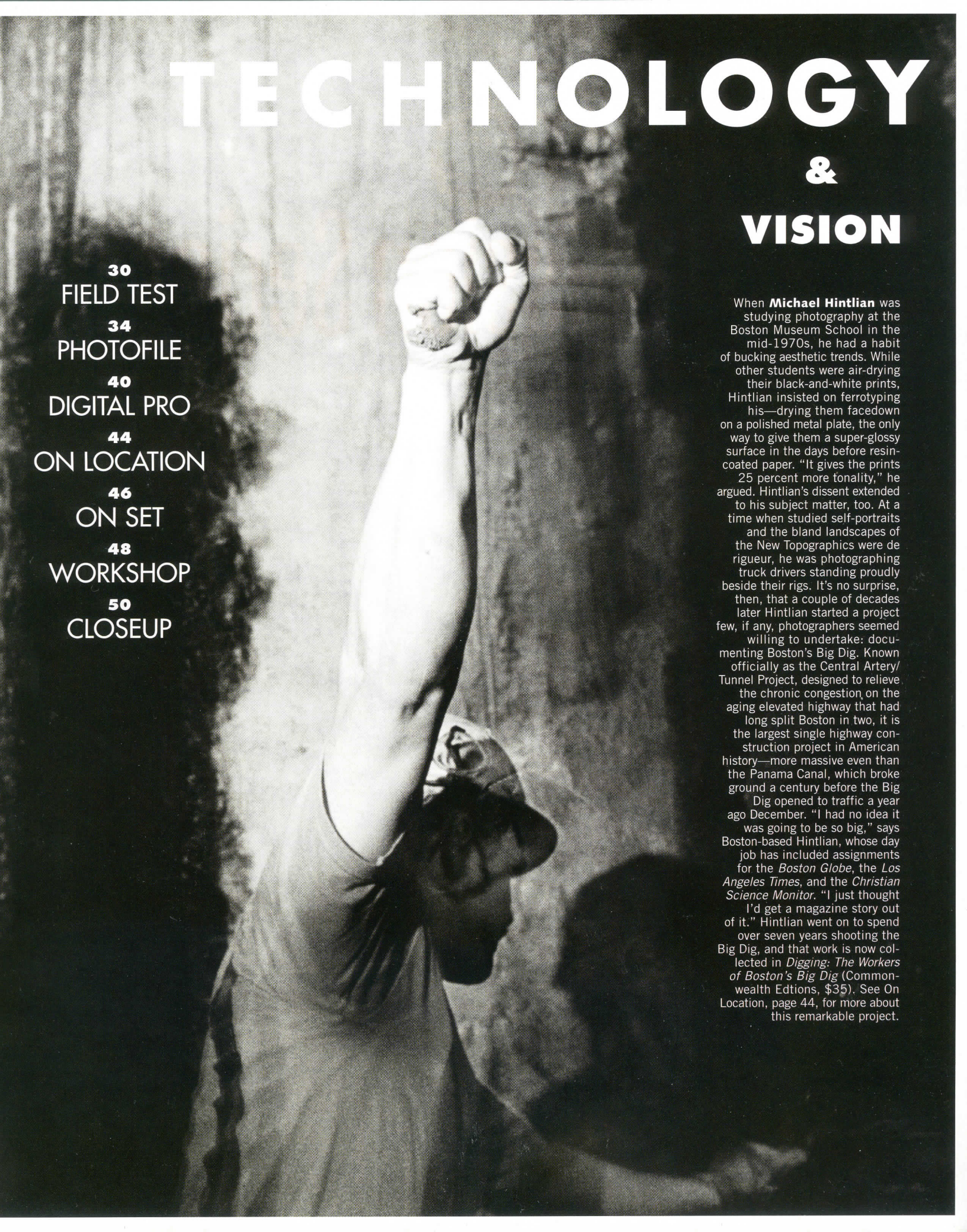


TECHNOLOGY

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CLOSEUP



When **Michael Hintlian** was studying photography at the Boston Museum School in the mid-1970s, he had a habit of bucking aesthetic trends. While other students were air-drying their black-and-white prints, Hintlian insisted on ferrotyping his—drying them facedown on a polished metal plate, the only way to give them a super-glossy surface in the days before resin-coated paper. “It gives the prints 25 percent more tonality,” he argued. Hintlian’s dissent extended to his subject matter, too. At a time when students studied self-portraits and the bland landscapes of the New Topographics were de rigueur, he was photographing truck drivers standing proudly beside their rigs. It’s no surprise, then, that a couple of decades later Hintlian started a project few, if any, photographers seemed willing to undertake: documenting Boston’s Big Dig. Known officially as the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, designed to relieve the chronic congestion on the aging elevated highway that had long split Boston in two, it is the largest single highway construction project in American history—more massive even than the Panama Canal, which broke ground a century before the Big Dig opened to traffic a year ago December. “I had no idea it was going to be so big,” says Boston-based Hintlian, whose day job has included assignments for the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. “I just thought I’d get a magazine story out of it.” Hintlian went on to spend over seven years shooting the Big Dig, and that work is now collected in *Digging: The Workers of Boston’s Big Dig* (Commonwealth Editions, \$35). See On Location, page 44, for more about this remarkable project.

On
Location



WORKING MAN

T E C H N O L O G Y & V I S I O N

A worker climbs rebar at the Big Dig, from *Digging*.

Boston's Big Dig was the single largest highway construction project in American history, but Michael Hintlian may have been the only photographer shooting it for posterity. And he had to sneak in to get the pictures. **By Russell Hart**

For seven-plus years, often three days a week, Michael Hintlian set out from his suburban home to photograph the Big Dig—a highway construction project burrowing deep beneath the city of Boston, larger in scale than the well-documented building of the Panama Canal. Yet in all that time, Hintlian never saw another photographer shooting the day-to-day progress of the massive endeavor. “I only saw photographers at the ribbon cuttings,” he says. As if to recognize that colossal oversight, the Boston Public Library, which maintains its own superb photo collection, is purchasing a 30-print set of Hintlian’s important work.

Yet Hintlian’s powerful photographs aren’t really about an engineering marvel. They’re about the thousands of laborers—ironworkers, pile drivers, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians—whose sweat has transformed downtown Boston. “What really caught my imagination were the tradesmen and women,” Hintlian writes in the book’s notes. “I wanted to document their daily work: the dirt shoveled by hand, the

hundreds of thousands of welds, the whole handmade nature of the project.” Think *Men at Work*, Lewis Hine’s monumental record of the Empire State Building’s erection, only underground to depths of 130 feet.

Hintlian started out as an interloper. “I would hide a couple of cameras under my safety vest, put on a hard hat, and walk into a construction site at 5:30 in the morning,” he recalls. “By 7:30 or 8 the supervisors would show up and kick me out.” There were so many separate Big Dig sites, though, that Hintlian would just walk into another and keep shooting until he was stopped again. Even the workers were initially skeptical of the photographer. “Their interaction with me was guarded at first,” he says. “They thought I might be spying for management.” But Hintlian won workers over with his persistence and by bringing them 5x7 prints to take home. It helped when he replaced his baby-blue hard hat with one of a more manly color, plastered with all the right stickers. “I had stickers for Iron Workers Local 7, Pile Drivers Local 56, and the Hooters

that had just opened downtown,” he says.

That didn’t make the next five years of shooting much easier. “Everything was dusty and oily, and the air was bad,” says Hintlian, who worked mostly with a Leica M6 rangefinder, also using the 35mm Hasselblad XPan and 6x7cm Mamiya 7. “It got so cold in the winter that my film would sometimes break when I rewound it.” Making a book happen was only slightly less Herculean a task; the photographer submitted dummies to nearly two dozen publishers. One publisher agreed to take on the subject—but only after Hintlian got Big Dig workers’ unions to commit in advance to buying copies.

Yet that support from his hardworking subjects allowed Hintlian much more control over the final book. “I got to choose my own designer, make good duotones, and use spot varnish,” he says. “I knew the book was going to get published. It just had to.”

To see more of Hintlian’s photographs visit hintlian.com. *Digging* can be purchased at booksellers or commonwealtheditions.com.