

Integrative Project Thesis

In the summer of 1997 my grandfather Anatol Prasicky wrote and dedicated a book to me about his escape from western Ukraine during World War II. At two hundred pages, written in English, this book stands not only as an impressive personal accomplishment, but an invaluable record of my family's history. My grandfather is still alive, but over the past year his physical condition has worsened significantly. At this time, it seems that Anatol will never return to Ukraine. Having spent much of his early life fleeing from either Soviet oppression or Nazi atrocities, my grandfather never really saw the majority of his homeland. My Integrated Project takes the form of a book, acting as a response and counterpart to his memoirs about leaving Ukraine.

Since the beginning of June, 2009 I have gathered material on site in Ukraine that eventually formed the body of my IP. I spent the entire summer living with Crimean Tatars, Carpathian Hutsuls, Kyivan oligarchs, and many other social groups that help form Ukraine's diverse and often ironic population. With over 10,000 photographs, two filled journals, and hours of recorded audio, I had the necessary building blocks necessary to tell a story not only to my grandfather, but also to the Ukrainian Diaspora as a whole. Ukraine is a land of contradiction, and this is metaphorically represented in all aspects of my project. Much as my grandfather left his home for the uncertainty of the United States, I left the United States for Ukraine. Fleeing Ukraine, the tool of social Change strapped to his back was a Kalishnakov. As I returned to Ukraine, I too came with a tool, this time a full-frame digital camera. Like my grandfather, the majority of Ukrainians that emigrated from Ukraine during wartime never returned because of the Soviet Union. What they hear, see, and read coming from Ukraine today consists of political and economic news (primarily from a publication called the *Ukrainian Weekly*). It was my goal to bring what I had seen to a community that barely remembers its homeland. As Europe's largest geographic country, surprisingly little is heard from this former Soviet state. Through my photographs and text I attempt to shed light on contemporary Ukrainian issues that are rarely discussed by the Diaspora and even less by the western world in general. It is my goal to present my work as a testament to this country's beauty, sorrows, and its ever-changing social landscape.

Beyond the conceptual components detailed above, my integrated project focuses on the understanding of how photography acts as a medium for the conveyance of numerous types of information. Understanding the roles of concept, form, and context is paramount in this process, and I will later outline how these three ideas have influenced the construction of my book. The process of sorting, selecting, and editing 10,000 photographs was initially daunting, but by creating a strict code of guidelines this task became not only interesting, but formative to my understanding of how I work as both a photographer and artist. My Integrative Project can be divided into three basic stages: creation, assembly, and distribution. The creative phase included the actual making of photographs, living and

documenting my life in Ukraine, and writing prose as compliments to the photographic work chosen for the book. The assembly phase focuses on the selective process mentioned previously, and the research conducted as part of understanding how to create engaging and unique work. The last, and possibly most personally challenging phase is that of distribution. Included in this stage is the publication and presentation of my work to both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian audiences across the United States and Canada.

The subject of my Integrated Project is clearly one of personal Importance. I have been planning and formulating the execution of this work for well over two years. With the support of the University of Michigan Center for Eastern European Studies, I was finally given the funding to begin my work in the summer of 2009. The initial preparations and planning allowed for a flexible and open-ended sojourn to Ukraine. Deliberately allowing myself freedom during the trip was integral to allowing creative growth and unrestricted exploration of my subject. Although I left with no set itinerary, I did limit my resources with a carefully planned approach. To maximize my mobile ability, I restrained my belongings to one mountaineering backpack, and one smaller gear bag. Included in these resources were the following:

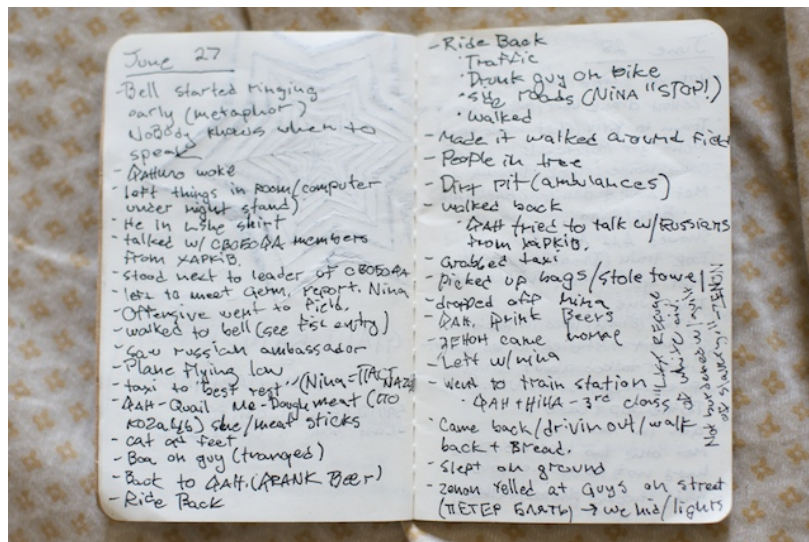
- Three changes of clothing/two pairs of shoes
- Toiletries/medical supplies
- 3 lb. Asus 1000HE Eee PC/Portable DVD burner
- Various books and guides
- Nikon D700 full-frame DSLR
- Nikkor f1.4 50mm & f2.8 28mm lenses
- Empty journals
- Hot sauce

It is important to the understanding of my project to describe the photographic equipment I used, and how that affected the resulting process and products. As a photographer, the scope of available equipment can be liberating, but can also lead to breaks in the consistency of visual results. For this reason I limited myself to two fixed focal length lenses. By only allowing myself to shoot at 28 and 50mm, the distortion and quality of my images remained constant. More importantly, the choice to not bring a telephoto lens greatly influenced my involvement with subjects. It was important for me to actively play a role in the scene, and to include myself in the working environment. Parallel to the honesty and presence in my grandfather's writing was my involvement with my surroundings. I attempted to distance myself from the nuances of photojournalism by allowing myself to first understand and communicate with my subjects before exposing myself as a photographer.

In addition to creating a consistent style through the use of limited lenses, the abilities of my camera to shoot in low light proved invaluable. By using a full-frame DSLR, I was able to shoot scenes that no other camera could have allowed. Normally, the highest usable ISO in a DSLR is 800, but the size of a full-frame sensor permitted images to be taken at up to 3200, and sometimes 6400 ISO. Although this range may seem unnecessary and

extraneous to most photographers, the subjects and locations in which I choose to work demanded this sensitivity. Often finding myself out at night, in bars, or shooting indoors, the ability to record images at high ISOs with little or no distracting noise effectively allowed my work to remain visually consistent.

During my time in Ukraine, I kept a series of journals that helped track, organize, and document the progression of my work. These journals have proved valuable tools in the construction of texts that accompany my photographs. Although they have been helpful, deciphering the language has been a difficult task. During my stay in Ukraine, my fluency in Ukrainian increased significantly, but my ability to communicate in English deteriorated. As a result, many entries are written half in Ukrainian, half in English, often even substituting Cyrillic letters for Latin ones mid-word. Below is an example of two pages from one of my earlier journals:



Upon my return, the task of sorting and organizing my work became the focus of my Integrative Project studio time. In addition to sorting, I began intensive research in the area of contemporary photography. It became important for me to properly understand the difference between journalism and fine art, and how my project was either one or the other, or a combination of both. To address this questioning, I turned to three fundamental texts: *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* by Michael Fried, *Art Photography Now* by Susan Bright, and *Aperture Volume 16* featuring W. Eugene Smith. The first two texts were constructive in my understanding of how a photograph can act as art, while the latter is a landmark representation of photojournalism. Along with these books I have kept current with *Aperture* magazine, numerous blogs, and frequently updated websites.

When I began to choose the photographs that would eventually become my book, I had to ask myself, "what separates my photographs, or *any* photographs, from the thousands we see everyday, in magazines, the Internet, Facebook, etc.?" To answer this question I turned to critical writings about photography as art. In 1946 Clement Greenberg reviewed an exhibition of Photographs by Edward Weston, and stated that: "Photography is

the most transparent of art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for that reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document and act as a work of art as well” (Greenberg 60). In *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* Michael Fried addresses this critique by explaining that:

By transparent Greenberg meant both that photography is capable of extreme feats of depictive realism, and that although the photographic artifact has a surface (it is, in a sense, all surface), the viewer tends to inevitably look “through” or, more accurately, “past” that surface to the depiction as such. This second point is in sharp contrast with painting, whose surface... (can be) emphasized, articulated, and thematized in an infinite number of ways... (Fried, 187)

Fried concludes that for this reason, the trend in contemporary photography has been to present work in a “tableau” form, which negates an image’s “transparency” by “...keeping the viewer at a distance... physically, but also imaginatively” (Fried, 187). Fried credits the physical size of photographs by artists such as Gregory Crewdson, Jeff Wall, and Rineke Dijkstra to this mentality.



Gregory Crewdson's *Brief Encounter* at Luhring Augustine Gallery (Conner)

Although contemporary tableau form is a solution to the challenge of presenting photographs as art, the purpose of my project was to create a final piece that would be accessible by many, and not restricted to a gallery setting. The other blatant differentiation between my work and that of the artists listed above is that my project is clearly rooted in journalism and reportage.

I chose to be a photographer because of the medium’s distinct representative abilities. I find all aspects of living visually compelling, and the photograph’s ability to harness this allure is beyond doubt. Unlike any art form that preceded it, photography has

the ability to exist between moments, to harness and contradict the invisibility of time. It is for this reason that documentation and reportage are so closely tied to the act of “taking pictures”. The camera has given mankind the ability to represent scenes, people, and events that could not have been captured and conveyed similarly by any other tool. This extra-human faculty is what initially seized my attention, and since then has not allowed me to leave photography for any other pursuit. Telling stories and sharing experiences, although perhaps self-centered, is at the origin of my passion for photography.

But, to live with this sentimentality alone reinforces Greenberg’s statement, and in my opinion, restrains the photographer from becoming an artist. In Jeff Wall’s *“Marks of Indifference”: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art*, Wall states that in order for a photographic image to become art it must “...not only succeed as reportage and be socially effective, but that it succeed in putting forward a new position or model of the Picture” (Wall, 149). This statement can be easily viewed as a parallel to Fried’s position. In an attempt to apply this concept to my own work, I began to look at the similarities and characteristics consistently represented in what I considered my most successful images. It became apparent that my photographs visually benefitted from cropping to a 16:9 aspect ratio. Although a seemingly subtle change, conceptually this indicated that my eye when shooting tends to see the world in these dimensions. This indicated a direct correlation between my notion of a successful composition, and the 16:9 ratio currently used for all HD television and film.

In our modern world, a large percentage of the population intakes the majority of its manmade visual stimulation through television and films. I myself cannot be excluded from this observed majority. This psychological association between mass media and perception of “good” visual representation is the current “new model” (as stated by Wall) for my own work. In the way that contemporary ‘tableau’ photographers have turned their attention to Western figurative painting of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century, my current goal is to turn to the modern esthetic of media giants such as J.J. Abrams and Christopher Nolan to provoke dormant associations in my viewer’s collective unconscious. By combining strategies used in contemporary film and television with photography’s intrinsic documentarian nature, I intend to create a new visual experience while alluding to both consciously and unconsciously familiar imagery. The panoramic crop of motion pictures and television is distinguishable, and ultimately intrinsic to its characterization. By applying an aspect ratio of 16:9 to my photographs, I framed them as stills from current mass media. This separated my images from the everyday photograph by visually suggesting an inherent narrative through a simple change in dimensions.



un-cropped original



cropped final

In addition to utilizing a cinematic crop, I began to focus on the composition of my photographs, and compare this aspect of my images to framing and subject placement in popular films. To maintain a visual consistency, filmmakers often chose to place subjects or points of interest at the intersections of lines which divide the overall composition into thirds. In photography, the rule of thirds advises to “...divide a canvas in thirds both horizontally and vertically, and place the focus of the image either one third across or one third up or down the picture, or where the lines intersect” (Freeman, 47). By adhering to this rule in most of my photographs (either through selective crop or initial composition) I was able to further the cohesion and visual consistency of my project.

Once the visual consistency of my images was established -both in concept and esthetically- I turned my attention to the content and narrative of my project. As initially described, my project is intended to act not only as a response and counterpart to my grandfather's writing, but also as a visual and written reference concerning contemporary Ukraine for members of the Ukrainian diaspora. For this reason I chose to title my project *Ukra'jina: A Dictionary for Diaspora*, and model the content of the book, as well as the design, after a dictionary. During my travels, essential concepts and themes arose which I



felt it necessary to convey in the book. Each of my 24 chosen photographs acts as a visual representation of one of these themes. Each photograph also has an assigned word and definition that help allude to the photograph's role in the project as a whole. These words often act as literal or metaphorical definitions of the corresponding photograph. Despite the ability of these pairings to create significant meanings, or express assigned themes, it was important for me to create a story-like narrative that brought the content of the book together as a whole. This was done to facilitate the interpretation of the project for individuals unfamiliar with artistic nuances (visual metaphor, literary allusion, etc.) like my grandfather and members of the Ukrainian diaspora. In addition to attempting to broaden the ability for individuals to receive my messages, there was additional information I felt needed to be conveyed. Among these details were names of individuals, locations, and ideas I could not directly express through either my photographs or their "definitions". Below is an example of this combination of photograph, definition, and prose:



Поїзд |trān|

*A series of railroad cars moving as a unit*

Although Kyiv could have easily inspired, entertained and changed me all on its own, I was determined to see as much of Ukraine as possible. I left the capital on June 26. The easiest, fastest, and most affordable transportation in Ukraine is by rail. The nationwide system's ability to effectively incorporate these three characteristics makes it the preferred mode of travel for the majority of the population. This proletariat remnant often creates a compellingly diverse travel experience. On one trip I found myself surrounded by obese "brothers" who -in the sweltering summer heat- refused to put on anything more than their underwear. Another night found me sleeping across from two male students who would periodically step out between the cars to smoke field grown marijuana from a plastic beer bottle. Everyone had a destination, and everyone had to take the train to get there. There seemed to be no rules, but no one seemed to mind.

Once the photographs were chosen, and the accompanying text written, the layout and design for the final product had to be assembled. Using book publication software I created a simple, yet graphically appropriate design, to both highlight the work, but not distract from the content. The images below show the design of the front cover, and an example of the page layout for each individual pairing of photograph and text:



Although the purpose, goal, and final product of my project is this book, I felt the need to present my work in a way that reached out further to the community I had initially set out to affect. To do this I planned an event that was held on April 17<sup>th</sup> 2010. The event was held at the Koessler Room of the Michigan League and consisted of a reading of my book, six large full resolution prints on display, and one oversized and framed print that is also on display as part of the “Wanderlust” senior IP show at Work Gallery, Ann Arbor. The event went as planned and had a turn out of over fifty individuals. The support of the Ukrainian community was unanimous, and I’ve since been asked to prepare similar presentations in other highly Ukrainian-populated cities. Similar events are currently being arranged for the



summer of 2010 in Chicago and New York City. The goal of this project was to reach out to an estranged community that has lost its ties to Ukraine. The process of working on this project has brought me closer to understanding my own relationship with Ukraine, but the effect of my work on the Ukrainian diaspora, and the true success of this project, will only be seen in the future.

### Works Cited

Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2009).

Michael Freeman, *The Photographer's Eye: Composition and Design for Better Digital Photos*, (New York, Focal Press, 2007)

Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston [1946]," *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols., ed. John O'Brian, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose*, 1945-49 (Chicago and London, 1986).

Jeff Wall, "The Site of Culture, Contradictions, Totality, and the Avant-Garde", (New York, Vanguard, 1984)

Jeff Wall, "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art, (Los Angeles and MIT Press, 1995).