9 Content and Concept

Photography has had almost 200 years of evolution and revolution. The last 100 years in particular have seen so much change that many photographic images made today would be unrecognizable as photographs to anyone from 100 years ago – even a photographer.

Though photography today includes so many different forms of image-making, all photographic work can be examined by a framework called the *4 Cs*: *craft*, *composition*, *content*, and *concept*. All photographers spread their creative efforts across these four areas, though to different degrees.

So far, Chapters 1–8 have introduced the *craft* of image-making, including technical considerations like optics, exposure, lighting, and digital post-production. *Composition* was detailed explicitly in Chapter 4 but has made appearances in almost all other chapters when we've discussed the ways photographers use their skills to create impactful images. *Content* – that is, the subject matter of a photograph – has similarly made repeat appearances as we've explored decisions photographers have made before, during and after capturing specific subjects. The final element of the *4 Cs*, *concept*, can also be found in previous chapters, even if it wasn't explicitly named, when we've discussed *why* photographers have made specific images.

The interplay between content and concept is complex and will be the focus of this chapter. First, though, an introduction is in order about what we mean by *concept* when speaking about art, including photography.

Matthew Brandt, American Lake WA E3, 2011, c-print soaked in American Lake water (detail).
A concept can direct – and sometimes drastically override – the other three C's. Here, artist Matthew Brandt has intentionally broken with traditional photographic craft by using water from the lake he's photographed to develop his film-based image. This conceptual twist connects the print to the place it depicts, making the content not just visual but physical as well.

Conceptual art and the concept in photography

A little more than 100 years before the publishing of this book, something tremendous happened in the art world: a French artist by the name of Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) bought a urinal, signed it 'R.Mutt', entitled it *Fountain*, and submitted it to a prominent New York City art show. The piece was rejected, but gained attention when photographer Alfred Stieglitz (American 1864–1946) photographed it (Photo 9.1), and it was then published it in an art journal, introducing the strange work of art to the world. [1]

Fountain created plenty of confusion and even detest at the time. How could something not made by an artist be art? Even today, when the author paid his pilgrimage to see a commissioned copy of *Fountain* at Paris's Centre Georges Pompidou, he still saw plenty of frowns on viewers' faces. Today, *Fountain* is often considered the beginning of *conceptual art*. What is *conceptual art*, anyway?

PHOTO 9.1
Photograph of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* by Alfred Steiglitz (American, 1864–1946), 1917. *Fountain* is often considered the first work of conceptual art.

Google defines conceptual art as:

Conceptual art
Noun
Art in which the idea presented by the artist is considered more important than the finished product, if there is one.

This definition includes some intriguing points. The notion that the artist's *idea* is the most important element of a work of art is one; the idea being more important than the *finished product* is another; finally, the possibility that there is not even a final product is yet another. If Duchamp's *Fountain* is examined under this definition, we can see that the only significant act of creation was Duchamp's coming up with the idea. He did not create the urinal, only the idea of calling it a work of art. Here, the finished product is no different from a urinal in any men's restroom. Though one can argue there is a finished product in this instance, it bears no input from the artist other than his signature. The work of art isn't so much the object itself, but the idea to call it an artwork.

Did Duchamp invent conceptual art? It's important to remember that concepts – that is to say, *ideas* – have been a part of artmaking since the very beginning: who's to say cave paintings did not convey ideas or concepts, when beasts of all types were depicted through simplified lines and curves? Those ideas, however, were not the only creative act required to produce the final product. In the case of cave paintings, or almost any other work of art created before the twentieth century, the idea – or concept – was just one component, arguably even a small part of the artwork in comparison to the skills – or craft – used to create it. Concept was therefore present, but generally behind-the-scenes when viewing the completed artwork. It is fairer to say, then, that Duchamp was perhaps the first to foreground concept almost exclusively.

Fountain was, and remains, a radical work of art. Duchamp himself coined the term *ready-made* to describe artworks like

Fountain whose physical form existed before the artist's idea. By definition, this term excludes the first three of the *4 Cs* from the art-making equation. If an art piece is ready-made, there is no input of craft or composition from the artist and it can at best convey generic content not specified by the artist. A ready-made is, by definition, purely concerned with concept.

Many artists of the twentieth and twenty-first century followed in Duchamp's footsteps, privileging ideas over the act of making, though few have gone so far as *Fountain*'s pure concept.

As we move forward in this book, **conceptual art, and by extension conceptual photography, will be defined as art that is based on the ideas, or thoughts, of the artist. The word *thought* is important, as it suggests an activity, something the artist *does*.**

A photograph's content

If a photograph's craft describes *how it is made*, a photograph's composition is *how it looks*, and a photograph's concept is *why it is made*, then a photograph's content is *what it is about*.

The content of any photograph is a simple description, usually just one or maybe a few words. Take for example Marcela Magno's (Argentinian, born 1966) image from her series *Land*, seen in Photo 9.2.

PHOTO 9.2
Marcela Magno, *38° 4'8.34"S | 67°49'16.56"O | 14 Ene 2012*, 2014, from the series *Land*, inkjet print on Canson Baryta paper.

Assembled from Google Earth satellite imagery, this series is definitely about *land*, as its title indicates, but because Magno has chosen to use her images to show human infrastructure's impact on the natural world, it is more accurate to say these images are about the *environment*.

Even a small group of people could come up with a long list of other descriptions for the content of Magno's *Land* and it's possible that none of them would be incorrect. One could say the series is about *technology*, because of its use of Google Earth's imagery. However, technology is the means for making these images, not necessarily their goal or message. One could also say the series is about *topography*, because the images present satellite maps of topographic features; however, these images are not about map-making, so much as they are about the forces that shape the land that a map describes.

These arguments are better supported if we do not simply analyze the image, but also consider the artist's statement: "I am interested in seeing how utopias of modernity are converted into dystopian outcomes. These maps seem to confront us with this alternative: social and economic distortion; environmental disaster; misplaced territorial boundaries; and the uncertain future of our world."[2]

This statement identifies Magno's overarching conceptual interests: that is to say, she makes these images to explore how "the utopias of modernity are converted into dystopian outcomes." She then tells us the subject matter, or content, she sees in these satellite maps: "social and economic distortion; environmental disaster; misplaced territorial boundaries; and the uncertain future of our world."

Taking this statement into consideration, we learn several things: that content and concept are often intertwined in an artist's work, and that *Land*'s content is the environment and the forces shaping it.

FLIP THE PAGE

An artist statement is a short essay in which the artist provides the viewer with information about the work, like the concepts, processes, or other factors that influenced the finished work. Statements and other forms of writing produced by visual artists are covered in Chapter 14: Words.

Content and Concept in Other Media

Each of photography's *4 Cs* will be given different weight, or importance, depending on a particular artist's creative style. For some photographic artists, content and concept play relatively small parts (see Chapter 9.5 for more on this). What about artists in other media?

Consider literature, particularly fiction: the story is the work's content, without which the book has only blank pages. Concept can manifest in many ways: is the story told chronologically, or out of sync to add suspense? How are the characters developed – is their evolution complete, or is the reader left in the dark on some aspects of their back story? It is important to consider that while *concept* is relatively new to the visual arts, literature has been concerned with concepts for much longer, at least since the advent of the modern novel in the seventeenth century. Without content and concept, a novel simply does not exist.

Now consider music, an art form that is by nature more abstract than either photography or literature. When considering content in music, let's set aside songs with lyrics, as lyrics are a form of literature – songs are actually a collaboration between the two media. But even music without words can tell a story or describe a scene, though in the long history of music, it was not until Franz Liszt (Austrian, 1811-1886) that music was used in this way: Liszt composed musical works with titles like *Symphonies After Faust* and *Dante* inspired by works of literature. Such music is called *program music*, or music with a non-musical subject, which, in this book's framework, is content.

Like visual art, music took a conceptual turn in the twentieth century. *4'33"* by John Cage (American, 1912-1992) is a seminal work of avant-garde music composed of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence (or, more realistically, the coughing and murmuring of the audience in the concert hall). *4'33"* fits perfectly into the definition of conceptual art: *art in which the idea presented by the artist is considered more important than the finished product. 4'33"* and Duchamp's *Fountain* (Photo 9.1) are equally conceptual, if we consider the fact that their creators did not physically labor on the final product and that the piece itself is primarily an idea. *4'33"* was a trailblazer for the medium of music, just as Duchamp's *Fountain* was for visual art: as works of almost pure concept, it is virtually impossible for someone to create something more conceptual than *4'33"* or *Fountain*.

From the above discussion, we can conclude that content and concept are the norm for some art forms and novelties, if not rarities, for others. Mark Twain's famous quote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness," can be applied to our understanding of other art forms: we should "travel" to other fields of art and learn to appreciate them in order to open our minds to new ways of image-making. In fact, collaborating with artists in other media can enrich our mind, expand our sources of material, and open doors to new practices. More on this in Chapter 10: Development and Presentation.

This chapter will build on our understanding of content and concept, exploring how each informs the decisions a photographer makes. Each of the chapter's sections will consider artists interested in similar content and we will see how differing conceptual interests can push their images in very different directions.

The environment as content

Some photographers make it their mission to raise awareness of environmental issues with their work. While these images share *environment* as their content, these photographers' concepts vary, resulting in different approaches to craft and composition.

Edward Burtynsky (Canadian, born 1955) depicts landscapes impacted by industrial activities, often employing an aerial perspective. Printed large and produced with meticulous craftsmanship and attention to composition, these images are breathtaking at first glance, though they reveal hidden depths upon closer analysis. Photo 9.3, *Colorado River Delta # 2,* is from Burtynsky's *Water* series.

The Colorado River, one of the most heavily developed river systems in the world, has many large dams on its main stem and tributaries. Each of these dams removes a portion of the river's water from the system, so that by the time the river reaches the sea (to be exact, the Gulf of California), there is essentially no water left. With no freshwater to push into the gulf, saltwater backs up into the river delta. The saltwater seeps into the soil, the water evaporates, and the leftover salt crystallizes.[3] Though the white areas in Photo 9.3 may look like snow, they are actually expanses of crystallized salt.

Some readers may have known about the Colorado River delta's troubles before seeing this image; for others, it may be new information. Either way, no text-based description could be as impactful as this stunning image of the situation.

This image and many others by Burtynsky share a tension between their formal beauty and their often alarming content. In Burtynsky's talk at the 2005 TED Conference (Google "Edward Burtynsky TED 2005"), he discusses his own internal conflict he feels between enjoying a good life in the industrialized world vs. knowing how industry impacts the environment.[4] While some people might attempt to ignore or avoid such feelings of conflict, Burtynsky confronts his own discomfort head-on in this work, raising his viewers' awareness in the process.

Burtynsky's internal conflict – and perhaps our own as we look at his images – is this work's core concept. His compositional choices emphasize the conflict between beauty

PHOTO 9.3
Edward Burtynsky, *Colorado River Delta #2, Near San Felipe, Baja, Mexico,* 2011.

In visual art, **abstraction** refers to depicting the general qualities of a subject, without realistically showing the subject's every detail. A painter might paint an abstraction of a flower by depicting its general shape and color, but not its details (for an example of this, Google "Joan Mitchell sunflowers" – Mitchell (American, 1925–1992) often painted abstractions of sunflowers).

Abstraction can be achieved in photography through many technical and compositional choices: in the case of Edward Burtynsky, Photo 9.3, getting very high above a subject reduces its visible details and creates an abstract effect of shape and pattern. Getting very close to subjects can also create an abstract effect: see the images in Chapter 4's *Show me 4.25: Texture*.

and harsh realities: by taking his images from high above, his subjects seem almost like pure abstractions – pleasant arrangements of color, texture, and shape. However, by looking closer and considering why Burtynsky has chosen his particular locations, the viewer is confronted with visualizations of major environmental issues.

Though images by **Marcela Magno** may at first glance seem quite different from Burtynsky's, Magno also uses the power of the view from above. While Burtynsky captures images by physically boarding an aircraft, Magno instead creates her aerial imagery by combining satellite images from Google Earth into high resolution images printed on a very large scale. Photo 9.4 is from Magno's series *Land*.

PHOTO 9.4
Marcela Magno, *Radiation | 37° 6′26.55″ N | 116° 3′10.24″ O | 3 •15 •2016*, 2017, from the series *Land*, inkjet print on Canson Baryta paper.

Radiation | 37° 6'26.55"N | 116° 3'10.24" W, depicts an area near Las Vegas, NV called the Nevada National Security Site where the majority of United States' 1,000+ nuclear tests were conducted between 1951 and 1992. Some of these explosions left craters on the surface, seen in this image's repetitive texture.

This and other images in the *Land* series share some conceptual qualities with Burtynsky's *Water*: they present phenomena that may not be unfamiliar, yet their visualizations can still stun the viewer by their novelty and even beauty.

The two artists differ in their processes, however: Burtynsky physically boards planes and helicopters in order to achieve his desired vantage point over his subjects. When the images produced from these outings are exhibited, this process becomes "behind the scenes" – Burtynsky's work is much more about his content than about his process. Magno's process, on the other hand, is highly conceptual and important for our understanding of the work. Google Earth is a free service and Magno's use of its imagery begs the question of why the subjects she presents have remained unseen by most of us before.

Think of satellite images as belonging to the lineage of Duchamp's ready-made *Fountain* (Photo 9.1), though in a less radical way: after the ready-made satellite images are collected, edited, and presented, the final product is not so ready-made anymore.

Magno's concept acts like a hyperspace jump in the artistic universe, dramatically shifting how the other 3 C's – craft, composition, and content – function. In Magno's work, craft is no longer about making an image with a camera but is now focused on compositing found imagery. The image's composition also no longer takes place at the moment of image capture but now takes place during post-production. Content is no longer sourced by physically going out into the landscape, but by surfing Google Earth. Though Magno and Burtynsky share an interest in aerial views of the environment as their

content, their differing concepts mean that their images, and their means of making them, are quite different.

Compared to Burtynsky and Magno's views from above, **Chris Jordan's** (American, born 1963) work is much more down to earth, literally. Interested in oceanic trash, Jordan set out to photograph the Pacific Garbage Patch, a massive area in the Pacific Ocean filled with plastic debris. When he consulted oceanographers about how to photograph it, he was told the idea wasn't feasible because the garbage patch is not generally visible from the surface as the debris floats and sinks in the current. He discovered, however, that if he traveled to Midway Island in the middle of the Pacific, he could find plenty of plastic debris in the carcasses of albatrosses, native seabirds, as in Photo 9.5. Unable to tell the difference between food and trash, these birds feed on both. Over time, plastics become congested in their digestive tract and eventually starve the birds to death.

PHOTO 9.5
Chris Jordan, *CF000313* from the series *Midway: Message from the Gyre*, 2009

THINK ABOUT IT 9.1
Concept-led lifestyles

An overarching theme in this book is the framework of the *4 Cs*: how each artist balances craft, composition, content and concept in their artistic practice is discussed in detail in Chapter 9.5: Craft, Composition, Content and Concept – The DNA of Photographic Art and *Think about it 9.5: Concept – punch this for hyperspace*.

An artist might devote a great deal of effort to one or more of the *Cs*. This will naturally impact how an artist spends their time and other resources. How might it impact their overall lifestyle?

An artwork's content is determined by what an artist learns about their subject matter. Take for example work by Edward Burtynsky, Marcela Magno and Chris Jordan featured in this chapter. All three artists address environmental issues. Their common ground – the environment as their content – requires extensive study, research, and understanding of current affairs.

While these three artists may share similar reading materials, their individual concepts lead them to separate paths once they step out of their studies and begin making images.

Burtynsky photographs environmental flashpoints around the world. His images are predominantly aerial views, highlighting his conceptual interest in the scale of each issue. Capturing these images requires a great deal of planning and hours logged in flight. Imagine his trip to his next destination, with days filled with flights over routes meticulously pre-planned to take the weather, lighting, and other factors into consideration. Once he's flown over a site, he may discover that his calculations were incorrect and he needs to return under different conditions to get his intended shot. This process is costly both in terms of time and money and one can imagine that a great deal of Burtynsky's life is spent planning to make sure his flights are as successful as possible.

Chris Jordan's *Midway* series is similarly interested in large-scale environmental issues like oceanic pollution, but his images and his process take on a much more intimate scale. This is due in part to his conceptual interest in making emotionally impactful images of this issue. To accomplish this goal, Jordan photographed birds who ingested plastic ocean pollution which led to their demise. Making these images required Jordan to spend a significant amount of time on remote Midway Island where this pollution accumulates, leading him to develop a personal connection to the place and the birds who inhabit it. While Burtynsky is always jetting off to the next location, Jordan maintained a long-term interest in a single place, even producing a documentary film about the island and its birds (Google "Albatross the film").

While both Burtynsky's and Jordan's projects required significant time and resources spent traveling, Marcela Magno's images are made from appropriated Google Earth images, requiring no travel whatsoever. Magno has managed to completely eliminate any footwork and by harnessing satellite imagery, her vantage point is further and higher than even Burtynsky's. The characteristics of Magno's depicted landscapes only reveal themselves at this zoomed-out view, making scouting trips unnecessary as well. This means that Magno can live and work anywhere without worrying about travel expenses, even while she's making images about places on the other side of the globe. An important aspect of Magno's work which likely impacts her overall lifestyle is the time spent on her computer: searching Google Earth for imagery and then combining them digitally requires hours and hours of screen time for each piece.

An artist's decisions are often determined by their concept, the ideas and thought processes they wish to convey in their work. These choices naturally impact the final artwork and they can also dictate aspects of the artist's lifestyle like where an artist chooses to live, how many hours a day are spent at the computer screen vs. exploring new terrain, and how an artist spends their leisure time and what new people they meet for friends or even spouses.

The images by Burtynsky and Magno share an area of conceptual common ground: their environmental messages are not entirely direct. Many of Burtynsky's images are stunning aerial views at first glance, until the viewer finds out what they are looking at. Similarly, Magno's satellite images are simply fascinating, until the viewer catches the anomalies. Both of these approaches are veils that hide the artists' true intentions, until the veil is lifted by the viewer's careful attention.

By choosing not to announce their message at full volume from the get-go, these artists' approach is similar to how some writers slowly reveal the elements of a story. Snippets or incomplete views of a grand scheme are doled out until the narrative's crescendo, when the full picture becomes clear. Stories told this way tend to have a stronger emotional impact because the readers, or viewers, are recruited by the creator earlier on, warmed up, and worked up. Their imaginations kick in and the anticipation builds, and then, bam! The revelation hits.

For art concerned with the environment, this veiling of intent also serves another purpose. A good chunk of the general public is resistant to environmental messages and a veil can serve to disarm these viewers' defenses. When they've realized what they are looking at – oops, too late, they are hooked!

Comparing Jordan's image with Burtynsky's, we see an interesting case of how similar motives and content under the umbrella of different concepts produce different images. While Burtynsky typically uses an aerial vantage point to show the enormity of the environmental issues he photographs, Jordan's approach is more intimate: getting up close and personal with individual creatures impacted by the issue at hand. If an artist's goal is to raise awareness of a particular issue and even encourage viewers to change their own behaviour, what type of image is most likely to "work"? The answer, of course, is that there is no set answer. Viewers, like artists, all have their own perspectives and preferences: what impacts one person might not another.

Photographing family

For photographers interested in people, family members are often the most readily available subjects. The bonds between next of kin provide a connection between photographer and subject that is otherwise unachievable. Take for example **Mitch Epstein's** (American, born 1952) series *Family Business*, focused on his father and his declining furniture and real estate businesses. Told across a variety of media including still photographs (see Photo 9.6), videos, archival materials, and the written word, *Family Business* paints a complex portrait of a man and his failing dreams. More of the series' photographs and its video component can be seen on Epstein's website, http://mitchepstein.net/family-business-intro.

Because he is photographing his father and other family members, the viewer is able to see things that would usually never see the light of day: Epstein's father convalescing after heart surgery, altercations with his father's rental tenants, bookkeeping records from the family businesses. In the series' video work, Epstein follows his father on a tense mission to evict tenants from a building that has been deemed unsafe. The footage feels as if we are watching home movies we are not supposed to see. There is an intimacy to the work that likely would have been impossible to create had Epstein not been documenting people to whom he was himself intimately connected.

PHOTO 9.6
Mitch Epstein, *Dad III*, from the series *Family Business*, 2000, chromogenic print.

Thoughts are constantly flying through our minds, but most of them never see the light of day – that is to say, they are never materialized through our actions. Artists who base their work on concepts, however, thrive on bringing their thoughts to life. Creating concept-based art can be viewed as externalizing the internal.

Taking a look at artists featured in this chapter, we will see cases where photographers persistently work on a single concept, often over a long time span, developing large bodies of work and sometimes spinning off into multiple series. Some artists work on topics that, for most people, are seldom discussed in public. By making art based on these extremely personal thoughts, these artists have sacrificed their privacy to bring something precious to the public.

Though their concepts may radically differ, all the artists introduced in this chapter have had to contend with the fact that when they exhibit their work, their concepts will be thoroughly tested. Not everyone who sees a work of art will experience it in the same way, and not everyone will agree with its concept. In order to survive the sometimes fickle winds of public opinion, an artist must fully stand behind their concept, meaning they must have an honest and sincere interest – and even belief – in it.

Today, when conceptual art is flourishing, many art students feel obliged to conceptualize their work, attempting to "reverse engineer" or "retrofit" a concept. In other words, they try to "fit" a concept onto images originally produced without a concept. In some case, this is done to mimic what seems to be trendy in the art world. Such concepts are often fabricated notions that the individual can't truly stand behind. Conversely, concepts based on independent thoughts – be it a simple idea or an intricate theory – can be sincerely captivating for you and, hopefully by extension, your viewer.

Like Epstein, **Susan Copich** (American, born 1968) also recruited immediate family members for her series *Domestic Bliss* (Photo 9.7). The conceptual similarity between Epstein and Copich, though, ends there. Copich is interested in the undercurrents beneath an apparently calm and blissful surface. Sometimes visually interpreting proverbs, the fragility of the seemingly rosy pictures is unnerving.

While the images and video of *Family Business* have a look of spontaneity as if Epstein's father and his other subjects are caught just living their everyday lives, *Domestic Bliss'* drama is meticulously crafted, clearly announcing its staged quality. Copich's images are commentaries on general family dynamics, while Epstein's images are documents of his *specific* family. In Copich's images, narratives are acted out, as if on stage, while Epstein's subjects actually lived their narratives.

➡ FLIP THE PAGE

Looking through this book's many conceptually intriguing images, readers may wonder how artists develop their conceptual interests. While concepts might seem like mysterious or even magical inventions, it turns out that there is a methodology to developing successful concepts. This is discussed in Chapter 10: Development and Presentation.

PHOTO 9.7
Susan Copich, *Sugar Rush*, 2014
from the series *Domestic Bliss*.

Professional practice

Houston, USA:
Multimedia artist and art professor Prince V. Thomas

PHOTO 9.8

Prince V. Thomas (Naturalized US citizen, former Indian citizen, born 1969, Kuwait) is an artist whose work crosses media boundaries: he's worked across photography, video, sound, sculpture, and drawing.

In his series *Ancestors*, Thomas digitally composites photographs he takes with large format film and 35 mm digital cameras with images from his family's archive.

"All my projects start with a seed from my personal life, something that has affected me in such a way that I feel compelled to speak (make art) about the subject. *Ancestors* is part of a larger body of work called *The Space Between Grief and Morning* that metaphorically explores the process of grief and mourning in private and public contexts. In 2014, I lost my father. I had been his primary caregiver for many years. During this time, I had taken care of every aspect of my father's daily needs while witnessing the slow process of aging and disease. This body of work aims to take this very personal experience of loss and translate it to a larger audience by exploring grief and mourning in its various forms."

Blending contemporary and historical imagery is a conceptual strategy Thomas often uses in his work.

"I am fascinated by the conceptual threads that run through history that connect the past to the present. Because of my unique background and fluid identity of being born in one country – Kuwait– and having been a citizen of two others – India and the United States – I have always looked for ways to connect to those various parts of my identity and history. Visually combining images, as in *Ancestors*, is a tangible way to do that."

***Ancestors* is printed on metallic photo paper, a choice that also carries conceptual meaning.**

"The paper creates a unique metallic sheen that mimics the look of various historical photographic processes printed on metallic surfaces. Because these images are created with historical family images, using metallic paper made conceptual sense to tie the past and present."

PHOTO 9.9
Prince Varughese Thomas, *Ancestors XX*, from the series *Ancestors*, pigment print on metallic paper, 2018.

PHOTO 9.10
Prince Varughese Thomas, *Ancestors I*, from the series *Ancestors*, pigment print on metallic paper, 2017.

Though fascinated with photography from a young age, it took Thomas some time to decide that he wanted to be an artist.

"For my tenth birthday in 1979, my parents gave me a Kodak Instamatic Camera. It was my prized possession and began my love affair with photography. When I was in high school, I was on the newspaper and yearbook staff as a photographer. In university, I explored many subjects that interested me: philosophy, history, computer science, and finally I ended up with a degree in psychology. In my last semester, a friend suggested that I should take one art class before graduating, so I took my first university photography class. I was hooked! After receiving my degree in psychology, I had to face the truth – that my passion in life was to make art. That was a difficult subject to explain to my parents. They did not understand how a life could be lived as an artist, but they respected and trusted my decision which allowed me to go on to graduate school to study art."

For Thomas, being an artist is as much about hard work as it is about relationships.

"I can honestly say that everything I have ever achieved came with the help of others. From my first job to my first exhibition, it has been someone saying, "Hey, there's this guy named Prince that you should check out." An artist is part of a community, and to be a part of a community, you must come out from your cave. "Start your own mafia," Butch Jack – sculptor, mentor, and friend – used to say to me all the time. By that, he meant that artists should keep in touch, stick together, and help each other out. I agree. You never know when in the future you will be in a position to offer an opportunity to someone else. Work hard. Get yourself and your work out there into the public. Meet other like-minded artists. Work hard. Invite others into your studio. Work hard. Share your ideas and thoughts. Invite others to share theirs with you. Work hard. Honesty and sincerity go a long way in my experience, and, always, WORK HARD."

A place in space and time

The Colorado River cuts through the United States' Grand Canyon National Park, exposing billions of years of geologic layers. This natural wonder attracts millions of visitors each year from all over the world. Fifty miles upstream, Glen Canyon has had a different fate: its natural geological evolution came to a sudden end in 1963 with the completion of the Glen Canyon Dam, which stopped the river's natural flow and created Lake Powell. **Eliot Porter** (American, 1901–1990) photographed Glen Canyon just before it was flooded. These photos were collected in the book *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado.*

PHOTO 9.11
Eliot Porter, *Pool in Upper Hidden Passage, Glen Canyon, Utah*, August 27, 1961, dye imbibition print.
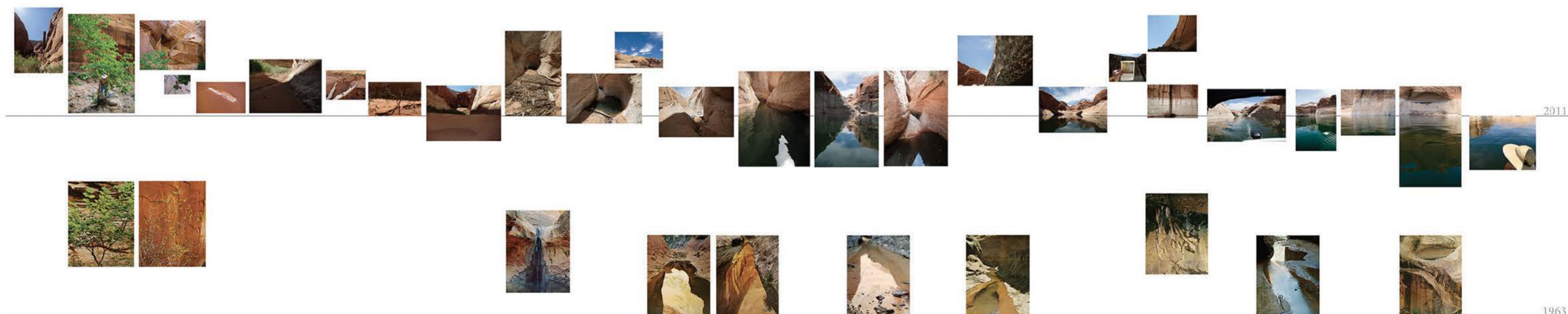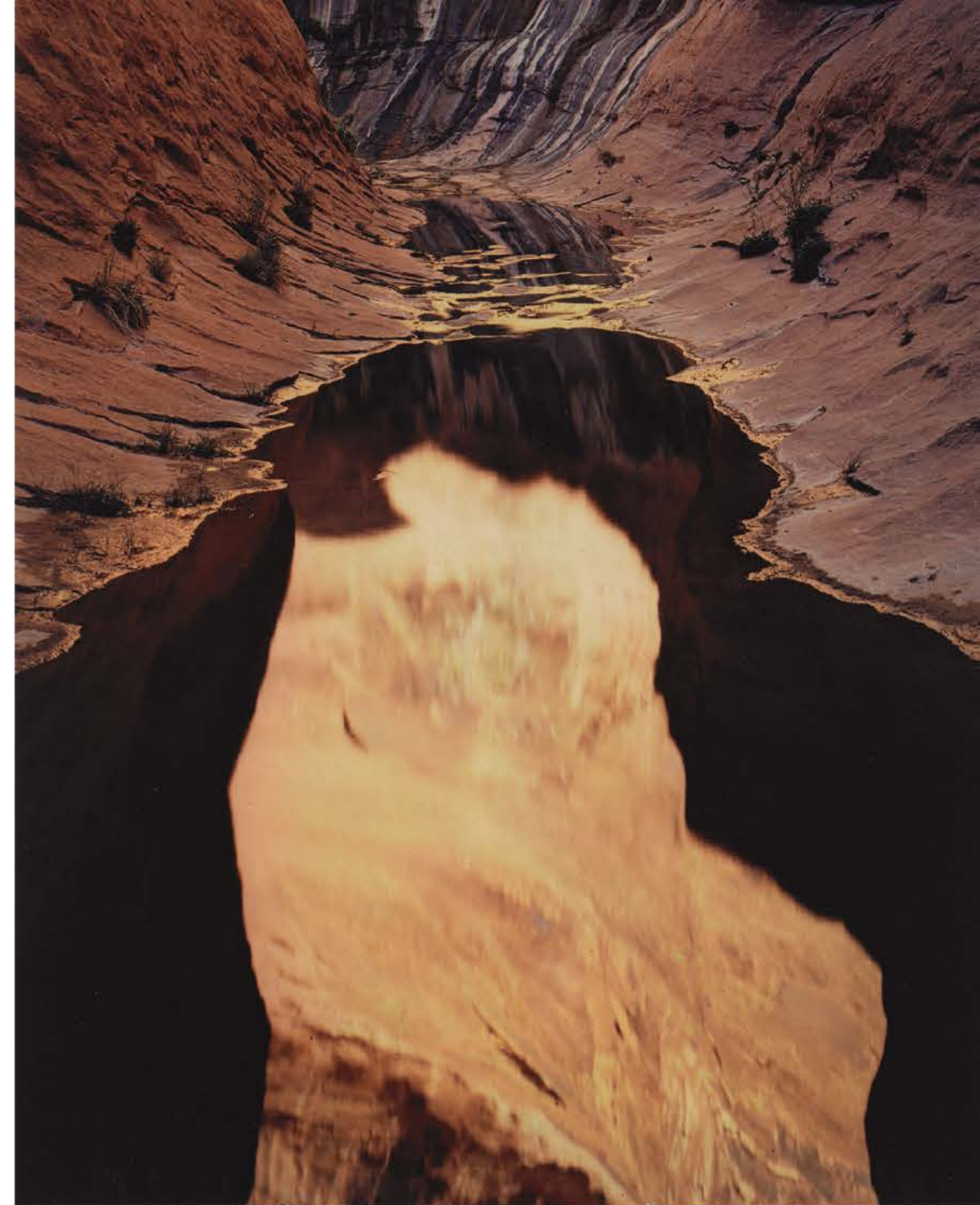
PHOTO 9.12
Mark Klett and Bryon Wolfe, *Powerboat reflections in sandstone formations*, 2012.

PHOTO 9.13
Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *Two Journeys in the Hidden Passage*, 2011.
Above: Photographs from a boat floating the lake waters in Hidden Passage, almost 50 years after Porter's hike.
Below: Eleven photographs of Hidden Passage by Eliot Porter c. 1962

The rock formations, sandy beaches, waterfalls, and plants depicted in Porter's images are all now hundreds of feet below the surface of Lake Powell. Like the photos of a deceased family member, these images are visual memories of something that no longer exists. In this work, craft and composition are clearly important. Like his contemporary Ansel Adams (see *Show me 4.2: Horizontal lines*), Porter was interested in creating impactful images of the landscape. Both photographers used large format cameras, providing them with precise control over their compositions. However, while Adams' fascination was with the landscape's grandeur, Porter was attracted to its details, leading to compositions that sometimes verge on abstraction.

Porter's concept behind these images was rather straightforward: he was out to document a fleeting beauty. This concept informs the content of each image and the book as a whole: Porter's images of the canyon's details become intimate portraits of a place about to be destroyed, and by extension, a meditation on impermanence and environmental destruction.

The places **Mark Klett** (American, born 1952) and **Byron Wolfe** (American, born 1967) photograph are not only places on the map, but also places in time. In Chapter 4, we saw one of their panoramic landscape collages, comprised of their own images along with images by earlier photographers who had visited the same place (see *Show me 4.34: Aspect ratio, orientation, and print size*). These collages are not unlike the view of a time traveler making a rendezvous with artists from the past.

Klett and Wolfe have extended this concept with the publication of the book *Drowned River: The Death and Rebirth of Glen Canyon on the Colorado*, created in collaboration with writer Rebecca Solnit. Traveling on a houseboat across Lake Powell, the trio revisited the sites Eliot Porter had documented in *The Place No One Knew* – now below a trillion cubic feet of lake water.

The images' vantage points are hundreds of feet above Porter's, meaning that the images do not immediately connect to history in the same way as Klett and Wolfe's earlier collages. This is resolved to some extent by pairing the images with Rebecca Solnit's written history of the lake.

Like Klett and Wolfe, **Simon Norfolk** (British, born Nigeria, 1963) is also interested in places and their history, though Norfolk depicts space and time in more straightforward compositions. His book *Afghanistan: Chronotopia* includes images of war-ruined structures, as in Photo 9.14.

Ruins produced by war after war in a region are not like ruins produced by a single battle. The destruction depicted in Norfolk's images is multi-layered: it was inflicted once, twice, then many more times. The damage is itself also damaged, by natural erosion in some cases, as in the rusted bullet holes covering the white car in the middle ground of Photo 9.14. These places are like bodies with old scars overlaid with new ones. Norfolk underscores the passage of time in this image by using a slow shutter speed and capturing the movement of sheep across the scene.

By thoughtfully selecting his content – the places themselves – Norfolk is able to capture his concept: the essence of time recorded in single images, a feat quite unimaginable for most artists working with still photos.

PHOTO 9.14
Simon Norfolk, *Bullet scarred apartment building and shops in Karte Char district, Kabul*, 2001/2002.

The essence of time and place is also captured by artist **Matthew Brandt** (American, born 1982), though in a very different way. Students of darkroom processes will know it's best to use purified water to ensure a print's quality. Matthew Brandt violates that rule by soaking his prints in water from the *Lakes and Reservoirs* his series depicts.

This technical anomaly illustrates how a concept can direct – and sometimes drastically override – the other three C's. Here, a deliberate "mistake" in *craft* leads to stunning *compositions*, abstracting the otherwise realistic landscapes into organic forms and colors. This process physically connects the prints to the places they depict, making the *content* not just visual but physical as well. These images are not only *about* the lakes but are actually shaped by the lakes themselves. Brandt's *Lakes and Reservoirs,* like Klett and Wolfe's *Drowned River,* likely also requires a statement for the viewer to "get it"; in this case, succinctly revealing the process would suffice to illuminate the work's core concept.

PHOTO 9.15
Matthew Brandt,
American Lake WA E3,
2011, c-print soaked in
American Lake water.

Concept – punch this for hyperspace

A photographic artist's practice can be compared to an enterprise and the *4 Cs* – craft, composition, content, and concept – are four department heads competing to be the CEO.

Each *C* has its own distinctive leadership style. If craft is in charge, technical skills are valued: purchasing and learning new equipment and software are often paramount. If composition takes over, formal elements become the main attraction, leading the viewer to "see" things through the artist's stylistic eyes. When content leads the way, collecting information and cultivating knowledge about the chosen subject matter can be the bulk of the labor. All of these scenarios require persistent effort over time.

However, when concept is the boss, drastic changes can happen, and quickly. In this chapter's examples, we've seen cases where concept orders craft to deliberately abandon best practices; where concepts reverse the pursuit of "pleasant" aesthetics by violating compositional rules, and even veiling content to purposely mislead. In other words, concept is the visionary leader that can revolutionize the product as if propelling the artist's work forward through hyperspace.

▶ FLIP THE PAGE

By intentionally breaking the rules of a traditional process, Matthew Brandt uses that process in a conceptually interesting way. Other artists who use, and misuse, traditional processes are discussed in Chapter 11: Tradition.

Self as subject

If we consider a spectrum where different professions are ranked according to how personal they are, at one end would be accounting or engineering, where the work is expected to be consistent, regardless of the individual doing the work. On the other end of the spectrum is art, where the creator's psyche makes each product unique.

Art is highly personal and so it is easy to understand why many photographic artists choose to use themselves as subjects. **Cindy Sherman** (American, born 1954) has been photographing herself for over forty years. Her early series *Untitled Film Still*s (1977–1980), resembles the aesthetics of movies from the 1950s and 60s.

The depicted "films" did not exist and neither did the characters she portrayed. A painter before taking up photography, Sherman has said, "I'm good at using my face as a canvas."[5] For Sherman, these images are *of* herself, but not *about* herself. They are not self-portraits (who needs that many self-portraits anyway?); instead, they project a narrative that is larger than herself.

Forty years later, Sherman is still prolifically photographing herself. As of this writing, some of her latest images can be found on her Instagram account, @cindysherman. Many of her Instagram posts feature Sherman's face, like a typical social media selfie. Some are clearly over-filtered for an unrealistically smooth complexion; some are edited beyond recognition with reptilian skin and bulging facial features – in a word, ugly. However, each of these "ugly" photos nets tens of thousands of "likes."

Sherman continues to use her own face as a canvas, but what has changed is the aesthetics. While *Film Stills* employed the glamorous look of a 50s or 60s movie, Sherman's Instagram images are grotesque parodies of the aesthetics of social media. We have probably all seen images online where users attempt to portray themselves in the best possible light, carefully angling themselves and even applying filters to alter their appearance. Sherman has pushed the social media filter phenomenon to the extreme, creating "selfies" that, true to form, aren't self-portraits, but instead portraits of the cultural zeitgeist.

Sherman is often considered one of the major innovators of conceptual photography. She has had many exhibitions at the world's top art museums and innumerable reviews, essays, and exhibition texts have been written about her work. Despite all this, Sherman never explicitly reveals her agenda and almost never entitles her pieces. In interviews, Sherman keeps her interests and motivations simple: when asked if her work is an examination of the self or gender roles, she has said, "It was just something I was working out without being overtly political about it."[6] Sherman is an example of an artist who chooses not to provide lengthy statements, yet many statements have been written for her. Does this analysis truly reflect her concepts? We might never know, so long as Cindy Sherman herself chooses not to agree or disagree with them.

PHOTO 9.16
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 inches, (20.3 × 25.4 cm).

Arno Rafael Minkkinen (Finnish-American, born 1945) also photographs himself, but while Cindy Sherman uses herself as a canvas, Arno Minkkinen uses himself like a highly malleable puppet.

Minkkinen poses nude in nature: in the snow, in water, on frozen lakes, at the edge of cliffs, all while stretching his torso and limbs into shapes we normally do not expect from a human figure. In these images, which – unlike Sherman – he considers self-portraits, he becomes a tree, a boat, a piece of rock, or furniture. None of these are "Photoshopped": the bulk of his work is in fact from before the digital revolution. Instead, Minkkinen sets the camera on a tripod, advances the film, and contorts himself before the delayed shutter is released. All great artists push the boundaries of our imagination: many do it with their minds, Minkkinen does it with his body.

An avid educator, Minkkinen has often written and spoken about his concepts and his process. His artist statement, called *How to Work The Way I Work*, can be found on his website, http://www.arnorafaelminkkinen.com. It is an itemized, illustrated, and nearly instructional essay – a stark contrast to Cindy Sherman, who does not reveal her intentions in either statements or titles. Remember: an artist can choose to either illuminate or to obscure.

PHOTO 9.17
Arno Rafael Minkkinen, *Stranda, Norway*, 2006.

PHOTO 9.18
Omar Victor Diop, *Jean-Baptiste Belley*, 2014.

Diaspora is a series of self-portraits by **Omar Victor Diop** (Senegalese, born 1980), in which he reenacts portraits of historical African figures who traveled far afield – sometimes by choice, often not – to become statesmen, scholars, and other men of prestige.

In some of Diop's images, modern soccer (or football) equipment is sprinkled in, as if the wrong props were used by mistake. In Photo 9.18, we see Diop as Jean-Baptiste Belley, a former slave, Haitian revolutionary, and the first black deputy of the French National Convention. He leans casually with a soccer ball not present in his original painted portrait (Illustration 9.1).

The content of *Diaspora* is African identity, then and now. Diop breaks character by including modern soccer equipment, hinting at Diop's own time and identity in

ILLUSTRATION 9.1
Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy, *Portrait of J. B. Belley, Deputy for Saint-Domingue*, 1797, oil on canvas. Omar Victor Diop's *Diaspora* series (Photo 9.18) recreates portraits of historical African figures, like this painting of Jean-Baptiste Belley, former slave, Haitian revolutionary, and the first black deputy of the French National Convention.

otherwise convincing reenactments. While *Diaspora* may at first appear to be a relatively simple series ("let me dress up as figures from the past"), the inclusion of the soccer equipment is a conceptual twist that raises important questions about perceptions of African identity today. Diop has explained it this way: "Soccer is an interesting global phenomenon that for me often reveals where society is in terms of race. When you look at the way that African soccer royalty is perceived in Europe, there is a very interesting blend of glory, hero-worship, and exclusion. Every so often, you get racist chants or banana skins thrown on the pitch and the whole illusion of

integration is shattered in the most brutal way. It's that kind of paradox I am investigating in the work."[7]

Like Diop, **Nikki S. Lee** (Korean, born 1970) inhabits characters in her images, transforming herself into a stereotypical member of various subcultures: tourists, school girls, hip-hop artists, punks, swing dancers, and more. In Photo 9.19, we see an image from *The Yuppie Project* (yuppie is slang for "young urban professional").

Lee often spent months preparing for her *Projects* – gaining/losing weight, perfecting her makeup and wardrobe – before


PHOTO 9.19
Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (4)*, 1998, color photograph.

Selfie

In 2013, the Oxford English Dictionary proclaimed *selfie* the word of the year. The OED defines *selfie* as:

A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.

The authors find this definition a bit lacking: consider that selfies are also defined by the photographer holding the camera at arm's length and pointing the lens backward at oneself while pressing the shutter release. This is made possible by a technological innovation, a camera that can display a live preview on the same side as the lens, now a standard feature of all smartphones.
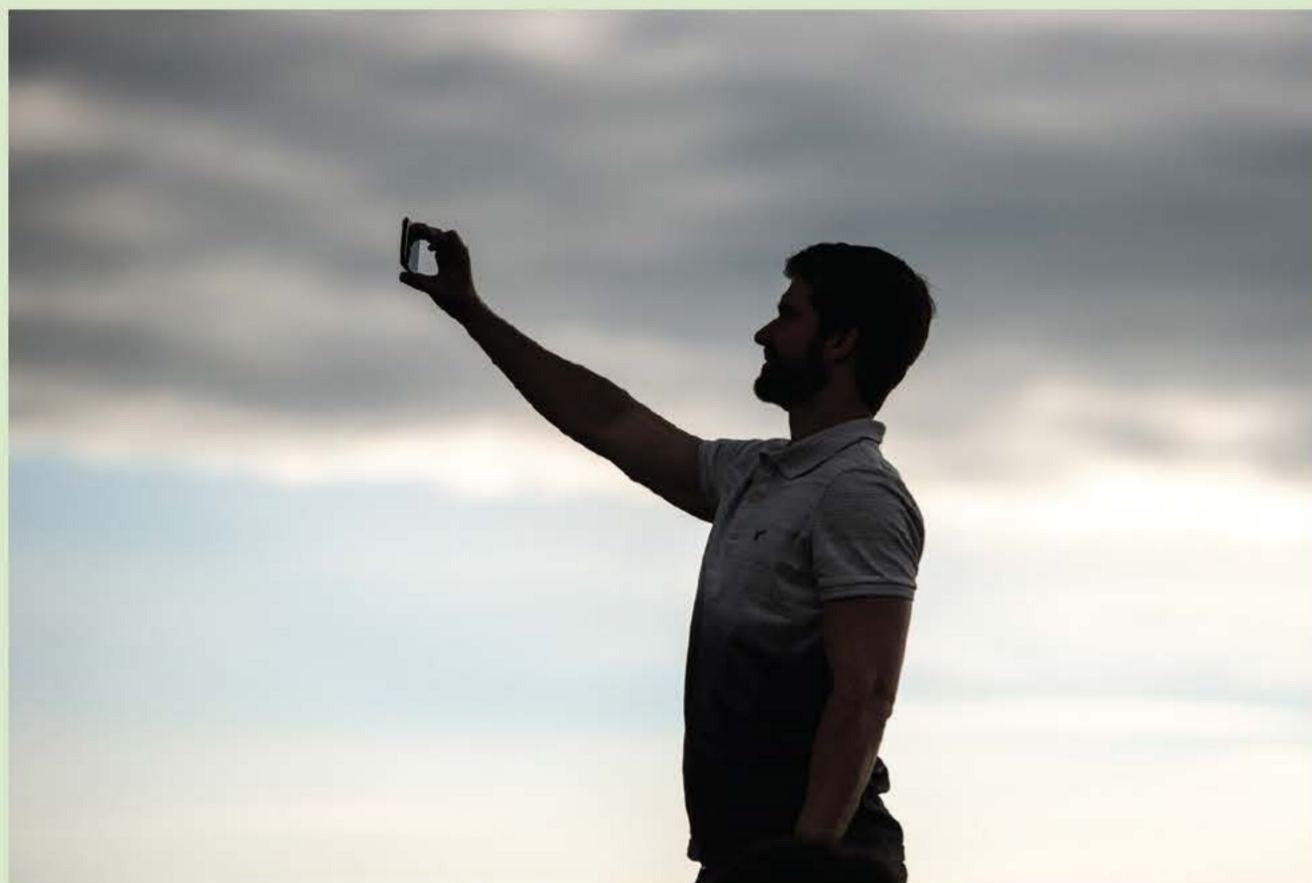
This camera positioning also produces the selfie aesthetic: the subject (self) in the extreme foreground and the surroundings (other people, landscapes, events, etc.) in the background, both typically in fine detail, thanks to smartphone cameras' deep depth of field.

The social implications of the selfie are tremendous. Twenty-four billion selfies were uploaded to the Google Photo app alone in 2015 and a recent survey estimated that a typical millennial will take more than 25,700 selfies in their lifetime.[10, 11] Even though many people are taking selfies almost constantly, there is an element of disdain in the public's opinion of the selfie phenomenon. For example, in 2016 Sugar Land, TX, made national news by installing in the town's plaza a statue of a two girls taking a selfie, to, in the city's words, depict an "activity common in the plaza," but the statue drew harsh public criticism.[12] Does this mean the general public is split between selfie practitioners and selfie haters? It's doubtful – while many of us love to hate selfies, we are also taking more of them than ever.

Though often dismissed as mindless and self-indulgent, selfie-taking requires craft: anyone who has tried knows the difficulty of taking a decent photo with an outstretched arm. Selfies also produce interesting compositions. The unique foreground/background aesthetic is highly effective in documenting a personal journey. Additionally, a selfie's content can be meaningful, saying *here are the places where I have been and I would like to share with you.* The selfie, as a social phenomenon, can also be thought of as conceptual: *let's give this device that people can use to easily photograph themselves to the general public and see what happens.*

Since the beginning of photography, professional photographers have often made a sacrifice, focusing (pun intended) on the job at hand and neglecting their own enjoyment of the moment. Now, selfie practitioners have a taste of that feeling. Take the authors' advice and put the camera or the smartphone away once in a while to soak in what's around you: from time to time, we all need a break from the duty to photograph.

she began mingling with people in that particular subculture. To capture her images, she handed a point-and-shoot camera to a passerby to snatch photos of her and her new acquaintances. [8] Because of this process, we might consider Lee as much a performance artist as a photographer. Compare Lee's process to Cindy Sherman's: while both Sherman and Lee inhabit personas, Sherman documents her transformations visually, while Lee throws herself into a real-world community to "field test" her personas. Lee's concept is not just to make an image, but to literally live someone else's life. As she explained in an interview, "I started out with a universal question about identity, my identity. The way I tried to answer that question was to look at others . . . . To get to know . . . who I am requires for me to see myself through the eyes of others." [9]

> ### ▶ FLIP THE PAGE: STAY ON YOUR CONCEPTUAL "BUS"
>
> In photographer Arno Rafael Minkkinen's *Helsinki Bus Station Theory*, the conceptual path an artist embarks upon is likened to a bus route. The theory goes that even though the route may be well-traveled by predecessors, an aspiring artist who stays on the bus will eventually diverge to a unique path. Minkkinen's famous doctrine is, "Stay on the [expletive] bus." (Google "Helsinki Bus Station Theory" for the full explanation). [13]
>
> This lesson is valuable as well as encouraging. As many aspiring photographic artists have found out, coming up with an entirely original concept is as unlikely and difficult as finding a goose that lays golden eggs. Assuming one does not strike such luck, working on a concept persistently over time can still lead to an interesting and even novel body of work. Chapter 10: Development and Presentation provides hands-on guidance for achieving this goal.

While these experiences were likely illuminating for Lee herself as she explored various identities, it is worth asking how illuminating the images are for viewers. Do the images provide the viewer with any new information about these cultures, or do they serve to strengthen stereotypes? This is certainly a criticism that has been leveled against Lee's work, though her images can also be understood as demonstrating how fluid and subject to change individual identity can be.

Truth as a concept

Photography is often perceived as a realistic medium. In and out of courts of law, photographs have been used as evidence of facts almost since the medium's very beginnings. Some might argue that our inherent trust in photographic images has been seriously breached by the advent of digital compositing, aka Photoshopping (see Chapter 7's *Think about it 7.2: Retouching, compositing, and truth in photography*). On the other hand, bystanders armed with camera phones often make an obscure incident *go viral*, leading to public outcry: seeing a photo is still believing.

Joan Fontcuberta (Spanish, born 1955) challenged the idea of truth in photography, even before the age of Photoshop and camera phones.

Photo 9.20 is from Fontcuberta's series *Fauna*, documenting animal species discovered by Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen that defy the theory of evolution. In the photo, drawn from Dr. Ameisenhaufen's archives, we see a specimen of *Centaurus Neandertalensis* communicating with a researcher. Photo 9.21 is a portrait of Ivan Istochnikov, a USSR cosmonaut who mysteriously disappeared from his spacecraft, resulting in a government cover-up of the mishap. Istochnikov's story was rediscovered along with a repository of his notes, photographs, and personal effects, from which this portrait was taken.

PHOTO 9.20
Joan Fontcuberta, *Centaurus Neandertalensis,* from the series *Fauna,* 1987.

topology, any scientific discourse, the media, even religion . . . . My work . . . is pedagogic. It's a pedagogy of doubt, protecting us from the disease of manipulation. We want to believe. Believing is more comfortable because unbelieving implies effort, confrontation. We passively receive a lot of information from TV, the media, and the internet because we are reluctant to expend the energy needed to be skeptical."[14]

Foncuberta's playfully deceitful work prods the viewer into critical engagement: some of the work's humorous elements even serve as clues, so that when viewers eventually realize the deception, they can't help but laugh at their own carelessness. For example, Fontcuberta includes this line in the text of The *Photography of Nature:* "[Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen's] heroes would have included . . . geologist and adventurer Indiana Jones."[15] Indiana Jones is, of course, a fictional character played by Harrison Ford.

However plausible they may seem, *Secret Fauna,* the tale of Ivan Istochnikov, and the other stories told in Foncuberta's book *The Photography of Nature* are all fictitious. Intriguingly, the book's design itself provides a clue to Fontcuberta's conceptual aims: the book's back cover shows the upside-down cover of another book entitled *The Nature of Photography.* In his own words, "the idea is to challenge disciplines that claim authority to represent the real – botany,

Cristina de Middel's (Spanish, born 1975) series *The Afronauts* (Photo 9.22) also plays with the truth, though with a different approach.

In 1964, a Zambian science teacher named Edward Mukuka Nkoloso founded the Zambia National Academy of Science, Space Research, and Philosophy and started training would-be space travelers for planned trips to the moon and Mars. Due to inadequate funding, Nkoloso's ambition remains a dream to this day. De Middel's images imagine what would have happened if this space program had moved forward.[16] The series is fiction as an extension of true history – an alternate history, in the vein of science fiction.

PHOTO 9.22
Christina de Middel, *Umiko*, from the series *Afronauts*, 2011.

Although both de Middel and Foncuberta depict events which did not happen, de Middel is not intentionally deceptive. While *confusion* is at the center of Foncuberta's work, de Middel's work centers around *imagination*. Like all good science fiction, this imaginary vision is based in reality: observe the apparently culturally specific fabric of the space suits and the distinctly African elements of the images' settings, like plants and animals. While Foncuberta purposely pushes believability towards the ridiculous, de Middel creates fictional content based on a logical trajectory of reality; this is another demonstration of how key differences in similar concepts can steer content in very different directions.

Thus far, we've seen Joan Fontcuberta's *anti-truths* and Cristina de Middel's *would-be-truths*. What type of truths does **Jeff Wall** (Canadian, born 1946) depict?

The content of Photo 9.23, like many by Wall, appears to be a snapshot: we seem to see a woman trying on a dress in a department store fitting room. The fact of the matter, though, is that this a carefully, painstakingly staged reenactment of a memory. The depicted event *did* happen in "real" life, just not at the moment Wall photographed it.[17]

Wall's work raises a conceptual question: is a staged photograph any less factual than a photograph taken in-the-moment? While Wall's images are certainly not photojournalistic, we might ask ourselves if they are any less "real" than some of the photographs we see in the media, especially in the age of Photoshop when "reality" is often questioned.

"In my time, I've been accused of being afraid to go out into the world to take pictures, like a so-called 'real' photographer does," Wall has said. [18] Some of his staged scenes, particularly of troubling subject matter like torture and homelessness, have provoked discomfort and even anger in their viewers, perhaps because his images disrupt our notions of truth and

PHOTO 9.24
Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick, *Trip to the Moon*, 2004, archival inkjet print.

PHOTO 9.23
Jeff Wall, *Changing room*, 2014, inkjet print, 199.5 ×109.0 cm.

reality. It can be unsettling to realize something we thought was "real" is in fact staged, or fake, and it is exactly this feeling of unease that Wall is playing with in his meticulously deceptive images.

Consider the *4 Cs*: craft, composition, content, and concept. If a photographer's training is like a Jedi knight's, then craft and composition are Lightsaber skills (how to use your tool – in your case, your camera) and content and concept are the way of the Force, something much subtler and more difficult to master. After reading this chapter, the Force is strong with you. Now, continue your training by reading the rest of the book. The next chapter, 9.5: Craft, Composition, Content, and Concept – The DNA of Photographic Art will put the *4 Cs* to practical use analyzing the work of other artists, as well as your own. Chapter 10: Development and Presentation will then illuminate the practice of developing your work's content and concept and, finally, sharing it with the world.

THINK ABOUT IT 9.6
Perceptions of reality

Take a look at this image by Laura McPhee (American, born 1958) and Virginia Beahan (American, born 1946): what do you see?

Is this another case of an environment under threat, a content area well-documented by Edward Burtynsky? Are the swimmers in the image naive victims of pollution? Or, is this a composite made of multiple images, a doctored reality like those by Joan Fontcuberta?

The answer is none of the above.

The photograph's title is *The Blue Lagoon*. It depicts a thermo-geological formation in Þorbjön, Iceland where the Svartsengi Geothermal Hot Water Pumping Station is located. The structure we see here is not a pollution-spewing factory like it may at first seem, but a facility that generates heating and electric power from underground heat – a renewable energy source plentiful beneath Iceland's volcanic land. Blue Lagoon is in fact an internationally famed tourist attraction. Swimming in it is not only safe and enjoyable, the mud from its bottom is packaged as a facial product.

This image has perplexed many viewers: the artists say that they are frequently asked if this is a composite or if they somehow manipulated the perspective to make the location seem more surreal.[19] In fact, this is a relatively straightforward image of a real

PHOTO 9.25
Laura McPhee and Virginia Beahan, *The Blue Lagoon, Svartsengi Hot Water Geothermal Pumping Station, Thorbjorn, Iceland*, 1988, archival pigment print.

landscape, though our minds may jump to other conclusions when we first see the unlikely pairing of swimmers and a power plant. The authors have to confess that even they did not read the image correctly at first. This is an important reminder to look critically at images and not to always take your first glance as truth.

Artists do not come up with concepts out of thin air. As discussed in *Think about it 9.3: Concepts and sincerity* earlier in the chapter, arriving at a truly captivating concept requires time, research, and lots of thought.

Ideas can also arrive from seeing the work of other artists. This happened for this book's author Mark Chen when he saw artists Joan Fontcuberta (see Photos 9.20 and 9.21) and Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick (see Photo 9.24) give talks. Concerned himself with environmental activism and in search of a conceptual way to address the issue, he was inspired by Fontcuberta and Kahn and Selenick's humorous approaches to the truth. Could environmental issues be addressed in a lighter, satirical way? Could fictional irony form the base of his concept?

Chen's series *Wintopia* was developed as an experimental answer to these questions:

Set in the near future, *Windtopia* documents a global monopoly that has solved the problem of climate change and rising sea levels with its 50 million wind turbines, eliminating carbon-emitting energy production. It may sound like a dream come true, but will the world be a utopia when environmentalists are in charge?

Viewers can find out themselves by seeing a *Windtopia* exhibition, always disguised as a shareholder meeting, an outreach program, or other corporate event at which literature like annual reports are distributed.

In these events, actors adorned with corporate IDs assume the positions of communication officers and spokespeople, interacting with viewers who may realize the fictitiousness of the narrative, or remain deceived. As in Fontcuberta's work, the threshold for realization is reached by degrees of absurdity: the norms in Windtopia's future, strange by today's standards, finally push the viewer from the deceived to the enlightened.

PHOTO 9.26
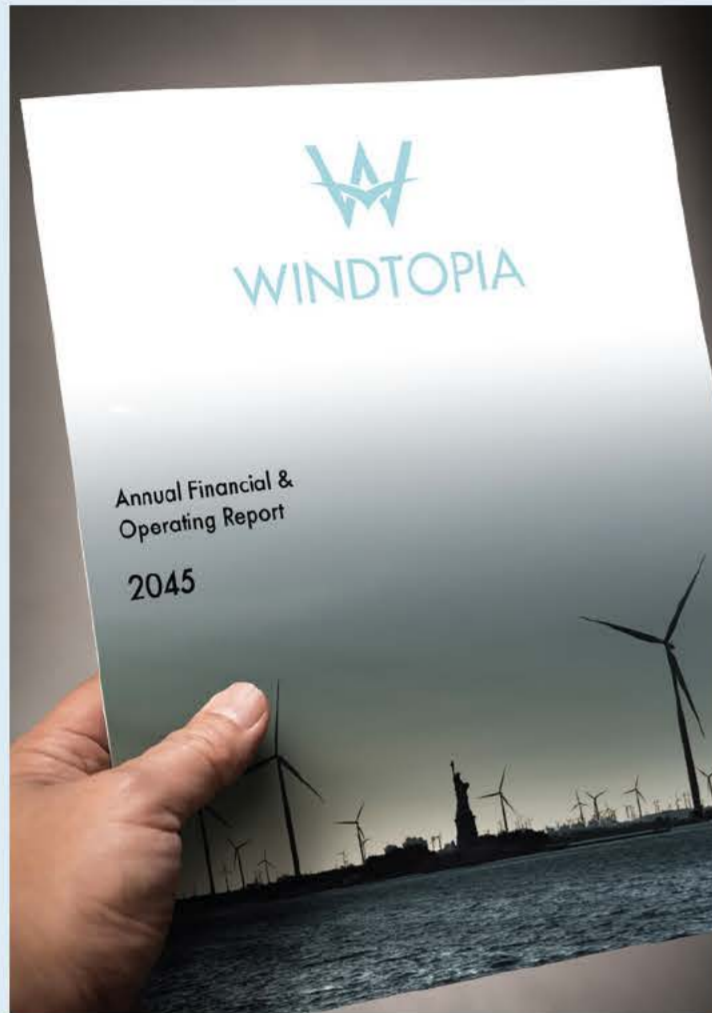Mark Chen, *Eradicating Avian Flu*, 2014, from the series *Windtopia*.

PHOTO 9.27
Mark Chen, *Annual Financial and Operational Report (cover)*, 2014, from the series *Windtopia*.

Mark Chen shares an interest in the human-altered landscapes with Edward Burtynsky and Marcela Magno (see Photos 9.3 and 9.4) but redirected his content development under the conceptual influences of Joan Fontcuberta, Cristina de Middel, and Kahn and Selesnick. This is another case where a conceptual twist opens a door to an otherwise unvisited creative space.

> **▶ FLIP THE PAGE**
>
> This box illustrates how Mark Chen developed a concept. In addition to taking inspiration from other artists, there are many other strategies for *conceptualizing* a project. This is addressed in Chapter 10: Development and Presentation.

TRY THIS 9.1: Reading photographs (conclusion)

Each image in this chapter has potent content and concept. Such photographs can be both fascinating and difficult to read. Because they are challenging, they are often misunderstood – lumped together and dismissed with all things "contemporary *art*."
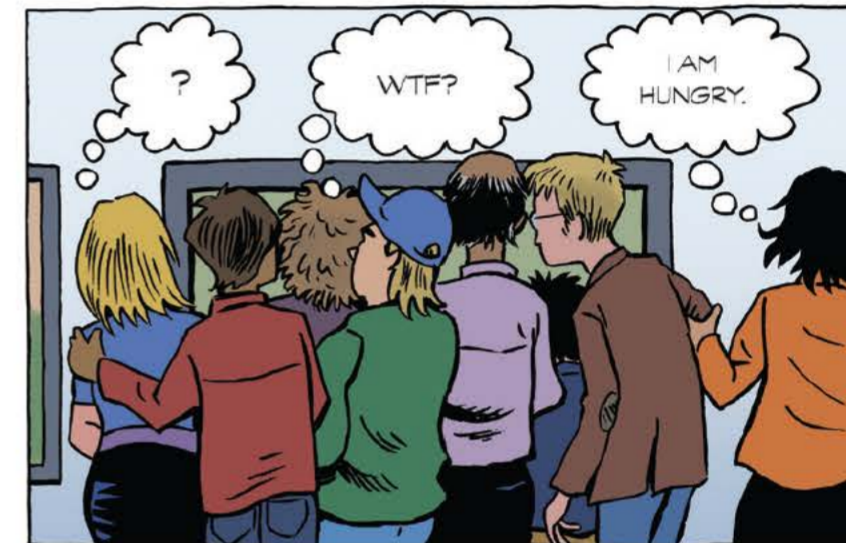
Now that you have completed the first part of this *Try this* and have also now read the entire chapter, compare your initial assessment of the images and your resulting groupings to the text's analysis. How "accurate" was your reading, without the chapter's behind-the-scenes information? You were likely more or less correct about some photos and wrong about others.

Famed novelist Stephen King advises all rookie writers that their craft is best cultivated through writing and reading. He reads seventy to eighty books a year. Through the appreciation of good work, and the critique of bad, the writer learns lessons that improve their own work.[20] The same is true for rookie photographic artists: make plenty of photographs, but also take the time to critically look at the work of other photographers.

9.5 Craft, Composition, Content and Concept – The DNA of Photographic Art

An understanding of craft, composition, content, and concept lays the groundwork for the *4 C* framework for analyzing images – both your own and others'.

Each artist's work is a unique combination, a blueprint made up of the *4 Cs*, just like DNA, whose unique combinations form the blueprints of life.

Whereas the previous chapters delved into the nuances of the individual *4 Cs*, this chapter will examine the *4 Cs* from a holistic view, looking at how each component works with each of the others as a team. Learning to see artwork from this perspective provides a level of understanding of the art-making process that is both utilitarian and philosophical.

> **A note on terminology**
>
> The definitions of the *4 Cs* – craft, composition, content and concept – are well established by now. At least, the authors hope so, after nine chapters! While the ideas conveyed by these four words are integral to studying photography, the authors' choice of these specific words is somewhat arbitrary. Craft could just as easily be called *technique*, composition could be *form*, content might be called *subject*, and concept could just as well be *idea*. In all honesty, the authors like that the four chosen words all start with *C*, making them easier to commit to memory.

4 C Profiling: Examining a photographer's work

All successful photographic artists work hard: take the authors' words on this, or try to prove us wrong by becoming successful by being lazy. Please contact us to let us know if this ever happens to you, though this is not recommended as we each only have one life to waste.

If working hard is the secret to success, aspiring artists should also be curious how that labor is spent. A photographer's efforts can be broken into the *4 Cs*. The following table serves as a summary of each *C*, as well as a framework for analysis.

The *C*	Description	Examples
Craft	All things technical.	"I put the ND filter on the wide angle lens, set the camera on a tripod, and experimented with long exposures until I got it right." "I have gone through a dozen Lightroom presets for conversion to black-and-white and tweaked a couple of my favorites to make the images look the way I want."
Composition	The visual design of an image.	"I've surrounded the small, single human figure with a monotonous background, turning the latter into negative space that makes the subject stand out." "I stitched 20 images together and cropped it so that the mountain is situated at a rule of thirds point."
Content	What the image is about.	"To create my *Cinematic Kisses* series, I researched famous movie kisses by watching 100 movie kiss scenes and then selected 12 to reenact." "I am reading news about the riot everyday so I know which street I should visit to photograph the action."
Concept	The thought behind the image.	"What if I inhabited characters from history, but disrupted my depictions with props from today?" "How do I convey a sense of time in a landscape? Let me revisit and re-photograph sites that have been heavily photographed throughout history and make a collage out of both my images and the historical ones, showing changes to the place through time."

TRY THIS 9.5.1: *4 C* profiling

Follow these steps:

1. Pick an artist and widely survey their work (a simple way to do this: Google their name, and peruse the image results. Note: not every thumbnail in the search results in accurate. Visit the linked website to verify if images are really by the artist in question).
2. Analyze the images in terms of craft, composition, content and concept, asking yourself the following questions:
   - How much effort does it seem like the image-maker put into each *C*?
   - Is there a *C* that's unique to this artist, and is there a *C* that's more generic?
   - Is one *C* overwhelmingly dominant, and/or are any of the *Cs* virtually absent?
3. After considering the answers to the questions above:
   - Start with a dominant *C*.
   - Compare it to another *C*, perhaps one with similar dominance, or closely trailing behind in dominance. How do they compare in regard to their importance?
   - Add the third and the fourth *Cs*, and repeat the same thought process.
   - After all *4 Cs* are considered, reach a conclusion on their relative weights and give each a percentage. For example: 20%, 60%, 10% and 10% for craft, composition, content and concept, respectively.
4. Take a look at the artist's biographical information, artist statement, interviews or talks – all of these can illuminate how the artist themselves weighs each of the *4 Cs*. Which comes to their minds first? How many words do they spend on each? Which makes them most excited as they are speaking? Do they skip any of the *4 Cs*? Do these clues confirm, or contradict, your own conclusion? If the latter, you may want to adjust your weight distribution from Step 3. Recall that an artist may choose to be subversive, or intentionally deceptive, in their statement.
5. Draw a pie chart based on your conclusion, with each slice sized proportionally and labeled with the specific *C* and its percentage.
6. Repeat this process with various artists, preferably with distinctive styles.

See Show Me 9.5.1 and 9.5.2 for example *4 C* profiles.

Looking through this table's example, it is easy to see that each demands a wide range of resources. Some require more time than others; some require money and some don't; some take years of study and some only require a moment of inspiration. *None of them is easy.*

Each artist spends different proportions of their effort and allocates different resources to each of the *4 Cs*. Sometimes these allocations are deliberate, but more often, they are the result of stylistic preferences or working habits. Every photographer's work – a single image, a series, or a body of work created over a lifetime – can be analyzed by looking at the effort allocated to each of the *4 Cs*. This type of analysis will be referred to as **4 C profiling** and can be an illuminating way to learn about an artist's practice.

For an aspiring artist, the *4 Cs* are useful not only for understanding the work of other artists, but also as a framework for thinking about one's own work. They can also be a sure-fire starting point for talking about art – both yours and others'. Discussing art will be addressed more fully in Chapter 14: Words. The next chapter, Chapter 10: Development and Presentation will explore how artists work towards sharing their images with the world.

TRY THIS 9.5.2: *4 C profiling yourself*

As artistic practitioners, we are constantly in a creator's frame of mind. Once in a while, though, it is good to step outside ourselves and examine our practice so as to better understand our artistic identity. This is not unlike seeing a therapist, though with *4 C* profiling, this examination can be conducted ourselves or by our peers.

Look at your body of work and carry out the *4 C* profiling method from *Try this 9.5.1*. Invite a mentor, peer, or stranger to profile your work after introducing them to this practice as well. Compare the results – is your profile of your own work similar or different to others' profiles of your work? What can you learn from this process?

SHOW ME 9.5.1
4 C profiling of Ansel Adams

Let's look at the work of the great landscape photographer Ansel Adams (American, 1902-1984) and try out the *4 C* profiling method from *Try this 9.5.1*. Also refer to *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* in *Show me 4.2: Horizontal lines*. To conveniently sample an even larger volume of his images, search Google Images with the keywords "Ansel Adams photography."

The examples included in this book and the Google search results should suffice to convince us that Ansel Adams' images share an incredibly rich and consistent tonal range. This wouldn't come as a surprise if we knew he spent hours and hours of effort in the darkroom printing each image to perfect its tones. He was so concerned with this that he invented the **zone system**, which indoctrinated a systematic approach to tonal richness in black-and-white images (see Illustration 6.4). Clearly, Adams was big on craft: a large slice of his pie should be reserved for it.

Adams' landscapes are stunning and it is no exaggeration to say that viewers can often be more stunned viewing his depictions of a landscape than viewing the place in person. How is this possible? Recall the analysis of the composition of *Moonrise, Hernandez, New* from Chapter 4: the positioning of the horizon, the interaction of the foreground and background, the depiction of detailed textures, and many more formal qualities are assembled into an *A team* of compositional elements. If viewers are in awe of Adams' landscapes, it is first and foremost because of his exquisite compositions. That rich tonal range from his delicate attention to darkroom craft is a supporting player to his composition. The largest slice of pie therefore belongs to composition.


PHOTO 9.5.1
Ansel Adams (American, 1902–1984), *The Tetons and the Snake River*, 1942.

Adams' crafty and compositional efforts were in the service of depicting his chosen content, the beauty of nature. Like craft, however, content is in a supporting role to Adams' goal of presenting formal beauty. Content will receive a slice as big as craft, but smaller than composition.

Finally, what's the concept behind Adams' work? He was a founding member of Group *f/64*, photographers who advocated a "straight" portrayal of the world, in opposition to the Pictorialists who were less interested in depicting reality than creating beautiful, often quite "soft" images (see Photo 2.18). The name *f/64* refers to a very small aperture setting which produces sharp images because of its deep depth of field. This movement was meaningful at the time as a challenge to the zeitgeist, but it is worth questioning whether Adams' work actually carried out the mission stated in the *f/64* manifesto, that is, ". . . simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods."[1] Adams' Zone System is not *simple and direct*: it was almost like Photoshop before the digital era, a way of manipulating the visual qualities of his images. So, even though there was a conceptual underpinning to Adams' Group *f/64*, that concept was not necessarily the driving force for Adams' own art. The slice of Adams' pie labeled *concept* should therefore be relatively small.

Putting this analysis together, we could draft a pie chart for Ansel Adams' *4 Cs* like this:
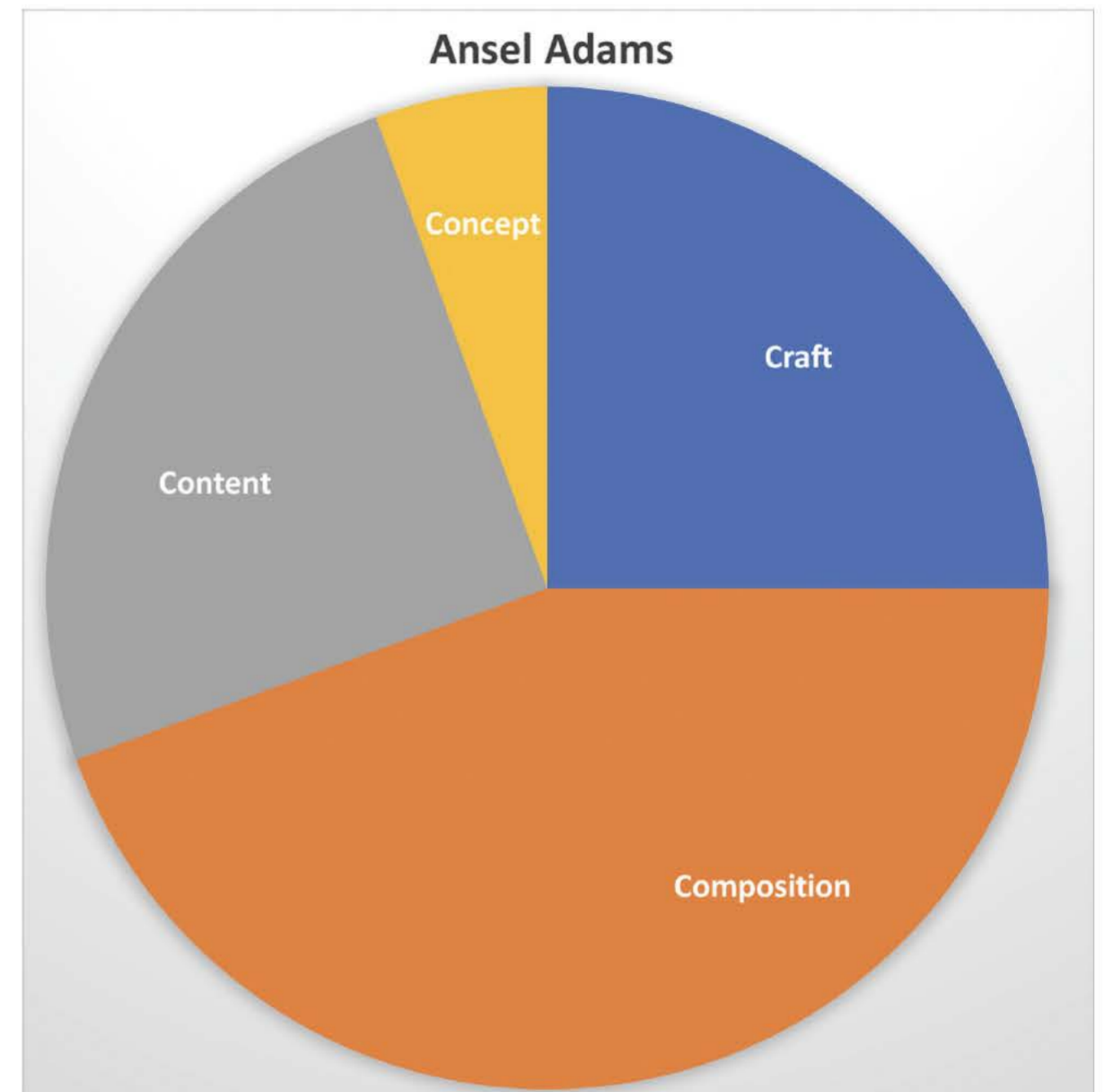
Remember, this chart is an analytical tool. It is not a scoreboard to evaluate artistic quality. This analysis also does not demand that everyone's results agree: your pie chart of Adams' work may look different than the preceding one. These differences are valid, so long as we have good reasons for the way we've sliced the pie, backed up by evidence.

Let's now profile contemporary artist Doug Rickard and his *A New American Picture* series.

More examples of Rickard's work can be found in Chapter 1: Devices (see Photos 1.33 to 1.35) and through a Google Image search with keywords, "Doug Rickard New American Picture." Rickard's street scenes were captured without setting foot on the street: browsing through Google Street View, Rickard located points of interest, set his camera on a tripod, and re-photographed the image on his computer screen.

New American Picture is street photography reinvented. While traditional street photographers hunt for subjects and happenings that spark their interest, Rickard was on the hunt for images of interest that already existed on Google Street View. He sought out "forgotten, economically devastated, and largely abandoned places," and his content selection process aimed to raise awareness of marginalized areas of the United States.[2] Looking at these images, we can imagine the Google Street View cars, symbols of cutting-edge technology, zooming down

PHOTO 9.5.2
Doug Rickard, from the series *A New American Picture*, #82.948842, Detroit, MI (2009), 2010, archival pigment print.

these streets, passing by people whose basic needs are only barely met. These images' content – images of marginalized Americans taken by complex technology – creates significant impact. Content, then, may be rightly assigned a relatively large section in our analysis.

It is important to know that Rickard spent years virtually "walking" the streets to create this body of work: he may not have burned as many calories as a traditional street photographer, but this by no means diminishes the effort he put into this work. Why did Rickard make this radical departure from tradition? Such moves can usually be explained by their conceptual underpinnings. In Rickard's statement for this series, he writes that while he shares an interest in documenting America with more traditional street photographers, he is also interested in our "increasingly technological world—a world in which a camera mounted on a moving car can generate evidence of the people and places it is leaving behind." For Rickard, this interplay between the bystanders in his images and the technology that documents them creates "a photographic portrait of the socially disenfranchised and economically powerless."[3]

These ideas about technology, economics, and how individuals are impacted by both are the concepts that informed Rickard's decision to re-photograph Google Street View imagery and in fact spurred the creation of this whole body of work. The appropriation of Google images is in the conceptual lineage of Duchamp's "ready mades" – repurposing something that already exists to make an artistic statement. Concept, then, should be heavily weighted in our analysis.

These images' compositions were determined almost exclusively by the Google Street View cameras: Rickard had a say in selecting his favorite frame as it "moved" down a street, but this process was passive at best. We can rightly assign a very small portion of Rickard's pie to composition.

Craft in Rickard's image-making process is also minimal. Using a camera to rephotograph the screen is more of a gesture than a technical consideration: in fact, a screen capture would have produced higher quality images.

Concluding the analysis, we may draw a pie chart for Rickard's series like this:
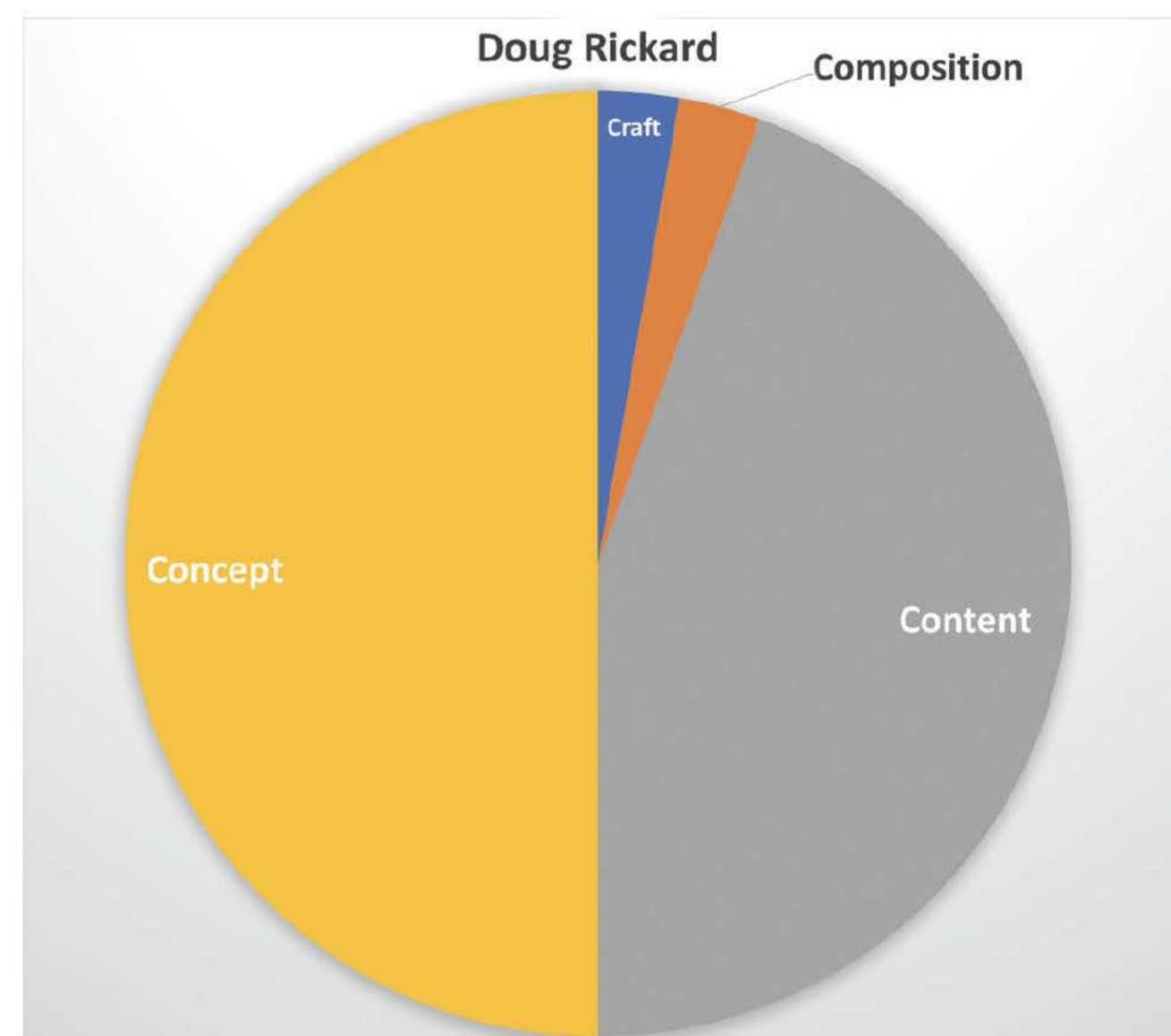
Try your hand at this kind of analysis by creating *4 C* profiles of other artists mentioned in this book or those you come across in your own research.