

A Workshop Experience, in the First Person

By Susan Fisher

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I've just returned from a week of putting aside what I already know about photography and learning to look for what I've stopped seeing. My teacher was photographer Sean Kernan at an Exploring Creativity workshop at the Maine Photographic Workshops in Rockport, Maine.

I knew it was going to be a mind-bending week when first thing Monday morning Sean told our group that if he had had his way in designing the course, he would have insisted that we leave our cameras at home. Then we meditated for 20 minutes. We did it each morning before starting. "Neither disperse nor contain your mind" Sean would say, and ring a small bell to begin. After that, we never knew what he would throw at us: observation exercises, improvisational group dances, theatre games, "singing" photographs through sounds instead of describing them with words, brush and ink experiments, or speaking in made-up languages.

Sean told us that when we were just learning to take photographs, it was like riding a runaway horse. We didn't know how to tame the horse, and certainly had no idea where we were going. Then in time, we learned to tame our steed and handle our craft. "What I'm now going to teach you," Sean said, "is how to make the horse run away again."

I chose Sean's course from scores of others because it wasn't technical and furthermore, sounded mysterious, even a little scary. In the catalogue, Sean says that being in a state of creativity is crucial to the art of photography. Yet how do we get there? Most photographers (perhaps all artists) "stand around hoping that this flash of awareness will somehow show up at the right time," he says. "But think about this: what if you didn't wait? What if you went looking for it?"

That's what we did all week—we went looking for it: that elusive state of awareness that would allow us to take good photographs. By good Sean means alive. He was always asking us Is the picture alive? And then he would put on a CD of throat singing and ask us all to move around the room as an unrehearsed yet choreographed unit, or get us to sit in a circle and pass an imaginary rotting cabbage around. Periodically we went out into the parking lot and walked up and down in odd patterns, or pretended to be a construction crew building a house.

The acting skits were torment for me, yet I could feel something shifting in me as I struggled to play the part. In one skit, I was a cross-dressing mother being interviewed on the Oprah Winfrey show (along with my cross-dressing husband and traumatized young daughter.) To add a little spice to an already loaded situation, Sean said that we had to speak in a made-up language. Whenever we faltered during the skits—if one of us just

couldn't make that imaginative commitment to the piece and, because we felt foolish and lost, made jokes to the audience, the whole thing would collapse. At that point, Sean would stop us, explain what had gone wrong, and ask us to do it again.

What has improv acting got to do with photography? For starters, Sean says "it's quite delicious to see photographers pushed out of their cherished observer position and made to interact with each other." I'm still thinking about that insightful comment a week later, by the way. But more importantly, Sean says that once a student commits to his or her part in the scene, sets self-consciousness aside and becomes the game, that the very intensity of that commitment brings the game to life. I could see exactly what he meant. I could see that even if only one actor was strongly committed, that the other actors became more engaged too. And as Sean put it, "When that happens, the audience follows, and the scene becomes reality for everyone."

So, the acting games taught us about commitment and focus. It demonstrated for us, how a photographer (or any artist) concentrating on doing good work can engage us—sweep us along to a place in ourselves that we had no clue was there. It also introduced uncertainty into our creative life, which Sean assured us will help us "find something really new." And whatever "newness" we dig up will enrich our photography and our lives.

We watched a video interview one morning of Richard Serra, who I learned is probably the most innovative sculptor of our times. It seems that he redefined the nature of sculpture by taking it off the pedestal "so that the viewer must deal with it in time and space, rather than as an icon of worship." Serra's recent works are towering slabs of steel, leaning in and out, that the viewer can walk into, beside, and around. As I listened to Serra talk about "experiencing an object in space", I remembered the exercise Sean had us do that morning. He put 13 of us in a smallish, empty room, then told us to take two rolls of film each. For about 15 minutes, we prowled around or crawled on our hands and knees, not quite sure what we were doing. But before long, I began to feel a rhythm and pattern to my movements and how I was seeing. I became completely engrossed by the constantly shifting shapes and spaces all around me. Later that day, we reviewed the surprising results. Many of the images had captured a lyrical wave of movement, space, volume, texture—even sound—that was unquestionably alive!

The day after I arrived home, Sean sent an e-mail to our group. He thought we might be having second thoughts about the workshop—wondering how closing our eyes or rolling around on the floor could possibly help us take a better picture. "If you close your eyes, you hear more, hear new," he wrote. "If you make body shapes in unfamiliar ways you have a new kinesthetic sense of what is near you and in you. And what comes from new sensation is new awareness and new work." Of course we won't roll around on the floor every time we pick up a camera. But, we will have new awarenesses in us, and the awareness of newness. According to Sean—and I believe him—"That's what lets you take a better picture."

If you want more info about Sean or the Maine Photographic Workshops, try
www.seankernan.com or www.theworkshops.com

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