



Happy Accidents Shot RAW

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There is more than one reason for working with characters. One of them, the important and right one, is directed against destruction. The other, the worthless one, has to do with a self-love that wants to see itself variously reflected.

– Elias Canetti

I described my photographic project and Bruce hits the nail on the head. “That isn’t a photo series,” he says, “it’s is a performance.”

We’re at La Pampa, an Argentinean restaurant on Staunton Street. Savoring a bite, he chuckles. “It’s vain and self-centered. But it’s bold. I like it.”

He’s right, *350 Rans* isn’t a photo project as much as it’s a six-and-a-half-year performance. It began hours before dawn after I had too much coffee and couldn’t sleep. That was the start of my 350-week journey into happy accidents. I committed to something with no practical purpose,

frivolous even, but it was the source and record of amazing, unexpected possibilities.

At 2:00 AM in February 2004, my wife Delian and I had already been in Hong Kong for half a year. Something about the city felt lifeless. It was the greenest, most vibrant place I ever lived in and the hum was electric. The vibe was as exciting as one could imagine, but it still felt like shiny hardware that still missed important software. Not that there wasn't compassion or feeling, only it was pushed aside so the bankers, lawyers and everyone else tried to run while ignoring the murmur whispering in their hearts.

Eventually, Hong Kong would attract artists by the busload. This wasn't to make great work but where art could be traded like everything else. Anything, as long as it promised some kind of 'return on investment'. I know. Brutal. But that's what got me out of bed. A creative refugee from Montreal.

I grabbed the bathrobe, lifted my camera off the desk and tip-toed into the bathroom. I took a moment. What was there, other than me and some Ikea bathroom furnishings?

I made a photo of the mirrors on the wall. A quick self-portrait. It wasn't a *selfie*, because this was before there was such a thing. Before people's faces were hitting us from all sides. Facebook. Snapcat. Whatever.

In this self-portrait, there's my scalp, a bit of hand, my chest inside the bathrobe, and the tiles in our 700 square-foot village house on Lamma Island.

I sat at my computer and logged onto eBay.

Title: 350 Rans

Description: For the next 350 weeks, I'm putting up a conceptually-different self-portrait for auction. This is photo one from 350 weeks, and by the end I'll have a photo-biography of my life.

I don't know why I chose 350 and not something stickier like 365. My insomnia pushed for something big and that feeling typed 350.

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“How’s that a self-portrait,” asked M, a Hungarian woman scrolling through eBay auctions. “It is not possible that you took that picture.”

She was right. I couldn’t have tripped the shutter when I was in the air, my shadow a silhouette on the ground. I replied that it doesn’t matter if I physically trip the shutter. No more than it has to be my face or body in the image. What’s important is that I decide and include. What makes it a self-portrait is the frame I put around whatever I decide to call ‘me’ that week.

I added that the exercise of making the photos is the creative act, and this act was the self-portrait. The self-portrait was the performance. It was a stretch, but that’s the great thing about creative acts: they let people go beyond what they imagine.

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In one photo, I’m lying on the roof of the Prince’s Building, while a business tycoon hits golf balls from my mouth. In another, I’m running down a beach in Vietnam. In another, I’m being robbed by some kids in Addis Ababa. In another, I’m the best man at Andrew’s wedding. In another, I’m getting an MRI done of my skull. In another, people stare as I make my point in Tiananmen Square. In another, I’m drowning in Victoria Harbour.

Is it photography or is it art direction?

Is it visual confession?

Is it a vain attempt at fighting destruction?

Week and photo 68. Delian and I are having dinner in Kennedy Town and she asks what I have planned for the week. I don’t know, stumped with writer’s block. Normally, by Wednesday night, I either had the photo or know what I

want to do. Thursday mornings are for posting the newest photo, but this week was tough.

“Don’t worry,” said Delian, pouring me another glass of wine, “grab your camera and figure it out.”

Stepping into the office, I stare out the window and scan the countless high-rise apartments. My reflection is dappled with the blurred lights from countless families in their apartments. On the desk, an 8”x10” close-up portrait sits in a tray. Pulling it out, I get my knife and begin cutting the print.

I soon have a shape I can use to assemble a cube, each side showing a piece of my face. On one side, it’s my nose and part of my eye. On another side, my ear and scalp. I toss the little box and made an exposure as the cube falls to the ground. Not happy with that accidental snapshot, I try again. And again. And again, until I like the cubist face floating above linoleum.

* * *

Anything can signify the self; all we must do is name it. We live in several worlds, several languages. The language of thought. English. Cantonese. Traffic cones. Math. The language we learn if we want to speak Tango. This is semiotics, the study of signs. What couldn’t be a language, if all it takes to create one is the will and some signifiers?

People from around the world discovered that a grilled-cheese sandwich revealed the holy image of the Virgin Mary. Coincidentally, I spotted Jesus’ face staring at me in the rock wall by my apartment. We see faces where we can. Faces, we tell ourselves, can mean something. One cliché from photography is that the most interesting subject we can find is people – we are fascinated by others and ourselves. Like how children are mesmerized by their mirrors and windows – ever try to Skype with a toddler?

Was it the Virgin Mary?

Was it Grilled Cheesus?

Why so selfie?

Week after week, a conceptually-different-looking portrait. Was there failure? There is no failure. The performance is the creative moment, every week, braced against the current we're born into.

Consumers.

Media junkies.

Eating images streaming by like an exquisite corpse.

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I met J on the ferry to Lantau Island. We began talking and she said she spotted the Sony commercial on NatGeo. I chuckled and reply that it was fun, shooting the ad. Sony had found a few photographers that they ended up featuring in these ads for their Cybershot cameras.

Turned out that J was a producer taking a small break from the BBC, where she cut her teeth making a hit comedy. She liked what I said about my photos, and over the next few weeks, we explored if we could pitch a show with me as the host.

"But what's the jeopardy," Jo insisted. "What's the hook that makes people come back every week?" The show, which I wanted to call *Shooting it RAW*, needed the tension of potential failure or else it wouldn't fly.

We didn't find our hook. All I knew was that photos are signs, words are signs, and so photos are words we can use to create meaning.

Like words, photos are everywhere. Junk photos. Perfect photos. An ocean of endless images. *Shooting it RAW*, a showcase of people who use photography to tell beautiful, compelling, stories.

In an ocean of signs, look closely and there are countless islands with stories waiting to be discovered.

* * *

Locking the door to the apartment, I enter the elevator. Inside, a poster is covered with Chinese characters I can't read. A woman with a warm smile stands before a temple – I don't understand what I'm looking at.

Leaving the elevator, a Wellcome flyer is trash on the ground. Perfect zucchini and wet cubes of raw chicken with a US flag in the background. Next to the food, a woman glides the back of her hand over her calf. Perfect attractive prices.

Stepping out the door, the humid stench of dog pee breaks my train of thought. By the street, there's a new banner-ad of elderly people. They stand smiling as children play behind them. They are poorly photo-shopped onto a scene of a subway car and an empty, spotless subway station.

Sitting at the bus stop, I think about the 20-foot tall woman with a cell phone pressed against her head. She's been here weeks, staring at the side of a building. She looks happy and young. A taxi speeds past with running shoes pasted on the doors and a massive plastic ADDIDAS sign on the roof. Around me, hundreds of people are walking around, doing their shopping. There are colorful plastic bags everywhere, being walked around like pets from places I've never been to.

An old lady trudges towards the stairs. She's toting a bag from Aeroflot, with a Russian stewardess smiling warmly.

Looking at the street, something catches my eye and I lift my camera. It's a quarter-second exposure of a double-decker bus rumbling down the street. For a moment, blurred in the frame, my reflection trembles in the bus window. The moment vanishes.

Tilting the back of the camera, I preview the image. The composition is fine and the exposure is good. As an image, it works. But that's not the point., that's not the feeling. The feeling is that nothing will ever be like this again, and no accident will ever be this perfect.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This article, story or other document was written by Ran Elfassy as part of the Shooting it RAW podcast.

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