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**The Photograph Taken and Not Taken.
Grant Scott 2017**

“The best photographers know what not to photograph.” Bill Jay

I recently came across a book that I first read a few years ago titled *Photographs Not Taken: A Collection of Photographers Essays* edited by Will Steacy that consists of a curated collection of essays written by photographers about their personal failed attempts to ‘make-a-picture’. Steacy asked each photographer to abandon the conventional tools needed to make a photograph and instead to use only words, to capture an image and its attendant memories. In each essay, the photograph has been stripped down to only the idea or concept behind the image. *Photographs Not Taken* features contributions by photographers such as Roger Ballen, Doug Dubois, Amy Elkins, Jim Goldberg, Emmet Gowin, Tim Hetherington, Todd Hido, Nadav Kander, Ed Kashi, Mary Ellen Mark, Sylvia Plachy, Mark Power and Alec Soth amongst others. It is a serious work, filled with serious photographers. It asks and presents some interesting points from which discussion could lead about the essence of the photographic image and the importance of the role of storytelling from a photographer’s perspective. I recommend it.

Rediscovering this book made me think. Why do we not take images? Why in that fleeting instance do we not press the shutter? Why do we walk away from that moment of capture? And what happens in our thought process that makes us feel that we can and should press the shutter button.

Historically there was an economic consideration in making-a-photograph. Film, processing, contacting and printing cost money which meant that to some the press of the shutter shared an uncomfortable alliance with the ring of the cash register. The creation of an image had to be considered not only from an aesthetic perspective but also from a financial one. An element of the decision-making process that digital capture has removed.

Many photographers still working with analogue treasure that sense of contemplation that the medium brings. The constraints of film enforce a sense of moderation in shutter use. Watching a BBC archive documentary recently in which Larry Burrows spoke of his working practice when covering the Vietnam war, it struck me how he would set off to cover a situation with fifty rolls of 35mm black and white film in one bulging thigh-pocket of his army issue combat trousers, with the opposite empty and ready for the shot film. Those fifty rolls were all that he had and would be all that he needed to tell the stories he was about to encounter. His image-making decision making would be informed by that reality. His images were taken with knowledge and understanding.

The situations Burrows found himself in raise a particularly contentious issue that has faced documentary photographers since they started photographing the theatres of war, whether they be international, national or domestic. How to document these events and the people involved in them with dignity and honesty, whilst also delivering images that many may find shocking. This moral dilemma has led many photographers to not press the shutter, or having done so not to release and show an image shot and face an inevitable and fierce interrogation concerning their motives behind their decision to take the photograph. Is it better to leave the photograph untaken and unseen? Kevin Carter’s 1993 Sudan image of the starving child and hooded vulture immediately comes to my mind in relation to this as does Burhan Ozbilici’s image of a 22-year-old off-duty police officer, having assassinated the Russian ambassador to Turkey from last year.

These photographers decided to not only create these images but also to share them. Many others would have turned away and chosen not to create these photographs, but they both decided to press the shutter. The power of these images cannot be denied, their story telling impact is both

immediate and obvious, however where Carter's image was shot on film with a subject matter that allowed him to take time in its creation, Ozbilici's image was created within a split-second of digital capture. Two very different thought process's informing the creation of two equally important images based on the decision to press a button. The photographs were taken from a point of awareness.

Financial considerations, choice of medium and moral judgements inform our decision-making process when it comes to making, taking or creating a photograph but there is another element of process that I believe is perhaps as important an issue to address. That is the issue of confidence and it is particularly prevalent amongst young photographers. The confidence to approach a situation, person, or a group of people and get close enough to engage both verbally and photographically is something that undoubtedly grows with experience but it also a skill that can develop through practice. I often speak with students and young photographers who have been unable to take the pictures they have seen in the moment but not captured due to a crippling lack of self-confidence. A picture not taken due to an irrational but all too real thought process. Perhaps they should document those moments in words as the photographers have done in Will Staacy's book, as a process of understanding the nature of image capture and their relationship with its storytelling capacity. Certainly, the photographer who consistently finds themselves unable to capture the images they want to will not be a creatively fulfilled image maker. To take a photograph takes confidence.

The decision whether to take a photograph or not remains with the photographer, it is the photographer who presses the shutter. However, that decision is influenced by aesthetic, emotional, political, personal, economic and sometimes even spiritual considerations that are shaped and formed by others. It is that life experience that fundamentally informs our decision as to whether to take a photograph or not. Just like the fisherman who never forgets the 'one that got away' we all as photographers have a memory of the photograph we should have taken. All we can hope for is that the reason why we did not take it remains as valid to us today as it did in the moment we took the decision to walk away.

Grant Scott is the founder/curator of United Nations of Photography, a Senior Lecturer in Editorial and Advertising Photography at the University of Gloucestershire, a working photographer, and the author of Professional Photography: The New Global Landscape Explained (Focal Press 2014) and The Essential Student Guide to Professional Photography (Focal Press 2015). His next book #New Ways of Seeing: The Democratic Language of Photography will be published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2018. Grant is currently making a documentary film titled Do Not Bend: The Photographic Life of Bill Jay www.donotbendfilm.com.

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