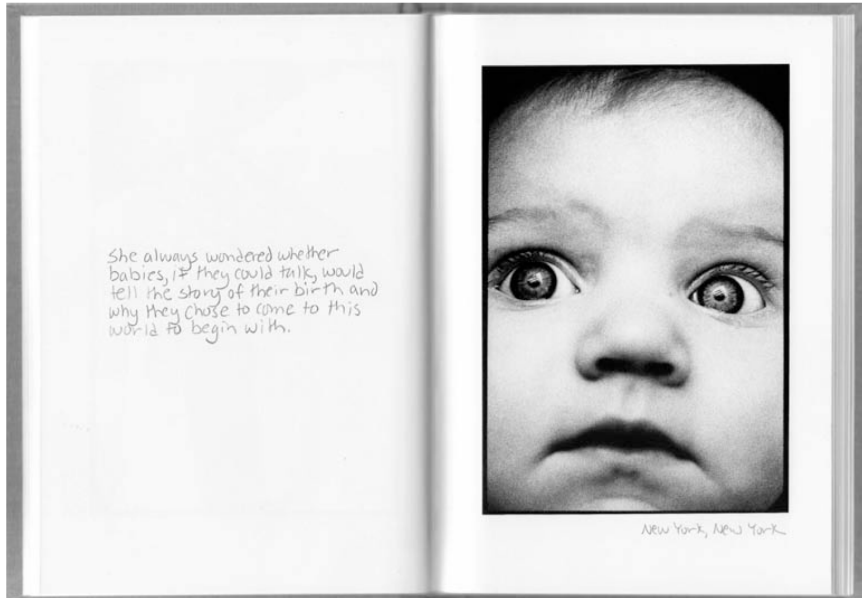


Joanne Dugan

THE PHOTOGRAPHER AS ABECEDARIAN

By Christopher Busa



BOOK SPREAD FROM *MOSTLY TRUE*, PHOTOGRAPHS AND WORDS BY JOANNE DUGAN, 1999 COURTESY ERNDEN FINE ART

HAVE SEEN JOANNE DUGAN'S work evolve from mute, Minimalist, black-and-white photographs of telephone wires—crisply eloquent against the stark, vast sky beyond them—to edifying-to-adults children's books introducing new learners to the letters of the alphabet and the basic numerals of our methods of counting. These fundamental systems are playthings to young students in elementary school, but adults too often forget the immense power of blind systems of organization. Dugan's signature image arises from her mastery of cropping, utilizing the camera frame to intelligently examine familiar subjects from a fresh angle. She can turn the top of the Chrysler building in New York, with its diminishing Art Deco arches, into a soaring medieval shrine simply by eliminating its massive base.

While Dugan's son, Hugo, grew from baby to toddler to preteen, the artist herself went about producing books of photography that referenced his learning curve. Each incorporates language in such ways that her silent pictures begin to talk. She produced two children's books, *ABC/NYC: A Book about Seeing New York City* and *123/NYC: A Counting Book of New York City*, both published by Abrams. She found letters and numbers natural to New York. C stands not for "cow," but for the Chrysler building. The number 4 stands not for four rabbits in the wild, but for four toy sailboats she photographed in a pond in Central Park. Dugan uses the term "vernacular signage" to describe the everyday way we assimilate these complex systems until they become at one with

our thinking and seeing. The letter B might be from the neon letter of a bicycle shop. A subway station could announce that it is the A stop. I wondered if Dugan felt the book was too sophisticated for her son, but she said that, on the contrary, he found many of the letters and numbers by happy accident.

Dugan's first published book, a limited edition artist's book, *To Music*, which is in the library collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the George Eastman House, combines her own photographs with her elliptical text. An L-shaped wall runs away, yet returns to the viewer, and Dugan writes, "Improvisation is the belief in the power of synchronicity." Her utterance was inspired by a poem of Rilke's, "To Music," in which a marble torso appears to breathe. The poem caused her to think about music as a metaphor for living one's life fully aware, and the act of improvisation as recognition of how the experience feels. This book is really about how we see sound. As Oliver Sacks observed in his deft exploration of how deaf people learn to interpret spoken language, *Seeing Voices*, there are occasions when the photograph can substitute for the audio. I asked Dugan if there was truth in what I just said—or were her photographs merely a theme to discuss visual rhythms as musical. She told me that she saw "music as a metaphor for experiencing the world," and, indeed, all her books are metaphoric in this surreal manner, much in the way the narrator of Richard Brautigan's sixties classic, *Trout Fishing in America*,

adopts the persona of the book's very title, becoming a pure idea in place of a person.

Taxi Driver Wisdom (Chronicle Books, 1996) is a collection of her photographs accompanied by actual words uttered by New York City cabdrivers. Risa Mickenberg collected these remarks while confined in the backseats of various taxis on her way to appointments. She simply wrote down what she heard. She knew that Dugan was interested in the pairing of word and image, and she asked Dugan to take photographs to accompany her text. The endpapers of the book show the "Vehicle Operator's License" and photographs of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, suggesting the driver's twin roles of psychiatrist and philosopher in ferrying passengers who, baring their souls, ask their drivers questions like "Why does evil exist?" or "Does jealousy contradict genuine love?" or "Why do bike messengers choose their profession?" One taxi driver answered, "Bike messengers?—they search for death!"

A sequel, *Beauty Parlor Wisdom*, appeared a decade later. Again, Mickenberg collected the wise sayings of people in modern "sweat lodges," places of intimate confinement where strangers share surprising secrets. Hairstylists, manicurists, colorists, shampooers, or henna artists are sought out when their clients plan to marry, move to a new city, or start another career. Women who go to salons tend to seek physical transformation of their old selves. Beside Dugan's photograph of an empty chair in one tacky beauty parlor, its blue plastic cover worn-out and badly cracked, Mickenberg quotes a stylist's remark about "ugly days": "Looking bad doesn't make you invisible. You just look bad."

People come to possess passion and original knowledge via the skills they develop through their daily jobs, and how they pass the time with talk that can be both banal and revelatory. The special circumstances of what they do for a living shapes them over decades, revealing character in the crow's-feet around their eyes and other fissures deepened from thousands of smiles or frowns. When the human face is expressively alive—actually experiencing a spontaneous mood—the muscles invent the exact mask that is routinely as true as the rare instant captured in a *Mona Lisa*.

Dugan believes that place is, in fact, synonymous with the experience where it occurs. Perhaps this is why we say things "take place," emphasizing the location where the event happened. In *Mostly True*, Dugan collects documentary photographs she took in diverse places around the world—a secluded cove in Hawaii, an unmade bed in an empty room in California, two soft-boiled eggs prepared for a couple's breakfast in Italy, a pair of shoes worn by a monk in Provence, France. She combines these images with vignettes that comment on the occasion. Although she is highly informed by photojournalism, she is not a photojournalist. She does start a project as a documentarian, simply looking and recording. The improvisation arises when the reality she is documenting starts to transform, in front of her eyes, by the framing device that is the camera lens. "It goes," she said, "from an I-was-here postcard to a this-is-what-it-felt-like picture."



"B IS FOR BAGEL," FROM *ABC/NYC: A BOOK ABOUT SEEING NEW YORK CITY*
BY JOANNE DUGAN, 2005 COURTESY ERNDEN FINE ART

She is speaking of something mysterious, and maybe we can make this clearer. She arrived last year for an off-season visit to Provincetown, staying in a small cottage along Beach Point, one of twenty-two identical cabins distinguished only by the delightful names of flowers that identify each one individually. They follow the curve of the shoreline and progress randomly through the alphabet from Aster to Zinnia. For an abecedarian like herself, who scoured New York City to teach her son the rudiments of letters and numbers, the name of her temporary habitation may have felt magical.

When I went to visit in the late afternoon, I found her busy in the Aster cottage, where she was creating an installation out of the furniture in the glassed-in porch that faces the water. A pale, Indian-summer sun, hovering at a low slant, gave wan light and less heat, but cast uncanny shadows on every surface of the room. We talked as the light faded further into what the French call the "blue hour" of twilight. She had stationed every chair she found in the cottage in this one room, clustering them informally as if inviting conversation among friends, not absent as ghosts, but quite happy to be present as spiritual guests. Two cameras were in the room, sitting on chairs. I asked her if she had been photographing this installation.

"I had," she said. "It became a setup. It's funny how it expands and contracts. When I walked in, I started by capturing what was there. One thing I felt I had to change was the table, which, proportionally, crowded the room. I started pushing furniture around. Removing the table, I realized there were nine chairs. The whole cottage may only be 350 square feet. I looked at the chairs and saw they were four different shapes, but they all were painted exactly the same color." They were painted the same ethereal blue as the walls, but the chairs distinguished themselves by projecting a searing, glossy glare, while the walls absorbed the atmosphere with the same hue painted in a matte finish. The contrast was subtle, meditative,

like the effect of light filtered through stained glass; the mood was spiritual, ceremonial, and respectful. I understood why blue was the most religious of all colors.

"Lately," Dugan said, "I have been thinking about the power of the collection—how one thing on its own may be interesting, but many together, slightly different from each other, become far more interesting."

Dugan's instinct, in arriving here, was to group the available chairs into social clusters. The sequencing of a book is itself a serial form, moving through time and through spaced moments of contemplation. The artist had made a studio out of her

temporary headquarters. Upon entering this cottage named Aster, Dugan immediately found a way to make the space comfortable as a place where she could do her work. Other guests occupied neighboring cottages. I saw a couple walking the beach with a small child. I saw a man feeding breadcrumbs to a flock of excited, careening seagulls. People, I reflected, are like seagulls in their spacing tendencies. The chosen spacing seems enough to allow privacy, yet also allow being together and sharing a common vista. The sight of Provincetown from Beach Point offered, for me, a rarely seen angle of vision.

The photographer mentioned her awareness that she was, strangely, mirroring her Manhattan experience here: "I was in a small space, with people very nearby, yet there is this effort to create your own separate space within a greater space. At times, I feel completely alone here. Yet when I want to check in with other people, I am able to do that, much as you can live for twenty years in a building in Manhattan and never see or talk to your neighbor, but the minute you want to, they are there. This felt similar. People are very private, yet accessible when you want them to be. They themselves become part of the still life."

In *Mostly True*, one photograph of her son's friend, taken when he was a moon-faced infant, is severely cropped so that his eyes appear at the edges of the image. His expression is one of intense astonishment. She wrote these concluding words when she was pregnant: "She always wondered whether babies, if they could talk, would tell the story of their birth and why they chose to come to this world to begin with."

For the past eight summers, Dugan has been showing her work in Provincetown at Ernden Fine Art. She will again this summer.

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