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The Self-Portrait

The self-portrait is an essential assignment because it brings together so many of the complex notions of a photograph. Students attempt to photograph ideas, feelings, the unknown, the past, or the future. Though the self-portrait assignment usually comes at the beginning of a class, as a way of introduction, I prefer to situate it deeper into the course once students have begun to build trust with one another. Even with omnipresent cell-phone documentation, the act of sharing an honest image of oneself in a classroom setting is challenging. Beyond the technical struggles, it asks the students to be risk-takers, to look inside, and to be fully vulnerable to their subject, to themselves.

1. Write ten nouns that best describe you.
2. Now write ten adjectives.
3. Add ten verbs to the list.

Each word should be a direct reflection of how you feel about yourself at this specific moment. The last few words at the end of each list might become fairly abstract. You may find yourself reaching past the initial ideas and into words that are more fanciful, more honest, and perhaps more problematic. Use this list of words as a way to enter into the making of a photograph, which is quite different from taking a photograph. Remember, be alone with your camera. No one else can click the shutter for you.

I polled former students about their response to this assignment. Here was one answer that bears repeating:

"I had been in an awful, long-term relationship with an emotionally controlling, manipulating son of a bitch. I was not able to find the strength to realize how miserable I was; I was stuck. Your assignment was to make a self-portrait. I grabbed my spool of vintage sewing thread, the one I had always loved for its thick, coarse, yellow density, and made my way to the

studio. Once there, I bound myself in thread, embarrassed, but determined. I tried to express in those photos something that went between being trapped, being helpless, being knowing, powerful, stuck, tangled, engaged.

Later, he called me everything but a whore for showing bare skin to a room full of strangers, berated me for my 'illusion of nudity.' For the first time, I stood up to him and told him that he had no right to control my creativity, my expression, my art. And that broke the spell. I saw what he was and what I had become before him. And then I left him. That assignment, those photos, gave me a hard look at myself, and I haven't been the same since."