

# Curriculum

## A List of Favorite Anythings

by Justine Kurland

Justine Kurland is a photographer of the road. Since the early 2000s, she has regularly crisscrossed the United States, frequently with her young son in tow, making pictures of traveling hippies, train hoppers, mothers and their children, car mechanics, and many others seeking their personal utopias. Her photographs combine romantic vision with a documentary sensibility, exposing both the charm and difficulties of an itinerant life. Kurland lives in New York City with her son, and teaches at Parsons, the New School; the International Center of Photography; and Pratt University. Her forthcoming monograph, *Highway Kind*, will be published by Aperture in 2016.

The works in this compendium follow one another as a stream of consciousness, with each successive selection invoked by the preceding one. My curriculum begins with love, moves to tears, uncovers desires, mediates consciousness, projects and interprets, and finally dissolves into blue. The connections are abstract and idiosyncratic, but they follow a path of associative logic.

### Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

I return to this book again and again the same way my son, when he was little, would insist I read *Goodnight Moon* every night before bedtime—suspended in the simple pleasure of familiarity. Or maybe it's related to my son in another way: the promise that at my death, he will return my love with interest paid. "You see," I tell my students, "Barthes 'engendered' his own mother." Regardless, what remains of value—what seems true to me—is Barthes's emphasis on the connection between love and photography: "I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body." For Barthes, extreme love is what makes photography possible. Sometimes, in studying photography, it's easy to lose sight of that initial love.

### Andrea Fraser, "Why Fred Sandback Makes Me Cry," from *Dia Foundation's Artists on Artists Lecture Series*, 2005

As a follow-up to Barthes's imperative that one must animate a work of art through emotion, Andrea Fraser's tears negotiate the impasse between art and the institutions that support it. I have seen teachers wrench tears from their students through the brute force of their authority—but that's not what Fraser is talking about here. She offers an alternative—the potential for art to open up a space for the viewer *within* the institution, to make enough room for us to have our own responses. She writes, "I don't believe art can exist outside the field of art, but I also don't believe that art can exist within the field of art. For me, art is an impossibility. And if art is impossible, then artists are impossible, and I myself am impossible. To the extent that I exist, I can only exist as a compromise, a travesty, a fiction, a fraud."

### Moyra Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, 2003

Like Fraser, Moyra Davey addresses the conflicted and reciprocal relation an artist has with the canon. Davey's book asserts that the cyclical nature of making—reading to write and writing to read (with its fraught balance between duty and pleasure)—is a generative process. "The idea of a book choosing the reader has to do with a permission granted. A book gives permission when it uncovers a want or a need... a book can become a sort of uncanny mirror held up to the reader, one that concretizes a desire in the process of becoming."

### Lisa Tan, *Waves*, 2014–15

The book that chose Lisa Tan is Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*. Woolf's experimental prose is both subject matter and guide for a film that contemplates its own condition. In several scenes, we are positioned in front of the artist's computer screen as she drafts a script, reads aloud, or navigates Google Cultural Institute maps while reflecting on technology and geography as a way to locate her own displaced consciousness. "With waves on my mind, I want to hold hands with what she says."

### Allen Ginsberg, "Wichita Vortex Sutra," 1966

Tan's work draws attention to the ways in which perception is variously mediated. Similarly, Allen Ginsberg's poem distinguishes three separate iterations of the American landscape on a road trip through Kansas: the first is the roadside signage as seen outside the car windshield (found), the second is the broadcast voice from the car radio giving the news of the Vietnam War (programmed), and the last is Ginsberg's own mantra sung from inside the car (projected): "I lift my voice aloud, make mantra of American language now."

### Albert Ayler, "Ghosts," 1964

Because the U.S. was founded upon a set of ideals, our identity as Americans is something invented rather than inherited. The New World was imagined as a kind of romantic dream of heaven on earth, with the potential for utopic innocence. Americans repeatedly declare the loss of our innocence, as though historical or contemporary

atrocities (including those we commit) are merely the reverberations of original sin. To evoke heaven is also to conjure hell. The musician Marc Ribot first turned me on to Albert Ayler's recording "Ghosts," from the album *Love Cry*. He described it as follows: "Ayler stays on the melody, unpacking it, wrestling with it, until finally it gives up its ghost. And you hear the country melody as it should be played: twisted by the horror of our actual history."

### Michael Schmidt, *U-ni-ty*, 1996

Schmidt's book slowly parses Germany's painful twentieth-century history, starting with the Nazi regime and continuing through reunification. The photographs are printed in heavy gelatinous grays, like the tar buildup inside a smoker's lungs. Schmidt's subject matter (concrete buildings, tape that once held up a sign, a kitchen table) is juxtaposed with appropriated images (a politician, a still from *Triumph of the Will*, a blueprint of a gas chamber). The final sequence in the book shows casual portraits of people we don't know: citizenry scarred by Germany's past. Schmidt writes, "I need my images as confirmation of that which I have experienced, and, to be sure, in a different form from that in which I experienced it."

### Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993

*Blue* chronicles Jarman's last days, the loss of his vision and other AIDS-related complications. A voice narrates over a solid blue screen, vacillating between angry despair in the face of death and a hallucinatory reflection rejoicing in the color blue: "In the pandemonium of image I present you with the universal blue. Blue, an open door to soul, an infinite possibility becoming tangible."

Opposite, clockwise from top left: cover of Moyra Davey, *The Problem of Reading* (Los Angeles: Documents Books, 2003); Fred Sandback, *No. 87* (from 133 proposals for the Heiner Friedrich Gallery), 1969; cover of Albert Ayler's record *Love Cry*, 1968; Michael Schmidt, cover of *U-ni-ty* (Zurich: Scalo, 1996); Jonas Dahlberg, *Lisa Tan shooting Waves*, Algarve, 2013; Howard Sooley, *Derek Jarman*, 1991



Clockwise from top left: Davey; Courtesy Murray Guy Gallery, New York; Sandback; © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y., and Fred Sandback Archive; Schmidt; Courtesy Nordenhake, Berlin and Stockholm; Tan; © Jonas Dahlberg and courtesy Lisa Tan; Jarman; © Howard Spoolley

