

Jonas Bendiksen: Curiosity in Practice

2. Ideas & Storytelling

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Introduction

“In my experience, what everyone struggles with is the ideas. Figuring out what you are actually interested in; that’s what everyone struggles with. Me too.”

During this lesson, Bendiksen touches upon some of the common struggles that photographers face: how do you discover what are you truly interested in? He explains that often you can find yourself doing what is expected of you, or what you feel you should be doing versus what you are truly intrigued by and passionate about. He goes on to reflect upon his early curiosities and how much of his inspiration comes from art forms outside of photography, citing Ryszard Kapuściński’s book *Imperium* as a key influence.

An Uzbek border patrol surveys one of the valley's seven territorial enclaves. Ferghana Valley. Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border. 2002



Curiosity

“It’s that journey of discovery, that’s what it’s all about for me. And that’s what will hopefully always keep me interested in photography because I will never run out of things to be excited about or curious about out there in this crazy, chaotic world we are living in.”

For Bendiksen, his projects always start with a series of questions: what does this story look like from another perspective? Who does this issue affect? Where does this idea lead? He cites maintaining his curiosity as one of the most important elements of his practice, allowing him to step outside his comfort zone and expand his knowledge, while opening doors to new experiences and points of view.

Curiosity is therefore a key tool in developing ideas for photographic projects. Spending time asking questions and immersing yourself in new ideas is the first step to understanding what it is that interests you and, in turn, which subjects you might choose to explore in your work.



From the project Satellites.
A priest gives his blessings
before a christening.
Transdniester. Moldova. 2004.

How to Generate Good Ideas

“A good idea is one that gets you out of bed and into the street.”

The amount of images being produced around the world can sometimes feel overwhelming. “An ever-growing mountain of photographs” are captured every day, so why become a photographer and add to the pile? To Bendiksen, although there are many well composed images in circulation, what is lacking are good ideas. Projects with “ideas perfectly expressed or stories poignantly told” are less easy to come by. These types of projects, that pose interesting questions, that make their audience feel something, can be what makes the difference between a good photographer and a great photographer. This is why staying true to your own interests and passions is of such importance when building a photography career.

“The people who will inherit photography are not necessarily the people who are capable of taking the most brilliant composition or taking the ‘best picture’, whatever that means. It’s the people who come up with the best ideas or are really using photography to ask the most interesting questions.”

So how do you generate good ideas? How do you find out what you are interested in? For Bendiksen, he starts by reading: absorbing anything that stimulates his interest, whether it be from a newspaper, book, or online. Often, a small statistic has been the spark that ignited his most successful projects.

“That number makes me think, oh, wow, what does that number actually mean on the ground... What does that actually look like?...”

What Bendiksen chooses *not* to do when developing ideas is look at other photographers' work. He finds in these early stages, when feeling insecure or stuck, that looking at others images can actually exacerbate these feelings. Choosing to look outside the medium for inspiration can therefore be a valuable process which also leads to innovative ideas.

Some examples of alternative sources of inspiration include: watching films or theatrical productions, going for walks and discovering new areas, meeting new people, learning about scientific or anthropological discoveries, or listening to music. A helpful exercise can be to take note of times when you have felt particularly inspired, in order to help you recognise what to do when you are at a loss for ideas in the future.

“I’ve realized with the years that I need all these other inputs and I would call them equal influences in me”

From the project Satellites.
Steel mill. Transdnierster.
Moldova. 2004.





Near the vilage of Muri,
tibetan nomad A Hen Ru rides
his horse near their camp.
Xinghai. China. 2009.

Outcomes

“As long as you figure out what you’re interested in, then all the photography bits usually fall into place”¹

Bendiksen never plans the visual outcome of a project before he embarks on it. In this lesson, he stresses that the format and visual language of your photographs should be a natural result of the topic you are exploring. You should always start with the ideas first. If you begin by exploring what you are interested in then the visual elements will fall into place as you continue. For example, in his project and book *The Places We Live*, Bendiksen’s visual approach was born of an effort to represent what normality looks like to his subjects. It was only when he was on the ground photographing, feeling dissatisfied with his images, that he realised instead that panoramas depicting the four walls of each of their homes with accompanying audio would be the best and most immersive way to communicate his ideas to his audience.

It is therefore helpful to remain patient and leave yourself open to your visual execution changing over the course of a project. It may be that you have a very fixed idea of what you want to achieve from the outset, but that as you learn more about your subject matter this no longer feels appropriate and you choose to explore different technologies, compositions, or colour palettes. It might also be that your project has a specific end goal, such as an exhibition, meaning that you need to think about your audience’s needs and the best way to visually communicate with them.

¹ *Lens Culture: Photography and Curiosity: What Inspires a Magnum Photographer*

Flowers in a meadow in front of the Pale di San Martino, Trentino, Italy. 2009.





Babushka "Tanya," an elderly ethnic Russian woman, heads back to her bombed out apartment building after walking her dog. Sukhum. Abkhazia. Georgia. 2005.

Men moving the community mosque that was threatened by river erosion. Kurigram District. Bangladesh. 2010.



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