

A conversation between Adeola Enigbokan and Randal Wilcox, recorded at the home of Randal Wilcox in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York, December 2009.

A: Sorry, I'm really bad at recording things.

R: ...Al used to record a lot of his conversations.

A: Yeah, I think it's really important.

R: You know, Andy Warhol did that too. He would go to these dinners and take a tape recorder and just record dinner conversations.

A: I think it's a great idea! I've been carrying [my recorder] around with me and not using enough. They're really cheap, and it's easy to just plop it into your computer—

R: And download it, yeah.

MEETING AND BECOMING FRIENDS

A: So my first question is: How did you and Alvin meet?

R: Well, it was in the 1990's, I guess mid or late 1990s, and I was hanging out with my friend Paul. We were bored one day, and we were in the East Village, and Paul said, 'Do you want to meet my friend Al? He's a photographer.' So we went up to his apartment... Now, you know, everyone in New York [is] either an artist, or photographer, or filmmaker, or [an] actor, whatever: You see their work and that's kind of that. But then I saw his work and I was kind of amazed by it—not only the quality but just there was so much of it. He lived in a 2 or 3 bedroom walk-up apartment and it was mess. He was pack rat. He didn't throw anything away; there were just photographs everywhere. In the bookcase there were all of these slides and prints and he had all of these photographs on the wall. He just kept pulling out more and more of these photographs. He mentioned the piers to me, which I had never really heard of.

So then we became friends, and one day I said, 'You know, I want to help you to try and get this work shown.' He had tried to get his work shown but a lot of people just weren't interested in it. He got a lot of really hostile responses.

ALVIN BALTROP'S AESTHETIC

R: ...It just seems that art—well not art, but working within the confines of the art world—is a very limited way to actually make work that addresses certain issues that actually affect people.

A: Right. The work has to be bite-sized, and easy to open, easy to consume. That's something it seems that Al's images kind of defy. Maybe this is why his work can be disturbing: whatever he's serving is not bite-sized, not easily consumable.

R: The funny thing about his photographs is that his main talent—he had this very refined aesthetic sensibility—is that aesthetic ability did not eclipse what he was trying to show you. The photograph is very formally composed, but it doesn't hide the truth of what he's showing you.

For example, he has all these photographs of corpses pulled out of the Hudson River, which are very gruesome, but beautiful[ly composed] at the same time.

A: So are you saying that often [an artist's] aesthetic sensibility can actually cloud the truth of a situation or image?

R: Well, yeah. I was talking to [a colleague] about Al's work, and she mentioned the images of Joel Peter Witkin. Now Joel Peter Witkin will do all of these photographs with deformed people and he'll add scratches on the negatives. He's doing all this dark room work to make something grotesque into something that's aesthetically appealing. Al's pier photographs [on the other hand] are just him shooting spontaneous action. They're documentary, but then you rarely see documentary work that is that [formally, compositionally] ordered.

A: Would you call Al's work "documentary?"

R: Well... yes and no. I mean the pier photographs were tied into Al's life. He basically changed the way he lived so he could document the piers. He was working as a cab driver in the 70s and then he stopped working as a cab driver and bought a van. He began working as a mover in order to support his career as a photographer. He would put a lot of his food and clothes in the van, and sometimes pack alcohol and sometimes pot, and he would stay at the piers for up to three days [at a time].

A: I guess based on the images I've seen, I don't see his work as simply documentary in the traditional sense.

R: Right, because documentary images are just kind of like "information."

A: Exactly—

R: But Al's pictures are more than that.

AL BALTROP'S PHOTOGRAPHS TELL THE HISTORY AND THE FUTURE OF NEW YORK

R: ...[T]he thing about Al's pier photographs is that if they were just photos of empty buildings, people would show them, but then you have the sex that goes into it, and people get freaked out.

A: Right. So for each venue Al's work would have to be carefully edited, to appeal to a particular audience. The kinds of galleries that are interested in the sex, or gay subject matter, might not care to show his architectural photos, or his photos documenting everyday New York of the time.

R: But I want to have all his photographs shown, in their entirety. A lot of people just want to see photograph of men with their pants around their ankles, and that's not what the piers were about. It wasn't what he [solely] photographed, or [solely] what he talked about.

A: Yeah, I think one of the walls this work is running into is just that: people don't want to deal with what the piers really were.

R: Right.

A: [Referring to "Peeps," an exhibit at the James Gallery of City University of New York, Summer-Fall 2009, which featured Baltrop's pier photographs] I know it was a show about sex and pornography in the city, but what I saw in Al's photographs was this life of New York, this life in the city. I thought, how was this possible? Is this life still possible now in today's New York? The photographs tell you about the transformation of New York. You literally see what this city used to be—

R: You see it falling apart...

A: You see, in these ruins, what the city used to be. You see the sailors' ghosts. You see the great Port of New York. I am extremely interested in this. Douglas Crimp framed his discussion of Al's photographs in terms of his own experience of the sailors, dockworkers, and bars of the Port of New Orleans. I was recently in Istanbul, which is a huge port city, staying with a friend who works in shipping, which is one of the biggest industries in Istanbul. My friend described wanting to visit New York so badly, and then finally visiting and being disappointed. He described New York as this great animal on its knees. I disagreed, saying I feel like New York is still alive. But he said 'I'll tell you what happened to New York.' It's not just the condos and the quality of life laws, he said. It's the docks. Great cities have ships that come in.

Most of the goods in the world are moved by ship. There's something about the world that develops in the dock neighborhoods of cities that have ships coming in, with cargo and people from all over the world. My friend was talking about spaces like sailor bars—and not just the fluidity of sexuality one can find in such places. There is just something about the sense of aliveness and possibility that comes from living in cities that have ports.

I was thinking about this in relation to Al's work. It struck me that his work shows the life that is growing in the decay of a great port city. His work doesn't just show what was happening [in the 70s and 80s]. It also shows, in the buildings half-collapsed and falling apart, what the city used to be. Those images also show, in that very decay, in the way the building are sagging, what is going to come next. I can see the Chelsea Piers on the way. His images show these moments 'in between'—literally people are living the possibilities right there, in the decay. Seeing these pictures in their entirety allows you feel something really strong about the city—what it was and what it could be.

R: It also points to fact that the city was poor then. It's unimaginable today, that amount of real estate being left undeveloped, to rot. I had a conversation with this artist, Ivan Galietti and he has a theory that the piers were destroyed because of fears about the spread of AIDS.

A: The city literally tore down the piers?

R: Al has photographs of the piers being blown up.

A: That is so amazing! I'm just glad someone thought it was important to document this time and place.

R: Well actually, Al was afraid of the piers, but his girlfriend Alice told him, 'you have to keep documenting this place, because it's not going to be around for long and no one is going to believe this existed.' I've seen other photographers' photographs of the piers and they just focus on sex. They don't show the entire thing. I mean there were homeless people there. There were runaway kids there. A lot of people were murdered there. Al said at one point the piers were almost entirely overrun with kids.

A: Homeless kids?

R: [Also] Kids who were kicked out of their homes because they were gay... Some people make the piers seem like they were this kind of carnal Disneyland, but from the stories Al told me, they were this scary, tragic place.