BEACH BUZZ

February – March 2002
Volume 3, Number 1
a publication of B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation and its Chapters *"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"*
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Jock Sturges: Photographer and Naturist

Working largely with naturist subjects, Jock Sturges' work often presents images of children, adolescents, and, not infrequently, their mothers, who are casually and unselfconsciously nude in their daily lives. This has led to prosecution – and persecution – by the "not-so-Christian religious right" – to use his own term. In 1990, the FBI raided his San Francisco studio and seized his work; many of his subjects were contacted and interviewed, in an attempt to substantiate charges of child pornography. Due to the unwavering support of his subjects and of the artistic community, a federal grand jury refused to bring in an indictment.

Yet persecution by the radical right still persists, in local legal actions and the picketing of bookstores. Unfortunately, most of those on the picket lines have not even taken the trouble to look at the pictures. For, to the unbiased viewer, Jock Sturges' work offers both a magnificent tribute to the innate beauty of the human form and an ongoing documentation of lifestyles in which nudity is simply an unremarkable and natural part of life within family and community. In a world of transient images and constant technological innovations, using essentially the same techniques used by Ansel Adams to produce his renowned landscape photography – large format camera and gelatin silver film – he offers us a timeless landscape of the soul – of himself, and of his collaborators: his subjects. His respect for his subjects is clearly manifest in his work, and in his unique refusal to use blanket releases, instead requesting their permission for every use of their images.

Collections of Jock Sturges' photography, including *The Last Days of Summer*, *Radiant Identities*, *Jock Sturges* and *Jock Sturges: New Work 1996-2000* are available at local bookstores or from on-line booksellers.

In October 2001, Jock Sturges participated in a conversation with Michael Kush and Shirley Mason of B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation.

Michael Kush: *My familiarity with your work has been exclusively through your published collections. Aside from some early photographs of textile beach goers – if I may use that term – in* The Last Days of Summer, *your subjects are mostly naturists, aren't they?*

Jock Sturges: Yes and no. The European context in which I work is naturist. So when I'm working in Europe I'm usually working in a naturist

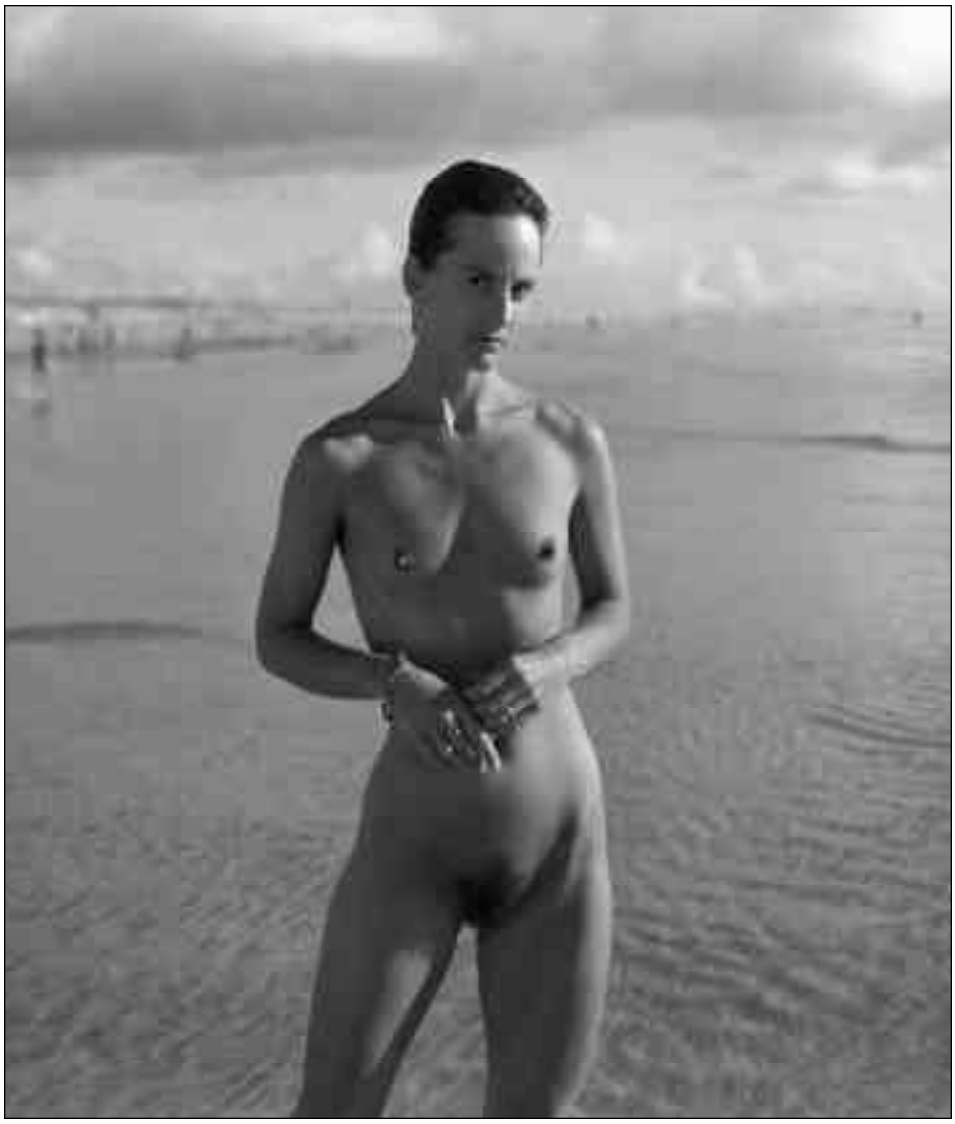
community. In the States I'm photographing people who, as a manifestation of their lifestyle, often don't wear clothes. But they're really more counter-culture than naturist. In fact, if you mention the word naturist or nudist to them, they'll sort of give you a blank stare. They don't know what that means. They've been brought up absent shame in alternative lifestyle communities in northern California and southern Oregon, and that's just who they are.

MK: *I was using naturist in a somewhat broader context. I guess the point I'm trying to make is that when the people in your photographs are nude, you aren't going in and undressing them just to take your photographs.*

JS: Right. I'm photographing people who are naked as a result of their own choices and their own lifestyles. And I'm usually not wearing any clothes when I'm shooting as well. A long time ago when I was a young college student with my libido firmly in charge, I did that kind of photography where I'd have people take their clothes off for me. And, you know, the work was just more "tits and ass" pictures. The world didn't need them, and I didn't find anything about them that was particularly interesting. And so I stopped, and it wasn't until I happened accidentally into a context where people didn't care about clothes, and I discovered the quite stunning absence of shame, that I began once again to photograph the figure.

MK: *And you've said that you don't usually pose people*.

JS: I try not to pose people at all. To begin with, I tell people with whom I'm working for the first time that it'll be three years before I make a good picture of them. It takes that long for them to get to know me, and for me to get to know them. The first year people will tend to stand there and not know what to do, and then after a while they'll come to realize that the best pictures are something they were doing completely on their own. So gradually they relax, and eventually they don't pose at all. And then I get my best photographs; I just say: "Don't move", when I see something I like...at the end of weeks, with some of them. One of the things that's always puzzled me about the photography in European naturist publications – and there certainly are more of them there than there are here – is that they still constantly present nudes of women in a really outmoded, dated aesthetic – the arms behind the head in the sunset and the whole thing. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. The irony is that people are so beautiful if you simply let them alone and let them be themselves.



MK: *So you don't think you would have gravitated toward nude photography if you hadn't encountered these particular people?*

JS: Almost certainly not. My work has always led me. There's this phenomenon that happens in photography when you do a lot of film: there's always one negative that you want to print first, and that's pretty much the subconscious speaking out loud. The subconscious voice is not an easy thing to apprehend, so when it speaks clearly, one is wise to follow. And that's what happened to me. A single nude done in the context of a lot of more conventional work I was doing in northern California changed everything – one piece of film. When I got back to the east coast and developed that film, that one negative was so intriguing to me that that started everything for me, that one photograph.

MK: *You mention the subconscious. I imagine a lot of people try to psychoanalyze you from your images. I suspect they usually wind up psychoanalyzing themselves when they do that. Do you agree?*

JS: Well, my work is very much a Rorschach, and I do get all manner of different reaction to it. It's a very neutral body of work, and there really isn't anything happening in my pictures. When people find them sexually very charged,

then I think you're quite right, it's evidence of mindsets and problems that the people doing the perceiving have, as opposed to what's in my pictures. I get asked all manner of questions, but I understand quite well the psychology of the art of my work, and why what fascinates me fascinates me – it's not a difficult equation.

MK: *I wasn't going to ask you why you've chosen your particular themes, since that's a personal thing, and should probably be apparent to some degree through viewing your work.*

JS: A viewer of my work isn't necessarily going to know that I was from an all male family – all boys, that my mother was androgynous at best, that I had four brothers, and went to all-boys boarding schools and an all-boys summer camp from very early in my life. I went from that to the Navy to stay out of Viet Nam, so I didn't really meet women and girls until I was in my early twenties. And when I did, I said, "Hallelujah, this is a better flavor", and never looked back. It was lonely enough, having passed that much of my life absent the company of women, that I've been very much fascinated ever since, and that fascination has never waned. If anything differs between me and most men who are fascinated, I'd hope that it would be that I've tried to make the fascination a responsible one. That's why I work with a very limited number of people for a very long amount of time – very much in their lives – on work of significance to them and to me both.

Shirley Mason: *I'm curious, how old were you when you started taking pictures?*

JS: I don't remember when I didn't take pictures. I've been told I was using my first camera at four or five. But I don't remember; I just remember always having cameras. And because I was from a family that really didn't have very much interest in kids – We all got sent off to boarding schools and summer camps at the earliest possible ages – from the age of eight I don't think I was ever home for more than a week at a time – I started photographing my friends, because in those schools and camps, at the end of the summer or the end of the school year, everybody would leave, and many wouldn't come back, and you wouldn't see them again. Because I seem to have had an aesthetic engine in my head from the very beginning – for whatever reason (as a boy I was totally infatuated with Grace Kelly...explain that to me) – I tended to like photographing the boys that were the most beautiful, and boys can be very beautiful. So when I finally discovered women, it was very often the androgynous that most fascinated me, so in some sense the work ended up somewhere halfway between those two worlds.

MK: *I guess, as a naturist, I think that I can view your work a little bit differently than a lot of Americans who unfortunately have that automatic association of nudity with sex.*

> ***Well, my work is very much a Rorschach, and I do get all manner of different reaction to it. It's a very neutral body of work.***

JS: Recently one of my subjects, a very bright young woman, in an essay that she submitted as part of her college application, wrote that Americans make the mistake of conflating nudity with sexuality. In fact, as you're a naturist, as am I, you know that there's nothing less sexual than a bunch of people standing around with no clothes on. It's something that people who haven't been there, who haven't been in that context, just don't understand. And it's sad, because they're operating with an overlaid matrix of shame in their heads that constricts them and restricts them in ways they don't even understand. It really is very sad for them. We both understand that naturism has an uneasy place in this modern world, and it's a shame, because anyone who's experienced it understands very quickly how much richer we are when we find ourselves absent shame. And how much better you know people when all civilized clues are edited out...status symbols and fancy clothes and designer this-and-that...and you just stand there with your soul and connect with people in a real way. It's the best thing that we do.

MK: *So you still have some hope that an educational effort aimed at the public may change some of these attitudes that they have?*

JS: Well, I think we're making progress, because my work, my books, thirty or forty years ago, wouldn't have been possible. I think we are growing up, very slowly. I think the European model is one that is gradually filtering into the American consciousness. Repressiveness and conservative thought, especially in the not-so-Christian conservative right wing in recent years, is something that happens cyclically, and right now we're actually at a pretty low point in that cycle. The dismemberment of the Clinton presidency, for completely irrelevant reasons, was really a very ugly political mechanization. One does get discouraged. I certainly have thought of moving to Europe on occasion, but I'm a good American, I'm damned if I'll be chased out.

MK: *At least in South Florida, your books are readily available in the bookstores, and prominently displayed in the photography section. Do you still find there are any parts of the country where your books aren't stocked?*

JS: I doubt it, because they sell too well. And it's frankly a matter of money when it comes down to it. Tennessee, I think, won a small victory in getting Barnes and Noble to agree to put them in plastic. Ironically, that's in a state where I think it's still legal to marry a thirteen year old, if you have her parents' permission. But apart from that, no, as far as I know, they're saleable everywhere. You realize that what happened to me four or five years ago when bookstores were being picketed, really has nothing to do with morality. The National Organization for Women had sometime earlier brought a suit against Randall Terry and Operation Rescue using RICOH statutes – statutes than in law were designed to go after organized crime – a very novel application of legal thinking. Terry immediately settled his case out of court for something in excess of two-thirds of a million dollars, and, I think, in the process I suspect was constrained from ever pronouncing the word "abortion" in public again. Within a very short while after that, he came after the

arts, because he was deprived of a way to rouse the rabble and make a living. And so, he needed something to replace that with. Suddenly, abortion was no longer a problem, and if he had truly been the moral soldier he claimed to be he would never have let the government or the laws deflect his moral rectitude. But it was never a case of morality, not with abortion, and not with the arts. It was just a question of raising money.

SM: *When you were experiencing these problems with Tennessee, I believe you also had problems in other states, like in Alabama....*

JS: Actually, there were grand juries in six states. It cost my wife and I all the money we'd saved for her medical school, over a hundred thousand dollars. It wiped us out. And there's no organization out there to help you as an artist. You do it yourself, and if you can't afford it, they basically wrap you up.

SM: *What about the ACLU?*

JS: The ACLU is a wonderful organization, but for the most part all they have the ability to do is to file an amicus brief for you, and also to point you toward a good lawyer in the area. They're very useful that way. But they don't have any money to help people out financially or to represent them. Now, after the fact, after the cases have been thrown out, many large law firms have been very interested in helping me sue the government. But I didn't want to get invested in that process, because frankly, such legal efforts typically take 10 to 12 years, and you spend so much time with it, that the government ends up defining you. As I believe that they don't deserve to define anyone, let alone me, I just walked away from it.

SM: *Did you find any kind of a thread or an organized effort when the radical right was trying to shut you down?*

JS: You know, they weren't trying to shut me down, because if they had been, they would have done it differently. They went after Barnes & Noble and Border's. Why those two chains and not all the other stores, the independent stores who have little or no legal budget and would have had a far harder time resisting the incursions that picketing would create for them? Because those two chains get national "ink". What these people wanted was publicity, so they would get more good people to send in their wrinkled two-dollar bills to support the good reverend's habits. It really had nothing to do with stopping me; it had everything to do with manipulating the press. So I never felt that they really understood what I was doing. When I asked a few of them about what they thought of the pictures in my books, they'd say things like, time and again: "Well, we've never actually seen them, but the reverend says....". And that's so profoundly un-American, frankly, that it's amusing. So I never felt that it had anything to do with the work itself.

MK: *Since you've lived in both American and Europe, I wanted to ask you if there are any comparable groups in any European countries that have attacked works such as yours?*

JS: The only problem I've ever had in Europe with my work happened during a show in 1991 in Amsterdam. We got very good reviews from all the papers, except one, the biggest paper in the Netherlands. We got a nice review from them, except in the last paragraphs they raked the gallery over the coals for having mentioned in the press release that I was in the process of having trouble with the American authorities. The reviewer refused to believe that this could possibly be true, and he thought that it was scurrilous that a gallery would invent such things to get people in to see pictures. So, we had to take some clippings in to show the guy that in fact it was true. No, the Europeans are a lot more grown-up than we are, about the body, about the physical self. Now, the irony is that the people in this country who militate against naturists – the moralizers, who want everyone to be ashamed of their bodies, to cover things up, who don't want abortions, who don't want condoms advertised on television – they get the opposite of what they think they want. Because, as soon as you give value to the concept of shame in a social system, people don't tell when they've been aggressed against, because they're so ashamed. In a social system such as the Netherlands, which has very liberal laws compared to the American norm, where sex education starts at age six, instead of having Sodom and Gomorrah on your hands, you have a statistic such as, out of a thousand Dutch seventeen-year-old girls, ten have been pregnant...in the States, the number is one hundred – one thousand percent more. And yet we're far more "moral". So you see how it works. It's always been my feeling that whenever anyone points a trembling hand at your morality and objects to it, if you follow that hand back, you're going to find some very wooly thinking going on in the head behind it. It's not a new phenomenon.

MK: *Your most recent book has a few color photographs. Is this something you've started recently?*

JS: No, I've been doing the color work for about ten years. And I finally published some, because I was hoping that in seeing them,

people would understand the tonalities in the black-and-white pictures a little differently, because I work in very late evening light. The colors one is presented with really almost exceed the imagination. The first time I spent an evening on this beach in France, year ago, I said to myself: "Impressionism – I get it"! The light was extraordinary; I'd never really seen anything like it. So I wanted to convey some sense of just how wonderful that French light was. I've worked on both coasts of the United States, and frankly the illuminations there are very different. They have beauties all their own, but there's something that happens in France that, for whatever reason, is very special for me. So that's why I published the color pictures.

MK: *What about the future? Where is your work going from here?*

JS: My grand ambition – and it's a tough one, since the 8 x 10 camera I work with weighs about 65 pounds, is to get to another generation: the children of the children of the children with which I began. I basically make family pictures, but with a fine art technique and sensibility. And I make them with people, not of people. I really feel that the first owners of my photographs should be the people in them. There are attitudes in places like New York: photographers think that they're more important than their subjects, and I'm not interested in that kind of thinking at all. I'm never more important than my subjects; I don't exist without them. And I photograph just a tiny fraction of who and what they are. So, my work is really about my profound respect and affection for the people I've depicted, and my long-term commitment to them. I just photographed a young woman named Christina who's been in my work since she was about four, on the beach in northern California, in a beautiful little alcove. She's four months pregnant and twenty-four years old now. She so wanted me to photography this pregnancy – it's her first. I had tears in my eyes as I made those pictures; they meant so much to us both. ☆