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Blank, Gil, and Lundin, Ulf. "Pictures of a Family: Gil Blank and Ulf Lundin in Conversation", *Influence*, Issue 1 (2003): 92 – 111.

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Pictures of a Family

When we first met we were standing shoulder to shoulder against the gable of Nolby Elementary School. A few meters in front of us, his older brother and some of his friends stood lined up like a firing squad swinging sharpened sticks with freshly stolen apples stuck on them. The apples were slung at us with considerable speed, but we were never hit. Standing there next to him, I could feel his body flinch each time an apple smashed against the pale yellow wall behind us.

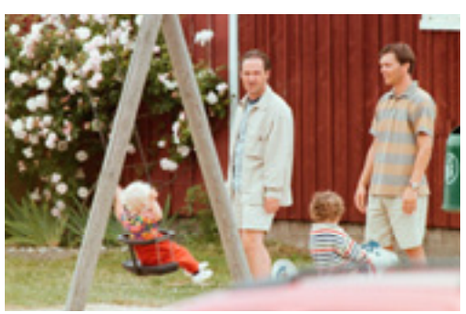
We lived in the same neighborhood, and that fall we became friends. He was a class ahead of me and was by far the bolder of the two of us. He was always the one to take the first step and I was the one who followed. He always chose a higher point to jump from. He had sex before I did, and when I was thinking about buying a moped he had already sold his. He still lives in the town were we grew up and now he has a wife, two sons, a home in a terraced house and a steady job. The security of his life appalls and attracts me at the same time. It is difficult to point a finger at the choices (if we made any) that have determined our present lives.

LUNDIN, Ulf
Ulf Lundin is a Swedish artist who was born in 1965. He studied at The School of Photography and Film at Gothenburg University. In addition to photography, over the last several years he has been working on video and installations. He has had numerous solo exhibitions in Sweden and Europe at venues including the Galleri Magnus Karlsson in Stockholm, The Photographers' Gallery in London, Galleri Hippolyte in Helsinki, and Fotogalleriet in Oslo. He lives in Stockholm with his wife and newborn child.

(pp. 92–111) **LUNDIN, Ulf**
Pictures of a Family, 1996. C-print, © Ulf Lundin. Courtesy Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm.

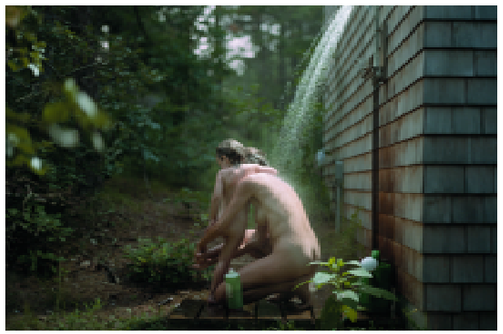
I have spied on him and his family for a year now and secretly photographed them. There are over a hundred rolls of film in my archives. We have made a contract in which they have given me permission to spy on them. In other words, they know that I'm there but they don't know when.

ULF LUNDIN When I started to think about this project I had finished my bachelor studies at the University of Gothenburg about a year before. My plan was to make my living as a freelance photographer. I didn't do very well economically, and I didn't find the job very satisfying. I lived alone in a one-room apartment and started to think about why things had turned out as they had. That's a very common thought, I guess. I started to compare myself to my friend and felt that I could have been in his position and he could have been in mine. As I say in the text, it's very difficult to point a finger at the choices that determined our present lives. So the man in the family works in some sense as an alter ego for me in this project. Maybe he could live my life very well, just as I could live his. I contacted him partly because he had the most stable life among my old friends, and partly because I like and respect his family. For me it's important that he is who he is, but in another way it's not important. I'm not trying to tell the true story about him and his family. I'm not naming them or the city they live in. The project is more about my relationship to their lifestyle. First we agreed to a one-month trial, and then we wrote a contract for another eleven months. It's important to stress that I didn't want his life completely but I did envy parts of it. I've heard all kinds of interpretations of the project. I think it depends on your point of view. Some people think that I have taken the role as the interesting artist looking at the family's dull, bourgeois life, and some think that I'm a pathetic person who wants to be in the man's clothes.



GIL BLANK The feeling of frustrated desire permeates the whole series. But that ambiguity you constantly infuse into it is, I think, so vital: as you said, you don't show too many explicit references to their direct identities, and the vignettes you show are rarely so obviously endearing, or what people might dream up on their own if left to create a "perfect family" life. We see vague tableaux of what might be either joy, or even crisis, and because of that remove you've placed on everything, we're left in a kind of limbo to decide not just what it is we really want, but what the source of our desire is to begin with. In this regard I think

you tap directly into the major strength of photography, and its parallel weakness. Because the act of making a photograph always promises us some kind of perfect resolution, both visually and emotionally, but in the end all we're left with is the cold comfort of facts, just dumb, silent facts. So you've pulled off this beautifully symmetrical echo, where the frustrated perfection of photographic desire neatly depicts just the same kind of phantom paradise of growing up into adulthood. **UL** In almost all of the pictures there's something that marks an inside and an outside, like a branch hanging down in front of a blurry car, and so on. When you're looking at *Pictures of a Family* I think you're identifying more with me as the one standing outside looking in than with the people in the pictures. Even if you're looking at all the thousands of photos I've taken I don't think you feel that you have come any closer to the family. Life is, for the greater part, taking place somewhere other than on the recordable surface, and you're left with, as you put it, dumb, silent facts. That leaves a void that I think people fill with their own desires or prejudices. **GB** Absolutely. I've found precisely this kind of recurring device in the work of Philip-Lorca diCorcia, where objects in the foreground are deliberately insinuated upon what would otherwise be the image's compositional continuity. It's like a framing device that always reminds us that this is a surveillance, that we are quite specifically not taking part in the action. With diCorcia, I think these devices constantly force us to consider the images' synthetic origins and so the reliability of authorial notions. But other than that small physical similarity, your work is radically different; it's so much more directly in touch with, even desiring of—there's no other word for it—"normality." Those framing devices don't connote something counterfeit at all; they seem much more like emotional inhibitors, signs of our separation from the primary experiences we always hope photography will recall for us. Did the series bring you any closer to some kind of personal reckoning with how photographs crystallize our sense of hope? **UL** Of course, the objects in the foreground and the short depth of field are devices borrowed from the spy movie or surveillance photography. They remind us that we're not, as you say, taking part in the action. I think those objects also remind us of the "photographic situation." The pictures are in some sense extreme photographs. I've tried to enhance elements that you find in "ordinary" photography and make them blatant. Before you start a project you're always trying to imagine what it will be like to stand there photographing. I also thought that I was well prepared for the situation this time, but when I stood there it was so much stronger than I had imagined. The first time I was out taking pictures for this project the woman in the family was home alone. I was standing in the dark garden photographing her through the window. I had felt the sensation I had at that moment many times before, taking pictures, but this time it was much, much stronger—a feeling both intoxicating and disgusting. But I also think that the object in the foreground entraps the subjects in a



DICORCIA, Philip-Lorca
At once inviting and devastating, *Wellfleet* crystallizes the sense of longing that suffuses much of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photography. He stole the picture (of his own wife) with a long lens from a distance, behind a veil of spare foliage, positioning the scene tantalizingly close but forever out of reach.

DiCorcia's style is one of the most widely influential to have emerged in the past decade, and it has been rampantly reinvented in any number of guises. Known primarily for his vivid deconstructions of the documentary and narrative conventions in photography, his images are often cited, referenced, and even plagiarized outright as disquieting distillations of contemporary life.

Wellfleet itself has been cited by film director Mark Romanek as one of the primary inspirations for his movie *One Hour Photo* (2002). The photograph appears in *A Storybook Life*, a new book of images made by DiCorcia from photographs taken intermittently over the last twenty-five years.

(p. 98 *left*) **DICORCIA, Philip-Lorca** *Wellfleet*, 1992. Fuji Crystal Archive print, © Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

narrow and shallow pictorial space. It gives the project its vagueness, distance, and duality. I'm not sure I understand what you mean by "hope," but when I started the project, I thought that I would accomplish some kind of authenticity by doing it in the way I did. As we mentioned before, the longer the project continued, I realized how little I was saying about the family. I didn't get any closer to the truth about them. In fact, I could tell any story about them I'd like, depending on which pictures I chose. **GB** Photographs really are the perfect palimpsest in that way. Even though they're just these blank recitations, for some reason—perhaps their ability for faultless description—people will always desperately seize upon a photograph as some kind of proof of whatever notions they cherished before they had even seen the picture in the first place. So the same document gets constantly re-enlisted by each new viewer as the supposed proof of their desires, however varied they are. The photographs become meticulously constructed instruments of hope. But I think this kind of

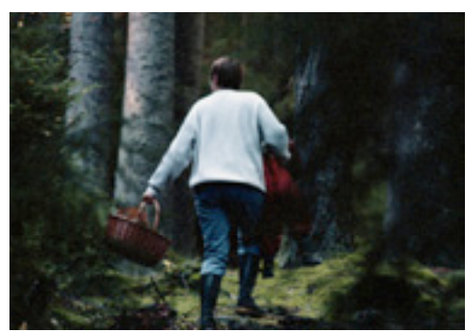
delusion only works when you accept the image reflexively, without too much contemplation. As someone devoted to the internal mechanics of the process, however, the photographer isn't afforded that kind of luxury, because the contradictions inherent in the medium quickly become apparent. So in time, as you said, these images that are supposed to be the perfect resolutions of external conditions end up more as mirrors of personal idiosyncrasy. That's a fairly basic premise, but you've added that subtle perversion, by setting out to document your own biased desires in the first place. You did so in a blatantly manufactured way: the content you chose (which you knew would be provocative), the "surveillance" mode of depiction, and the compositional devices, all of which constantly reinforce the awareness that what we are seeing is a highly controlled method for stimulating a specific reaction. Of what? Disgust, as you mentioned? And maybe jealousy, fondness, or prurient interest? You knew that your viewers would be aware of all of this as much as you were from the beginning, so I'm left to wonder: Were you perhaps setting out not so much to satisfy your curiosity about what other path your life might have taken, but instead to actually kill any sense of hope you had invested in such a question, thus letting yourself finally live your own life, this actual life, in freedom? **UL** I wanted the spectators to be aware that they were being manipulated, as they always are when they look at photography. But I can't say I knew that I was stimulating a specific reaction in them; there is a limit to that. I've tried to stimulate the audience and awaken their curiosity, but I can't say where that will lead them. I think that the man in the family represents something that I've been a part of, a certain way of being and living your life. By observing him and making him an object separate from myself—I'm here and he's there, on the other side—it can be seen as a liberating process. From being one step behind I'm taking one step aside. **GB** You're moving on. And now, in fact, you're having a baby… **UL** Yes, any day. Are you suggesting that I ended up where I didn't want to be after all, or that I finally got what I desired? All I can say is that it was an unusually deliberate decision. I didn't want it then, but I want it now. **GB** In fact, what I've been thinking about all along, the feeling that I find most compelling about the series, is how perfectly it illustrates the twin frustrations of photography and life. The way that in life, we are, as human beings, inevitably limited in our abilities, in our knowledge, in the basic time and resources and freedoms that we have at our disposal. And the way that in photography we indulge the impossible human hope that maybe, just in this one instance, we can freeze the rush of time, or see a subject more perfectly, or prove some ephemeral fact, or understand some essence. For the series you completely subjugated yourself in both regards: you placed yourself as the one who only watches, rather than experiences, and who has to wait outside in the freezing cold just to do even that, all the time

reflecting upon how limited your own life experience at that moment is. Then, even after you made your picture from the garden or the street or whatever peripheral "outsider's" spot, the photographic image that results is itself also limited, corrupted, frustrated—it never gives us complete information or emotional satisfaction as maybe we had hoped it would. The entire process illustrates frustrated desire. But—and this is the key—all is not lost or nihilistic. You yourself called it a "liberating process." So this brings me back to the idea that it functioned as a sort of exorcism, not so much by criticizing the particular subject matter (your friend's family, or even the class he inhabits, or whatever), but by moving beyond the feeling of frustrated hope that the subject (and photography) inspired within you. Obviously, it worked: now you're starting your own family, and it's something you're enthusiastic about. And you still make photographs. **UL** I think you're right in what you're saying. It's also about realizing that you can affect your own situation. You can only make your own decisions based on your own limited knowledge. Even if they're wrong, they're your choices. You're talking about how in photography we are trying to stop the rush of time and see a subject more perfectly. In *Work in Progress* I'm trying to work the other way around. I'm building a flow of time from these frozen moments. Traditionally a photographic portrait is supposed to reveal the essence of the subject's personality. But what happens when that picture is transformed into another similar picture that is transformed into another similar picture that transforms?… **GB** …another "corruption" of our expectations of the photographic capability. There's no question that this tendency to re-evaluate photography's reliability is at the forefront of current practice, but I find it most compelling when a photographer still maintains some kind of connection to what might be called "organic," or primary, experience. The most successful contemporary photographs are ostensibly about that firsthand knowledge, but they twist its presentation in some way to make you question not merely the subject (which is the standard mode of documentary work) but the act of seeing and photographing in the first place. There are so many instances today of photographers taking the idea of synthetic or setup photography to an extreme, separating it entirely from knowable (or at least believable) human experience, that it falls flat for me. It becomes a meaningless indulgence at best, and an inside joke at worst. I can't believe in the traditional, clichéd notion of capturing essences either, but I think photography's unique importance lies in its ability as a lens-based medium to record knowable experiences and meanings that a viewer can relate to, if not completely comprehend. In this indirect way, I think current photographic practice approaches real experience, with all of its vagueness and entropy, a lot more closely than most of traditional twentieth-century photography ever did. **UL** I totally agree with you. That's why I'm especially interested in photography. It can't tell the

truth about what used to be called reality, but it can say something about it, filtered through a temperament. And I think it's important to make that author visible. I do come from a documentary tradition, and there are a lot of reasons to question that tradition, but I'm still interested in photographs that deal with what you call "organic" or primary experience. Photography also turns you back toward the world in that when you make a photograph, it almost always reminds you of other kinds of photography that exist outside of the art world. You can never be totally free as a photographer because the medium is so exploited, which I think makes it more interesting. The medium in itself is loaded with meaning, which you as an artist can use. It's like when a movie director uses a famous actor that doesn't need to be closely presented, because the audience knows a lot about his or her character and what kind of parts he or she usually plays. Instead, you can start with what's important and choose to confirm or question what the audience thought it knew. **GB** Of course, that's a timely metaphor: the influence of film and cinematic melodrama is almost everywhere in photography today. In fact, even beyond photography, I would say it's just everywhere today, period—as predicted, celebrity has paradoxically become the new commonality, and not just in America. But Hollywood aside, this trend feels like a particularly awkward fit for photography, which is so similar to—and yet completely unique from—film. If it is going to be at all useful or viable, there has to be something in a still image that speaks directly to those unique, hermetically sterile conditions that photography imposes on what is otherwise a messy, undefinable slice of life. Even when you as the photographer do your best to isolate certain ideas and meanings, the beauty of the process is that if the image itself has any resonance at all with other viewers and life at large, that infinite complexity of separate voices and the natural noise of the photographic act will blow your neat little pile of intentions all to hell. Your perfect, composed object, dead-still as it may be on the page, is every bit as fractious and unknowable as the rest of experience. **UL** I see that more as a strength then a weakness in photography. Of course, you have to try to control all of this as much as possible, but after a piece is out in the world it lives its own life. It's only possible to control the viewers to a certain extent. People will always make strange associations and think unexpected thoughts when they see your work. You can't give any absolute answers, only interesting questions. Often when a journalist has written a text about my work, I'm asked if I want to read through it before publication. I usually say no because I can't approve his or her thoughts about my work. If I'm going to control the text I'm suddenly responsible for it. It gets strange sometimes, but exciting and interesting just as often. If you put all the texts together I think something essential will crystallize. **GB** Do you place much faith in the notion of the author's voice, then? Not just as a mildly controlling device that initiates some sequential conversation down the road

among the audience but, specifically for photography, as an accurate recorder of someone's experience?

UL I can't say that I believe in photography as an accurate recorder of a person's experience, if I have understood your use of the word "accurate" correctly. Of course, you should try to be as precise as possible, but at a certain point you'll have to let go, and then it's impossible to say where that conversation goes. Even your own photographs can change meaning, for you, over time.

GB Which, of course, brings us back to how *Pictures of a Family* feels to you now. Inevitably, when I first show these pictures to someone, the first reaction is a sort of titillated fascination, then a slowly building guilt as the viewer tries to pass judgment on the piece in hopes of distancing themselves from their original interest in it. Several years have passed since you first conceived and finally completed the project. You're at the age when many fundamentally life-changing developments happen, such as having a baby, which is also one of the things the project dealt with. What place does the project hold in your life at this point? Is it purely history, or can you still return to it for some kind of active meaning?

UL Often when I'm exhibiting *Pictures of a Family* I'm asked if I still follow this family. It would have been pathetic if I hadn't been able to go on with my life from that point. Of course, some parts of the project aren't as relevant for me now as they were then. Or maybe they're relevant in another way; I think we always have the need to compare ourselves to others. When I do an interview like this one, I have to try to put myself in the situation I was in then, to think about what made me start the project in the first place, so in some sense the project is history for me. But there are other parts of it that are as relevant now as they were then, such as the parts that concern photography. If you look at my latest pieces, they seem very different than *Pictures of a Family*. *Machine* is an installation built in the gallery, and *From Darkness* is a series of portraits taken in a studio, but I think there are certain things that you can recognize in all of my work. There's a temperament in the work that I can't get away from even if I sometimes want to. In several of my pieces I had to start with a large amount of raw material that demanded a huge amount of work to get through. Sometimes I long to work in another way, but I always seem to come back to that. It's not something that I can choose. Then there are more deliberate themes, like how people relate to a camera, or the photographer's power and triviality. For me there is a logical step from *Pictures of a Family* [1996] to *Station* [1997], in which I filmed people waiting in a railway station without their permission, to *Mobil* [1998], a video of myself listening to people's conversations over cell phones with a sound scanner, to *Bless You* [1999], a video portrait of people whom I've invited to my studio and asked to sneeze on cue, to *From Darkness* [2002], portraits of people who are sitting in total darkness. Even if the pieces look very different there are some clear points of contact.