

IDENTITY

CRACKS IN THE FACE OF AUTHENTICITY

It's going to take time, space, curiosity and the permission for boredom to exist to recalibrate our creative vocabulary. Tasked with photographing subjects and relationships that are multi-sided and dimensional, we owe it to the depth of them to explore more of those sides, and more of our sides. The world wants it. And pretty soon, it's going to need it.

BY OLI SANSOM

THIS SPREAD: During nightfall, Oli Sansom ventured to Joshua Tree National Park in California. He captured this just as someone in the parking lot hit their brake lights.

When Heath Ledger's Oscar-winning portrayal of the Joker broke ground as one of the most radical performances

in recent memory, you'd probably be forgiven for not believing that one of *The Dark Knight* writers, Jonathan Nolan, was, like the production studio and most of the population, in vocal opposition to the casting choice. Ledger defied critics in the loudest way, broke any subtle typecasts he had and built himself into a Joker that dismantled what it meant to revive an established character.

This is what's revealed when you test the edges of who you think you are, or are told you are, and lean away from one of the most popular pieces of recycled advice: "Just be yourself."

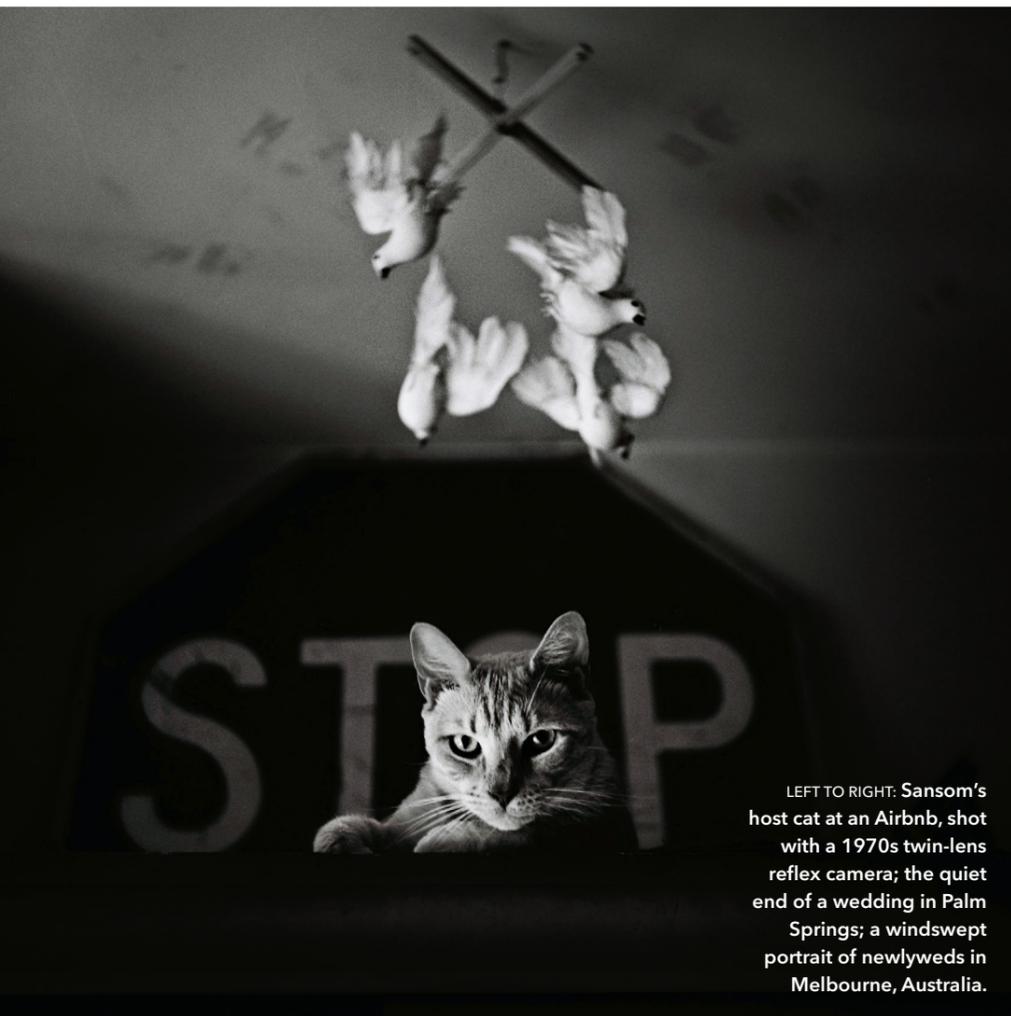
We're in a narrative-driven culture competing for ideology air-time, and we've never been bombarded with so many different ones at such frequency and so forcefully. It's "be yourself" one minute and "always step outside of your comfort zone" the next, with a scarcity of roadmaps available to navigate how and when to switch on each of those oppositional states. A convincing counter can be found for just about any mantra out there at the moment, and mentally sifting through competing narratives is nearly a full-time job in itself.

One of the most charged narratives out there right now for creative professionals and freelancers is around the intersection of our identity and our craft. Identity, and therefore artistic voice, is often presented as that fixed construct and something that should be reflected in all parts of our work. But aligning ourselves with this narrative does two things that can potentially cause us grief: It makes the assumption that we've taken proper stock of ourselves and know "who we are," and it can create unnecessary tension around the idea of being truthful to that identity in our work and telling truth in our images.

"Who I am" is a construct built by everyone I've ever had around me and every story I've ever told myself, about myself. And now, this construct is supported by every digital touch-point in our lives. Without sounding like an apocalyptic defeatist, online social platforms are exactly engineered to create more confirmation bias and solidify your already-presented identity. Through a system of carefully engineered notifications and filtering, they bind us to this presented identity with a high rate of frequency. This has a profound subconscious effect on how we go about living in the small-business world and producing the work that we do.

The candid photography and authenticity movement that is driving the story heavily on

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Sansom's host cat at an Airbnb, shot with a 1970s twin-lens reflex camera; the quiet end of a wedding in Palm Springs; a windswept portrait of newlyweds in Melbourne, Australia.

social media currently is less an objectively good way of going about doing things and more of a response to our perception of photography in the '90s. Whether we like it or not, we all leave our own, new mark on the historical proof we're creating somehow, and it's near impossible to get an idea of how that will hold up in 30 years. This is an ambiguously freeing thing, and while we should celebrate that as makers, we should also do it with the context that this isn't better. It's just different.

Before, during and for a long time after the Industrial Revolution, we didn't really consider concepts of our work and self being too intertwined. We got the damn work done because we had no other choice. We had to support our family. Thankfully, the general employment climate and standard of living is better, which affords us more choice, but an abundance of that choice has presented its own set of challenges. In this case, it's the challenge

of excess and that identity magnifying glass we're placing on ourselves because we now have the time and space to do so.

In a world where you can do anything and be anything, we're now told to be authentic, to wind things back to what's real and truthful. And this is particularly potent in photography, where we're tasked with keeping historical record of real things happening in front of us.

However, authenticity and truth don't exist—not in the way they're sold to us, anyway—and perhaps the pursuit of those things isn't the most useful way of finding our curiosity. When the broader online think-tank promotes a thin, arbitrary idea of authenticity, it all starts bearing a striking level of similarity. We see this most obviously in how that authenticity is manifested into branding design, but that's a conversation for another day.

So when engaging with the precious task of bringing out our voice into our work and brand, and being true to ourselves or our



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clients, in an industry heavily steeped in the idea that we have to "be" our work and live out binary authenticity through it, where does this leave us?

Various studies report that 70 to 80 percent of people lament not having their dream job, and a problem lies in the idea that we're putting that dream job a yardstick ahead of a greater goal: exploration. Fundamentally, we are liquid, not stone—we just forget that as we go through school and the workplace, and find ourselves having to set a fixed identity relationship with everything around us, cemented with our job title stamped on paper.

You don't have to "be" your work. Treat your business more like a pet piglet by your side. Walk it, feed it, let it roam.

Give it a hot bath occasionally. Feed it a strawberry (no, seriously, Google "piglets eating strawberries"). Most importantly, be open to the idea that it can have an identity of its own. You can treat it like a game while still serving people in a beautiful way. That does not have to be a state of conflict for you.

I never hide the fact that I wouldn't book myself, or anyone like me, for my wedding. This isn't to say I don't believe in the work that I do; I'm deeply engaged with my way of producing images and finding couples who like it. I'm surrounded by lush imagery,

intimacy and end-to-end storytelling. But me? I don't want that for myself.

I'd hire a gritty, jaded '90s photojournalist to photograph my wedding day on grainy film and a super wide lens. No prep, no portraits, no "storytelling." I'm very present to the fact that our powerful imagination can fill in the gaps; I don't need prescriptive images of every last micro-event doing the heavy lifting for me. There's amplified value in scarcity, and that's where my values lie for what I'd hire (subject to my wife's input, of course). Does that make me inauthentic in the product I choose to sell?

ONLINE ONLY

Oli Sansom shares how to challenge your authenticity, a step-by-step to kickstarting your design vocabulary and rebrand, and his favorite resources. rangefinderonline.com

There's a lot of power locked up in words, and even though we've passed the madness of the loud hipster application of authenticity (I've waited patiently for six years for the fad to pass so that I could grow this damn man bun currently sitting post-pretentiously atop my middle-class noggin), we're still

in the middle of an ideological gold rush to show our B-side instead of our A-side, to move against heavy curation and to be "real" with what we post. But curated A-sides were never disinteresting or damaging—they just got hijacked by #influencers and advertisers.



PIECE OF ADVICE

RETURN TO CHILDHOOD

Find what really captured you as a child—the literal and figurative, unfiltered identities that we've let slip away—and use that as inspiration going forward. It's one of the purest parts of yourself.

There's nothing wrong with someone's work or personal identity being shrouded in curated mystery, with all the rest left private, for them, like it used to be.

The next movement will be a middle ground and our ability to induce magic in the people that view our work by turning how we live and how we craft into a character. Perhaps not the Joker or any other folks also sporting a Glasgow smile (your bookings might suffer), but something more in line with human anthropology and ritual in all of its forms—the real, the fake, the tacky, the authentic, the staged, the awkward. This is the wonderful human circus, and we owe more to it than gratuitously pretending we can capture its whole, objective truth. And never forget that there's an enormously wide range of ways in which to reach the hearts of people through your identity and craft, beyond moose-antler logos and slideshows accompanied by the indie acoustics of José González. *Rf*

Oli Sansom is a photographer, international speaker, instant-coffee enthusiast and a 2015 Rf 30 Rising Star (2015). In 2018, he photographed everywhere from Australia to Antarctica. He spends his time thinking about the intersection of the digital and analogue worlds, and what the future of how we record history looks like.