

MARK INDIG

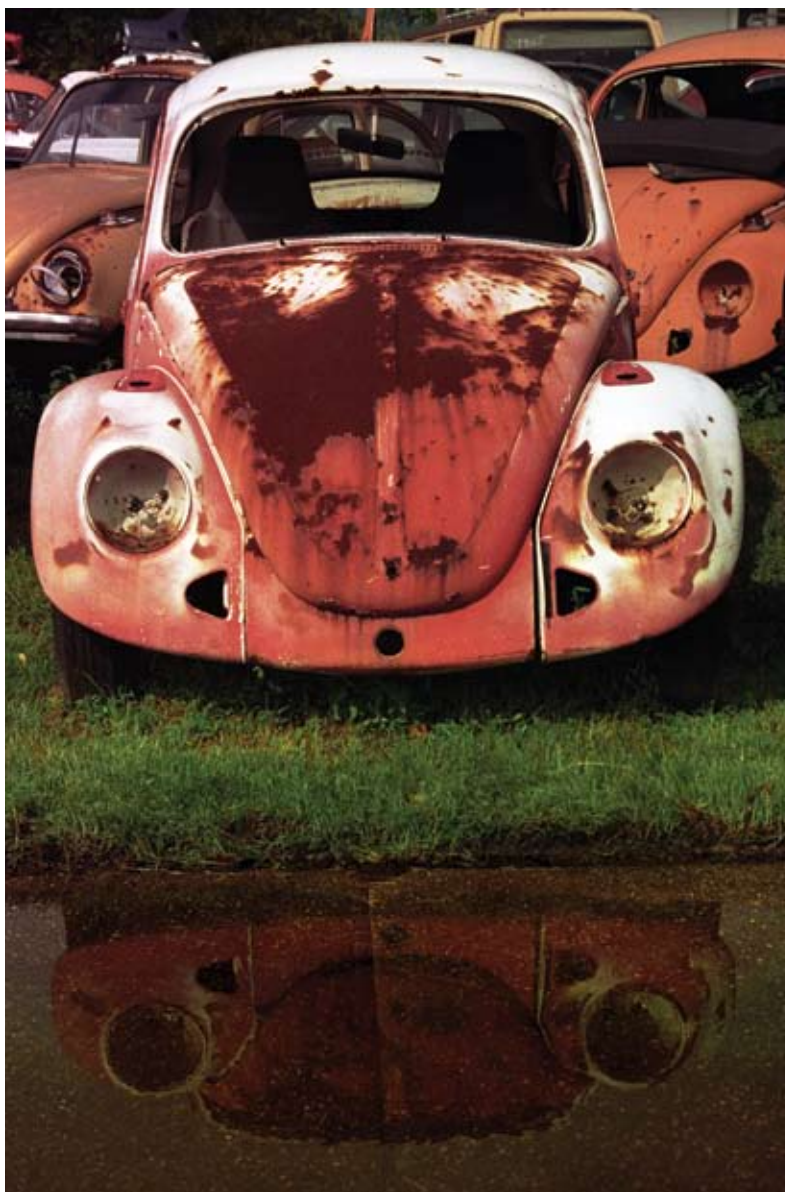
By Martin Elkort

Location Scouting & the Art of Getting Lost

Mark Indig is a reasonable guy, ready to politely yield the floor in a discussion. But make no mistake—when he needs to take a photograph in the course of his work as a location scout for the film industry, he yields to nobody. Nor can anyone get in the way of his Nikon D200—not even a man with a knife. In the course of his colorful career, he has caused alarms to go off, warning lights to flash and the police to go on high alert, all merely by showing up with his camera.

At heart, Mark considers himself a location photographer. A visit to his beautiful home—decorated by his wife, Mamie—reveals that Mark is an avid collector of prints of old maps. After all, maps are the visual byways to many new locations. To that end, it's ultimately surprising how much Mark has learned about getting lost when finding something to shoot.

"The art of getting lost relates to both your mental and physical space; to clear your mind, to be willing to divert from the plan," Mark



says. "To go where your gut tells you, to be unafraid of new places, to let your senses take over, to let the images find you. Hopefully this unique background and skill set informs my art. For me, finding something interesting to shoot is as enjoyable or more so than any other part of the photographic process."

Darkroom classes in college first sparked Mark's interest in photography. After a short time as a film editor in Long Island, he was hired by NBC at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan, dispatching couriers to retrieve exposed film from cameramen on assignment. In that pre-electronic era, news footage was shot on 16mm film by reporters, then transported to labs for processing, and finally edited and distributed to news outlets.

The job was far from glamorous, though, as Mark found himself

cooped up in a small, windowless room, doing boring drudge work. He dreamed of getting out into the world and envied the couriers who, at the very least, got to see the light of day. So, after a few months of such tedium, Mark quit and hired himself out as a “gofer” for film crews and began running errands and fetching coffee.

One day in 1975, in a reversal of the country bumpkin who goes to the big city, he was sent to Iowa to assist a crew filming a commercial about farming history.

As much of life is serendipitous, one day Mark was leaving the Iowa set for an errand when a producer called to him. “Hey, you!” he said. “We need a wheat field for a shot. If you see something that looks like a wheat field while you’re running around, let us know, will yah?” Amazingly for Mark, while all the wheat in Iowa had already been harvested by that time of year, he came across a small field of grain swaying in the breeze. It looked like wheat. The producer was simply delighted.

Impressed by this success, Mark thought, “When I get back to New York, I will call myself a location scout.” Upon his return he printed business cards that read, “Professional Location Scout,” and started knocking on doors. He was soon busy finding locations for filming commercials. He had to find them fast, so he used a black-and-white Polaroid 195, ISO 3000. Working for various production companies, Mark traveled with several suitcases full of Polaroid film because 3000 ISO film was unavailable outside of big cities. One suitcase was filled with garbage bags to hold the leavings from the film, the peel-away sheets that

had to be removed as each print was self-developed—a miracle of those days.

Working from a script and instructions from the producers, he searched for things that typified the scene and snapped Polaroid pictures of them. He then stayed up nights, pasting the pictures into panoramas, labeling them and sending them back



to the production company the next day.

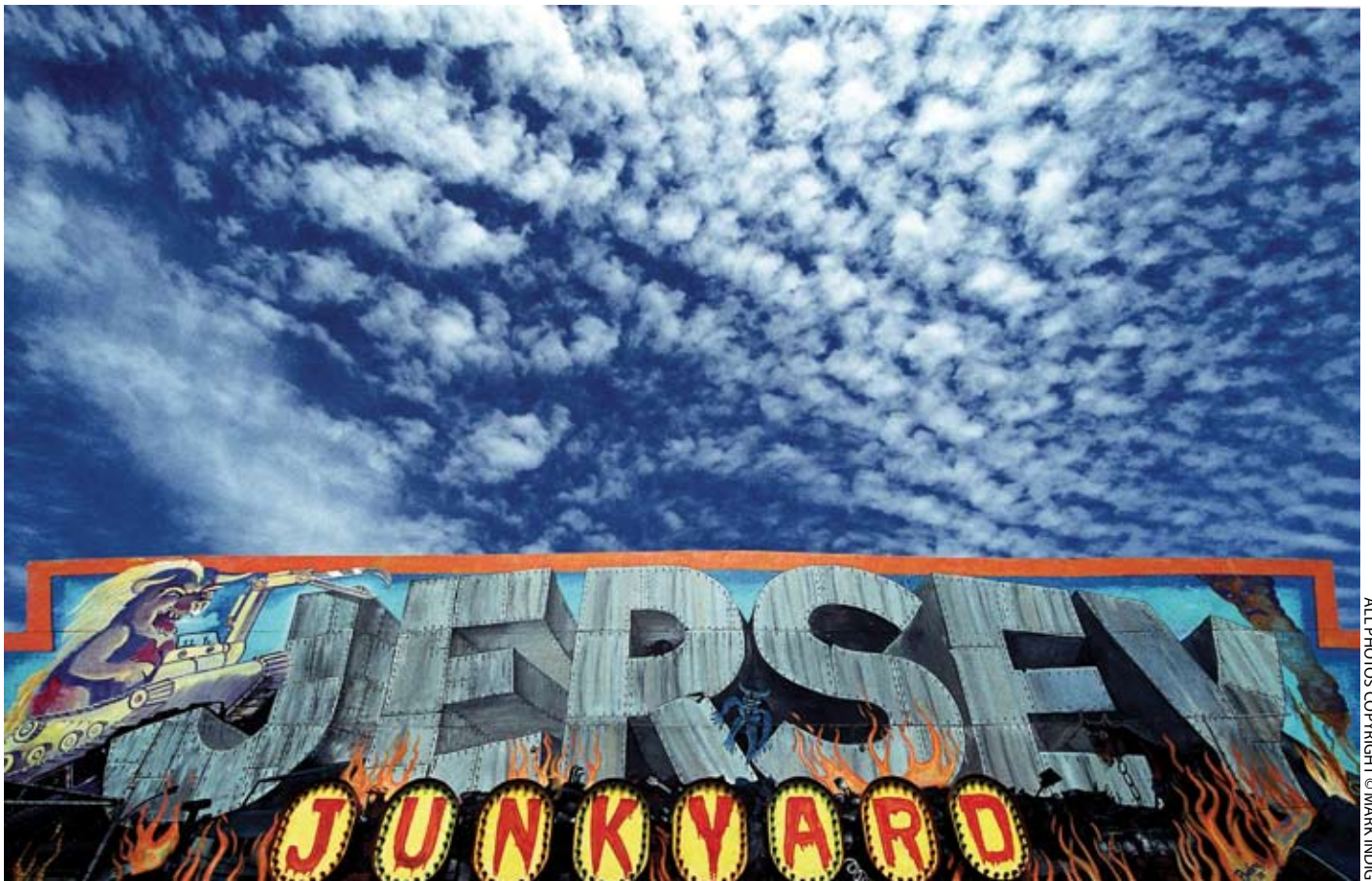
During his 15 years working as a scout, Mark drew a number of lessons from investigative location work—some artistic, some practical. He learned to identify common spaces and their photogenic natures; he learned to photograph and tell the story of a location so the producers knew what the scene looked like before the

film crew arrived there. He also learned that you can’t necessarily wait for a sunrise or sunset to take dramatic pictures. Most of his shots are done at midday, when the sun is directly overhead. He sees that as an advantage. “If you’re interested in color,” he says, “you get more saturated color at midday, when the sun is rich. But I’ll shoot

with whatever light is available at the time. You never know if you’ll get the chance to go back.”

On a more practical level, his work has led him to deal with surprising and compromising situations. Consider an incident that occurred in 1978, when Mark was working as a location scout for movies. He had to find a theater that could pass for the Shubert Theater on Broadway for the film *The Fan*, starring Lauren Bacall, James Garner and Maureen Stapleton. Why not just rent the original Shubert Theater? Well, for starters, a motion picture can take months to make and a set like the one required would entail major indoor reconstruction to allow camera dollies and booms to operate. To rent the actual Shubert Theater would be out of the question, so Mark had to find something similar that might be available for filming.

His first stop was the library of The Lincoln Center For The Performing Arts in Manhattan, a treasure trove of theatrical history. After diligent research, he found the location of every old vaudeville theater. Most of them had been torn down, and the few remaining had been turned into multiplexes or adult movie theaters. After checking several surviving theaters and turning thumbs down on all of them, he found one in Queens, New York that was in relatively good shape. He explained the project to



the manager and promised that when the filming was done, the theater would be repainted and restored to an even better condition. The manager was amenable, but explained that the theater ran 24 hours a day, so Mark would have to shoot with the patrons in their seats. After documenting the outside, he took pictures of the lobby and the rear of the theater. Then he walked down front, climbed onto the small stage and turned his camera on the audience to film the seating area and the balconies. As he snapped away, absorbed in his work, a critical film scene was being projected onto his white shirt, blocking the view of paying customers. This interruption was more than one fellow in the front row could bear. Leaping onto the stage with a large jackknife, the angry man brandished the blade under Mark's nose. After a moment of indecision, during which Mark held his ground while the man scowled, the would-be assailant lost his nerve and ran into the wings, waving his knife. Unperturbed, Mark continued snapping pictures and the audience turned its attention back to the scene in progress.

"You have to know what your rights are," he says. "Since 2001, people got a little crazy," he muses ruefully, recalling another incident a few years ago when he

was taking pictures of a huge gas plant in Philadelphia. Suddenly, a police car and a private security car—sirens blasting and lights flashing—screamed to the curb. He was subjected to the indignity of placing his hands on top of his car and was frisked for weapons. The police seized his camera, but Mark stood his ground. He told them he was on public property, taking a photograph of something in plain sight for the purpose of creating art. He took out a copy of the relevant statute he always carries in his back pocket and showed it to the police, explaining that he was acting in a lawful manner. After hemming and hawing, they handed him his camera, turned off their flashing lights and left. Mark continued photographing the scene.

Few could argue that he has not earned his way. Working as a location manager on commercials and full-length movies such as *Body Heat* and *The Big Chill* from 1975 to 1989, Mark was hired as a production executive by Walt Disney Studios in 1990. Recently, he has worked as a production manager on such films as *The Village* and *The Guardian*. "The producer sees 'the big picture,'" he explains, "and the production manager budgets the money, hires the crews, rents hotels, and takes care of all the details involved in a successful shoot."

Mark maintains that he is not a "people" photographer and relates his collection of "vernacular landscapes" like this: "If you take a spider out of its web, the web is a fascinating thing to look at. Similarly, if you take people out of their environment, you are left with the echoes of the people who created it. Common things are built for a function and not to express anything," he continues. "They can be eloquent, but they can also be elegant. A good photograph needs to be both eloquent and elegant. It must express form, structure, color, composition, line, etc. It has to tell something about the people who were there.

"People's faces can lie," he maintains, "but an environment never does. When people are present, you don't get the essence of the place, only the people. It's like archeology," he says, warming to another analogy: "When I'm out photographing, I look for echoes, layers. How did it get there, I wonder? I'm not talking about icons of architecture—just the opposite."

Visit www.markindigphotography.com.



Martin Elkort has been a photographer since age 10. He is a former member of The Photo League, and his photographs are in the collections of the New York Museum of Art, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Elkort resides in Los Angeles, CA, where he continues to refine his craft.