BEING THE EXPLORATIONS OF ONE FINE SUMMER
a personal zine, in photo book form

Magpie Killjoy
Introduction

My name is Magpie Killjoy and I’m sorry if this is the most expensive per-zine you’ve ever seen. It is, though, one of the cheapest photo books around. This is a bit of an experiment in form.

I took these pictures over the course of about two months, from early May to early July 2009. I was playing around with the idea of doing environmental war photography—that is, photography documenting the war against the earth. There’s a lot that I don’t like about the photojournalist world, though, from the bullshit faux objectivity to the insistence that it is a photographer’s right to photograph—and profit off of—anyone and anything they see.

What is the role of the anarchist photographer? Most of us anarchists are pissed off about the over-abundance of cameras and the piss-poor ratio of photographers to direct-actionists at protests. And most of us understand that it is more important to experience moments than to capture them.

But when it comes down to it, photography can be useful—it can draw attention to atrocity, or heroize those who fight against it. And it serves the purpose of any other art, in that it creates aesthetic experiences. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, it’s fun, shooting photos.

I reject the idea that a photographer is the sole creator of a photo. These photos belong at least as much to the subjects of them—my friends and yes even those forests—as they do to me.
It was in southwest Virginia, Wise County, that we saw our first mountaintop removal site. Fox Gap.

I’d read—even written—about mountaintop removal (MTR) before. But of course, it needs to be seen.

We saw a wasteland with no context: what were these pipes for? Why the fuck is there a mailbox up here? We should have been a hundred feet underground, but we stood on a mostly featureless mess of shattered earth, of broken shale.
I hid from the enormity of it all by looking through a camera. This is a convenient way to escape the fearful breadth of reality.

This place is insulting. MTR is insulting. The industry has the nerve to tell people that they improve places.

I mean, there is beauty here, to be sure, but it is the beauty of the fields of dead after battle, a beauty of sorrow and loss.

Proponents of MTR don’t offer very good justifications for this destruction, and the few they do are easily refuted. But to be honest, I wouldn’t care if the reasons they offered weren’t lies. Even if MTR was good for the economy, even if we didn’t have alternatives to rely on for our electricity, I would be furious.

Sometimes, on Fox Gap, I almost convinced myself that I was standing on a normal rocky plateau somewhere. But the stones, like fossils, lay shattered.

I learned a lot more about all of this later. That grass that looks like Ire-
land? It’s spray-on, invasive, and usually doesn’t last. The hills in the distance of course, those aren’t supposed to look like Montana. It’s supposed to look like Appalachia.

So we left Virginia and went north into West Virginia, further into poverty and—no coincidence—further into destruction. We drove through town after town where almost nothing remained. Some of these places are remembered only by a street sign or a name plastered on the side of a coal silo.
There are dumptrucks that make pickups look like powerwheels. These machines are larger than houses, larger than mansions.

The method they use to blow up mountains is fairly simple: there are coal seams that run through mountains. Most of these have been deep-mined extensively, but some scraps of coal remain. So companies drill into the rock, pack the holes with fertilizer-bomb explosives, and blow it up. After retrieving the coal, they dump everything left down the side of the mountain.

Kayford Mountain used to have a town perched at the lowest point of its crest, the natural pass over the mountain. Now this is the highest point; the mountain in all directions has been leveled. There used to be a school, a store, and plenty of families. Very, very few remain.

There aren’t many jobs left in West Virginia, because buying explosives is a hell of a lot cheaper than hiring people.

We drove up onto Kayford Mountain and stuck our heads over a retaining wall—placed to keep people from watching the devastation—to witness active mining. We’d seen a corpse of a mountain, and now we watched the killing.

We were so far away that scale really fucked with us. The giant crane? That’s a dragline, and it’s stories and stories tall.
The nasty thing is that these companies—responsible for the destruction of the working class economy in the region—blame environmentalists for wanting to take jobs away.

I gotta be honest, I don’t really care about jobs. I want people to be able to eat, sure, but coal is a terrible thing. Capitalism is a terrible thing. Industrialized society? A terrible thing.

But I saw one woman—whose home has been destroyed by MTR—talking about this, and she said it well. “I don’t care about their jobs. I don’t owe anyone a job. They owe it to me to not destroy this mountain.”

It’s still beautiful up on the tiny part of Kayford that remains. All the mountains I’ve seen in West Virginia are beautiful. Some have coal seams just sitting there, exposed. It’s easier to understand coal, I think, when you see it this way: it’s just a rock. And when it’s still in the mountain, it’s actually rather pretty.
Our guide took us through the woods, out to a different viewpoint. Here, we got to see “reclamation” firsthand. In some places, perhaps the lucky places, the coal companies spray a mixture of non-native grass and fertilizer onto the rock face. When this dies, as it inevitably does, they spray it again.

I don’t know about the long-term effects, if these new “pastures” ever become worthwhile grazing lands. I suppose, eventually, new soil might build up. But the thing is, Appalachia isn’t known for its excellent cattle grazing opportunities. Appalachia ought be known for its dense and beautiful deciduous forests, for the amazing herb-picking and hunting opportunities. For its mountains.

And the places that aren’t lucky enough to have grass spray-painted on? They get commercially developed.

The West Virginia motto is Montani Semper Liberi: Mountaineers Are Always Free. The idea is that no one can invade, and control, rural folks in the mountains. Appalachia has a long history of resistance, from anti-slavers to pro-indigenous folks to the union workers who rose up with guns against the despotism and violence of the coal companies. And this resistance is based on there being mountains in West Virginia.

And this then, if you’ll pardon my Catholic upbringing, is the wages of sin. Well, it would be if it affected the people who caused it.

We drove out to Mingo County, West Virginia, to provide what we could in the way of flood relief for the anti-MTR folks out there. It wasn’t a “us concerned outsiders will come and save you” thing, it was a “our friends and co-conspirators just had a mountain of debris and mud wash down on them, we’d better get over there and help out” thing. The distinction isn’t subtle.

Mingo County is where they are building King Coal Highway (speaking of non-subtlety). Here’s the deal: coal companies have “donated” their labor by doing the blasting to build a highway that no one needs. In exchange, they get to take out the coal. This way, they don’t need permits and they can blast places they wouldn’t otherwise be able to get to.

This is on top of their usual MTR and strip-mining antics. No one is really very sur-
prised that the newly-bare mountains are more susceptible to causing massive floods. There have been two “hundred-year rains” in the past five years.

The felled trees and the loose mud come barreling down the hills, often along the cuts the coal companies have made, then pour into creeks and undercut the roads.

We did what we could, which consisted mostly of digging mud out of basements and helping folks throw away their stuff that was contaminated. Only one of us started getting weird rashes from the toxins we were exposed to.

The coal companies have denied any wrongdoing, of course. But the thick, muddy runoff speaks for itself. These pictures were taken days after the flood, when the water levels had gone down in most places. With no roots to keep the earth in place, and blasting to keep the soil loose, the creeks ran opaque.

Days after we left, the coal companies finally realized the propaganda effect of helping and donated some of their heavy machinery to aid in the cleanup of the mess they had made. I like to think
we guilted them into it. I like to think they did it because they were afraid that if we helped and they didn’t, they would look bad.

It’s awful, actually, how they’ve tricked people into being thankful to them. I heard from the teams that came out after us that people had put up “thank you coal” signs in their yard. The thought of thanking people for being nice after they’ve attacked you …

why, it sounds like every abusive relationship I’ve heard of, personal or governmental.
The family we stayed with was amazing, though, and they weren’t fooled by the companies in the slightest. Lots of people weren’t.

One man showed us the turkey calls he had made. Another, having never heard of the musical saw, was excited to try it.

And we stayed up late playing music. Since, of course, that is what one does in life.
On the way out of Mingo County, we drove past a massive fire. At first, I assumed it had something to do with the flooding. After all, who could work with heavy machinery right up the street from a flooded out and destroyed area? Who could be so callous?

I really did think that. I’m not being facetious.

But no, the heavy machine operator was hard at work knocking down and burning trees. You see, it’s quicker and therefore more cost-effective to simply knock trees down and burn them, rather than logging them for timber. Afterall, they’re after the coal. It’s like killing a deer for the hide and leaving the meat to rot.

I never thought I’d think to myself, gee, I wish that company was logging.
One night, a retired union miner started telling me about the labor struggles of the 1910s and '20s. He told me that, back then, union organizers were being shot on sight. And any worker seen talking to one would be evicted from company housing. These folks would take shelter in shantytowns they built alongside the railways. The companies, however, hired thugs to perform drivebys on the ramshackle towns, killing even more.

He told me about a graveyard nearby, one with lots of young dead immigrants killed in the early 20th century. And perched on the edge of the hill, inside the graveyard, was a bunker that the companies used in their literal war against the unions. A friend and I found it, carefully hidden right beside coal company property and set back onto an embankment. Most of the graves were knocked over or illegible. Some were hand-carved. A few had been adorned with plastic flowers. The bunker sat empty, a small tree growing out of its roof. The structure was sort of a grave marker itself.
Later I went to the Mountain Justice Summer camp, a week of workshops. The highlight of this time, if you ask me, was walking out to a waterfall and sitting in the shade with a friend, watching the sunlight catch the foam and spray.
After the camp, three actions took place at the same time. Unfortunately, I only photographed one of them. In one action, eight people locked themselves down to a dumptruck the size of a suburban house, stopping work on an MTR site for hours. Elsewhere, two women kayaked a banner out onto the world’s largest impoundment of coal toxin slurry—a giant toxic lake situated where, were it to burst (not unprecedented), it would destroy an entire stretch of river, many towns, and many schools. These two women put the whole place on lockdown. And then, us, down below that impoundment. Seven civil-disobedients crossed onto company property, forcing the police to arrest them.

All three of these actions were important. Only one stopped work directly, but all three contributed to the goal of keeping pressure on those who would demolish mountains. The coal companies have said it’s like being under siege, like being at war. Good.
part two:
Haymarket & Idle Dandy Acres

When my friends finally got out of jail in West Virginia, I drove to Chicago.

Like a lot of anarchists, I’ve got a bit of a thing for the story of Haymarket. The real short version is that in 1886, someone threw a bomb at some cops in Chicago, and in retaliation the police rounded up eight anarchists and put them on trial for being anarchists. Four were hanged, one blew himself up in jail, and three were eventually pardoned. It’s a big deal in labor history. It’s why we have the eight-hour workday. So I visited the gravesite, and the memorial. Haymarket Square is now some yuppie loft space with a ClearChannel billboard. It may or may not have made me cry.
From Chicago I left for Tennessee with a lovely collection of friends. We rolled up onto Idle Dandy Acres (Ida), for the yearly Ida Fruit Jam (better known as Idapalooza).

Ida is a queer-and-trans land project that takes queer culture out of the city and drops is quite handsomely in the woods of Appalachia. I don't know what to say about it, or about my experiences there. I've never seen such a fine array of fabbed-out crusties and gender outlaws. I can't really say I'm much of one for music festivals, but this is something different. This is ours. This is the celebration of everything about us that is fucking weird and fucking amazing. There's also, uh, a hell of a lot of fucking.

I ran across a friend from years back, another photo school dropout. She was traveling with a view camera, shooting tintypes.

And I hiked with a remarkable boy up to perhaps the finest waterfall I've ever seen. I didn't take any photos of it, because sometimes you just have to let beauty exist in the outside world and leave it uncaptured.
Butchering a Fawn on Sunday

part three: Butchering a Fawn on Sunday

I don’t know if it will do any good to disclaim all of this that I’m vegan. I left Tennessee for Portland, Oregon. My old home. A few days after I arrived, my hosts brought a roadkill fawn and cut it up for dinner. Apparently, a hand-knapped stone makes a wonderful knife and hatchet. I took photos of the process, because without a lens there’s no way I would have been able to stomach watching my friends rip out an animal’s heart with their bare hands.
From Portland it was off into the heart of Cascadia, those lovely, lovely coniferous forests. I went to the Earth First! Round River Rendezvous, spent an unphotographed week networking, drinking, and ... I’m not not actually entirely certain what I did that week—not cause I was drunk, but because time, when casually enjoyed, seems to float away on the nearest breeze. I had a good time, regardless. Fought valiantly against the mosquito horde. But the climax of any good camp—or, hell, any good week—is action aimed to delay or destroy those who try to destroy the natural world.

We went off to Elliot State Park, outside of Eugene, Oregon. Public lands in this country, in
NO COMPROMISE ON NATIVE FORESTS

Earth First!
case you didn’t know, are not protected. In fact, the federal public lands (BLM and National Forest) are run like treefarms. Timber cutting of virgin forests is usually done at a net loss to the taxpayer, since the government foots the bill of building roads. But much like I don’t care about surface-miners’ jobs, I don’t care about the economics of public lands forestry. I care about these trees because I care about having natural ecosystems.

Anyone who has seen an old growth forest knows instantly how different it is from second-growth. And anyone who has seen natural second-growth can see the difference between it and mono-crop tree farming.

The Elliot State Free State was set up, utilizing a bipod, a hanging pod, and an overturned cargo van—as well as an amazing number of brave folks willing to lock themselves down—to stop logging for days. The forest defenders forced the state to bring in fifty or sixty cops to evict them all. And hopefully, this is just the beginning.
Getting involved with forest defense has undoubtedly been one of the best decisions of my life. There are many ways to get involved, but the one I suggest is to just hit the ground running: find an active campaign, show up, and help. Later, when you know what you’re doing, find friends and start your own campaigns.

There’s a huge coalition of folks working to end MTR in Appalachia, but for aboveground direct action, look no further than Climate Ground Zero: [WWW.CLIMATEGROUNDZERO.ORG](http://www.climategroundzero.org)

If you’re more interested in Cascadia, check out [WWW.FORESTDEFENSENOW.ORG](http://www.forestdefensenow.org) for the latest in Eugene’s forests.

For a bimonthly update on Earth Firsters around the globe (well, mostly in the US), read the Earth First! Journal, available from [WWW.EARTHFIRSTJOURNAL.ORG](http://www.earthfirstjournal.org)

You can see the photos that that fancy view camera took if you go to [WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/KNITBONE](http://www.flickr.com/photos/knitbone)

For more zines from Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness (significantly cheaper than this one!), check out [WWW.TANGLEDWILDERNESS.ORG](http://www.tangledwilderness.org)

And finally, I post a lot of my photos to my blog, [WWW.BIRDSBEFORESTORM.NET](http://www.birdsbeforethestorm.net)
strangers in a tangled wilderness