

WorkSpace Canada:
Conversations with Martin Weinhold, 2024



Erik Blok / Chris Wickenheiser
Drilling Rig
Kindersley, SK 2010

We may well spend half our lifetime at work... the way we make a living is an immense factor in shaping our personalities. Work defines who we are in society... this is how we appear and participate in the public sphere.

In 2005, I was determined to produce a comprehensive photo documentary about work in modern, western society. By accident, this was the year that I came to Canada for the first time. I was mesmerized by Canadians, by the diversity and openness of the people in this vast country, a young nation still on a quest to figure out what it is.

I wanted to give contemporary Canada a face, by creating a composite portrait depicting people from all provinces. At the same time, my mission was to explore the work/life possibilities of this day and age.

My photography is about a dramatic conflict that I see people subject to: being exposed to space and time, and being forced to make a living.

-from the exhibition **Face to Face with Canada – A Nation at Work**, 2017

By 2017 - the year of Canada's sesquicentennial - Martin Weinhold had been making photographs of the nation's workers for over a decade. Fifteen separate trips had taken him to all ten provinces and to Nunavut; he had made 13,200 exposures on film and selected 3,300 for scanning. Further editing has led to a reference CD of 160 images, acquisition of 112 prints by Library and Archives Canada, plans for a book, and the exhibition listed above, first shown at the Artspace Gallery in Toronto.

WorkSpace Canada is now the largest collection of contemporary workplace portraits in North America, representing eighteen years of work, over 100,000 km of travel, visits to 147 cities, towns and settlements, 16,200 exposures, and a new selection of 4,500 photographs. 264 work fields are already included, and results from 2024 will add to this total; a final trip is planned for 2026.

While a collaboration between Weinhold and Prof. Sara Dorow of the University of Alberta was established in 2021 and has enabled some expansion of the project's scope, for the first fifteen years Weinhold worked on a completely self-directed and self-funded basis, a vanishingly rare form of artistic commitment in the Instagram era.

I wanted to know more about the forces driving this project, and went to Ottawa in November to meet with Weinhold and to catch up with his latest work. Excerpts from our conversation, and a sequence of images that Weinhold provided, are below.

I grew up in East Germany... My parents were constantly debating whether to leave the country for good, or not... And at that time my aunt was working in a library, and feeding me these books about native peoples, and about Canada. So I taught myself to read, even before I started school, in order to read these books. And when I started writing, the first two words that I wrote were "Mexico" and "Canada".

I forced my mother to sew maple leaves on my clothing, which got me into trouble at school because Canada was a NATO country... And I was saying, even as a child of seven or eight, that I would emigrate to Canada and live in the woods... this was very confusing for everyone.

And then all of a sudden in 2005 I had an opportunity to actually go. I had my degree, but no girlfriend any more, and little work... I was in a very empty space. While I had produced a documentary about artists in Berlin the year before, I also had the feeling that I needed to do something that was not local.

*I had run across the ideas of Hannah Arendt in 2003, when an excerpt from her writing appeared in a theatre program for a Berlin performance of "Elektra". This led me to read Arendt's **The Human Condition**, and I think this book, with its presentation of three different categories of work, was really the inspiration for everything I did next.*

How do you live in a capitalist society? How can you match, even to some degree, your talents with the need to make ends meet? How do you live without satisfaction in your job and find other ways to complement or substitute for that?

These questions started to become the only subject that mattered... I would say that from this point on I really didn't have a choice anymore, I was so convinced that this project should be done. And after two years of visiting and some preliminary experiments, I realized Canada would be the perfect subject: it's a place where radical capitalism takes place, and yet people are very open.

The first trip in 2005 was basically a pleasure trip, but then I returned several times for short visits. In 2006 I started to make photographs seriously, primarily of members of the performing arts community in and around the GTA, as well as in Montreal and Vancouver; this was thanks to the introductions of a friend. And I applied for a visa that year under the Young Workers Exchange Program, with the idea of eventually immigrating.

In 2007 I had an exhibition with Jesse Boles as part of CONTACT, with support from the Goethe-Institut in Toronto. It was a good partnership: he hated photographing people, and I was bored by landscapes. He was describing what I couldn't, and I was exploring this new theme... it seemed like the current was running more and more in favor of this project and reinforcing the idea that I had no choice but to do this work. And I started to think, if you can do this in the GTA, why not extend it, and make an inventory of jobs and work in the entire country?

That's how I saw it... and by this time I had completely forgotten about Germany, I just wanted to work in Canada.

The day before we met, Weinhold had been at the National Gallery of Canada, to present a new portfolio. It's interesting that the true dimensions of his project become most evident when he talks about the prints themselves and describes his interactions with the people in them; it's nearly impossible to digest images by the thousands, but very compelling to engage with individual narratives.

The totality of WorkSpace Canada can also be more fully appreciated via the tonal range of Weinhold's prints, which are made on silver-rich Bergger paper and selenium-toned to archival specifications. It is an amazing experience to see these, and to hear so many details about the kinds of work that his subjects do. After our meeting, he forwarded a selection of photographs, along with notes and observations:

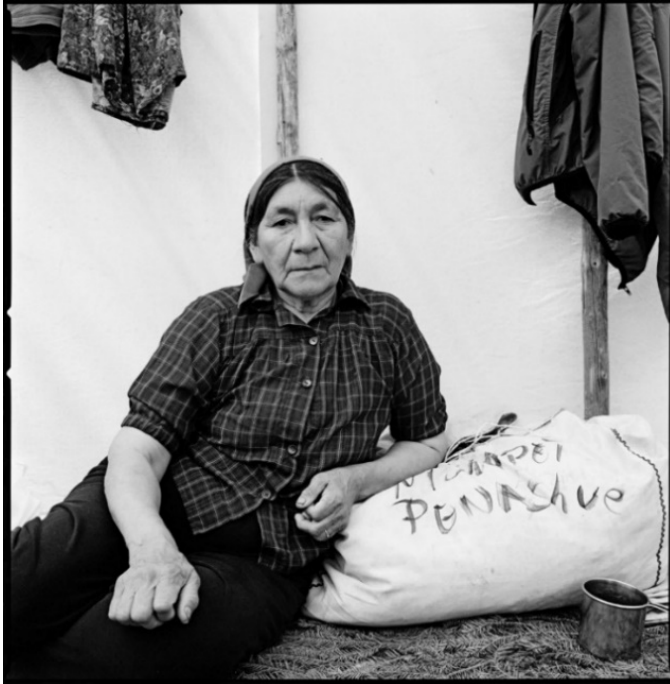


Hailey Cole
Cole Mussel Farms
Springbrook, PEI, 2014

This is an image that I often use when I first show the project to people. The reason is that Hailey really doesn't like the work she is doing—working in a mussel factory, starting at 4:00 AM—but even though she doesn't like the job, or feel that it adds much value to her life, she nonetheless understood the idea of a national inventory of work situations, and didn't mind being photographed.

I didn't have to persuade her at all, she wanted to be a part of the project. And this is something that I treasure so much... I'm immensely grateful to all of the people who have the courage to stand in front of the camera.

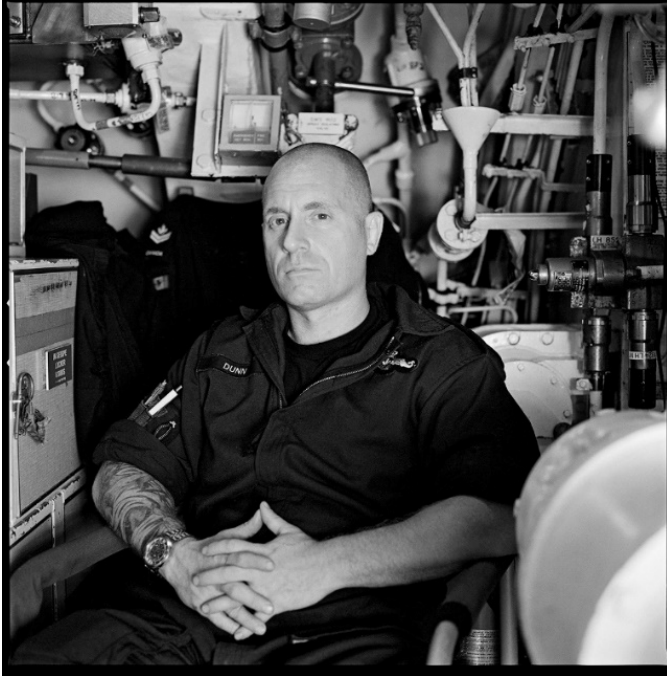
I learned quickly that it often doesn't work if you only show up once. For something like a potash mine it might work, but for other areas—First Nations, Hutterite communities, extreme situations like Fort McMurray, it requires repeated visits... I mean, the only thing I'm not supposed to do is make superficial photographs. There is way too much photography already in this world. In order to make a legitimate visual statement, I often need to go deeper, which for me only seems possible if I can return to places.



Elizabeth Penashue
Elder, Innu First Nation
Camp near Sheshatshiu, Labrador, 2010

Elizabeth Penashue is a well-respected Elder in her Labrador community—she was a leader in the movement against low-level military flights over the region—but when I met her in 2010 it was through a friend’s recommendation, and she was initially very reserved. I had little background about her... so I approached this very powerful woman without a lot of situational knowledge, and maybe that was helpful in this case.

I met her again this year in Sheshatshiu, and this time she actually asked me over for a visit, which was honouring and moving for me. Apparently I got a lot of credit for the simple reason that I came back, returning after fourteen years. This was something that I didn’t expect at all, but it was a big advantage for the work with the Innu community, since I had way less time for photography compared to 2010.



John Dunn
Naval Weapons Technician
HMCS Windsor, North Atlantic / Nova Scotia, 2016

This is John Dunn, on the Canadian submarine HMCS Windsor in 2016. I like it because of the compressed space in which he has to work. Although he came from the surface fleet, he wanted something different for a change; this is why he applied for the submarine service. This was one of the most demanding environments for me to photograph in, with limited space and poor illumination. I had to transport all my equipment and lights through the very narrow channels of the submarine.

I always had the idea to do a book about spatial relationships: you have a farmer in the open fields, you have people doing subsistence hunting in the wilderness... probably the most extreme contrast to that is people working in confined spaces such as this.



Julia Clinton

Order Picker / Cashier, Robertson Trading Company
La Ronge, Saskatchewan, 2023

This image was made in a store that means a lot to me—the Robertson Trading Post in La Ronge, Saskatchewan. It opened up a whole world, because the person who was running it was at first extremely suspicious of me and then became a huge supporter. Definitely the work in this region—including Stanley Mission, Grandmother’s Bay—would not have been possible without Scott Robertson’s help. This place became, I wouldn’t say a second home, but somewhere I felt very at ease, where I craved going back.

I went to La Ronge five times and when I was there last year in 2023 it was good and bad at the same time, as the store was closing. I don’t even know if there are any other trading posts left in Canada, but I was there when the store was still in full swing, and I made a complete record of the staff.

Julia is one of the people Scott most relied on, and she also very generously led me into her community. There are probably enough images from just that one region to do an entire book.



Tanya Kleinsasser
Colony Helper, Springfield Hutterite Colony
Saskatchewan, 2023

Another place where I was working with a special emphasis was the Hutterite colony close to Kindersley. I started in 2013, and it was just by accident that I got access: there were two or three other Hutterite communities that turned me away, they did not want to be photographed at all.

What I noticed is that the Hutterites are different in front of the camera because they are not photographed that often... so that was just a pristine ground to work on. I have no idea why they trusted me so much—maybe it was because the first collaboration went well, and I returned and brought them prints, and even had a makeshift exhibition in their lunchroom for one afternoon. They gave me almost carte blanche; I went there to photograph four times.

I think it was Richard Avedon who used the phrase “an undeserved intimacy” —you are so close for the time of actual photography, and then there is this strange feeling when you pack up your lights and tripod and put everything away.



Tatiana Iatsiuk

House Keeping, Canalta Hotel
Kindersley, Saskatchewan, 2023

This image was made in Kindersley, where I also went many times. My hosts there were wheat farmers who became like second parents, and Kindersley was also a very fruitful place to work because of the combination of agriculture and the oil industry.

In 2023 I re-did a subject that I hadn't been able to complete ten years ago, which was people who run the housekeeping in hotels. During my first attempt, in a Kindersley hotel back in 2013, the subject's boyfriend suddenly showed up. He was angry that I had not asked his permission... The work pictures were already done – of course she had agreed and wanted to be part of the project – but her boyfriend forbid any further photography, so I could not take her portrait.

And it bothered me that I couldn't finish, I had no portrait—because someone cleaning rooms deserves as good a portrait as someone conducting an opera. So that year I added another story about hotel workers, in a situation where I was able to complete the series.



Dr. Michael Jong
Labrador Health Centre
Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 2010

Going back to an image from 2010, and why I picked it: Dr. Jong was one of the people I had a chance to meet for a second time this year when I returned to Labrador, and he particularly sticks out to me for two reasons.

Firstly, this image from 2010 contradicts what I always said about needing time, needing at least an hour to make a successful portrait. When I can spend a lot of time with people, we can grow close together even though someone may not be sitting in front of the camera, and this was the case here. This photograph was made between 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning, in the Emergency Department during the night shift. I knew I would have very little time, but he tapped me on the shoulder and said he could give me fifteen or twenty minutes right then, so I was able to make a meaningful picture. This was the only fifteen minutes when there was no emergency and no alert, in a hospital serving a very torn community.

I met him again this year and was very happy about it, because again he was an exception to the rule. I had heard that many doctors leave the area after two or three, at most four, years, but he stayed through all that time and even after his retirement, and I took this as a sign of positive change.

These images are just a few examples. There are many strong bonds I feel with these individuals and with all these communities, bonds that have formed over many years. In every case, it's something I miss when I know I cannot return for a while.

But thinking back and also thinking about the future, I can only consider myself lucky because things have changed so much, even within the span of this project. Sometimes I feel as if the last time I was in a place was fifty years ago, but it's actually only ten. A profession, a calling, can become just a job... climate change can create all kinds of disasters...a lot of things I was still able to capture don't exist in the same way anymore.

Retiring craftspeople are replaced with line workers; the lobster industry has to move north to colder waters; the collapse of herring stocks has put an end to the weir fisheries off the coast of New Brunswick... Or take the area around Fort McMurray, where an industrial operation that defies any description still produces fossil fuels on an inconceivable scale.

The landscape there, in fact, is beautiful—there are very stark contrasts—the hills, the riverbanks—the silence of nature was so strong that it actually overpowered the sound of the trucks, and the only thing that came to my mind was the idea that nature is already preparing for revenge.

And, ten years from now I may not be able to run around so much with all my equipment. But the negatives, the prints, these will last. And I know I will keep working in the darkroom, no matter what. So the project is still ongoing...

For more information about the original **WorkSpace Canada** project, please visit:
www.workspacecanadaproject.com

For information about Weinhold's partnership with Prof. Sara Dorow of the University of Alberta, **Work-Life in Canada**, see www.worklifeproject.ca



Robert Hubers, Outfitter for Sailing Boats/Mover, Bowmanville, ON, 2007



Robert Hubers, Manager, Wiggers Custom Yachts, Bowmanville, ON, 2021

Robert Hubers, 2007 and 2021:
Sample images from the first year of the Work-Life project partnership



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