

THE DEAD TVs OF NYC

A PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES THE LAST TRACES OF AN OBSOLETE TECHNOLOGY

E

VERY JANUARY AT CES, IN LAS VEGAS, IEEE SPECTRUM editors find themselves strolling through enormous cathedrals of television: Multistory facades of luminescent images flood the eye from screen after screen. At press conferences, the manufacturers try to outdo one another with razzmatazz presentations as their latest wares make their glitzy debuts before heading out into showrooms around the world. ● Photographer Tom Starkweather is interested in the utter antithesis of what happens at CES. He recently published *Screen Saver*, a hand-bound book featuring oddly compelling photographs of televisions discarded in the streets and yards of New York City. Devices that would have once been the literal center of attention now lie abandoned, with the images on their screens formed only by the reflections of their surroundings. (Starkweather has also chronicled the fading presence of the pay phone.) *Spectrum* senior editor Stephen Cass spoke to him about his fascination for the public fate of yesterday's technologies.

Stephen Cass: What provoked you to create *Screen Saver*?

Tom Starkweather: I started noticing in 2015 that there were a lot more of these TVs being left out on the street, or in the garbage area of buildings. I thought it was just because of people upgrading their televisions. But I did a little more research, and I found out that the state made a law that you can't dispose of televisions with the normal waste; they have to either be taken to a recycling center or it's on the manufacturer to take them back. Of course, some of these television companies no longer exist, and from a building manager perspective they keep them together and then [dispose of them all at once]. But I've seen some of them

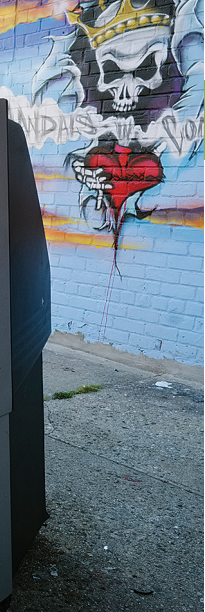
hang out for six months. I saw one yesterday that's been there for a year!

And those televisions—at least those with that kind of cathode-ray tube and big, bulging back—are not something you're going to see as much of in the future. So I started photographing. I have hundreds of pictures of these TVs.

S.C.: How does this relate to your earlier pay phone photographs?

T.S.: I'm influenced by photographers from the '60s and '70s in New York. What I get out of looking at some of their photographs is the things that might have seemed ordinary at the time and now really stand out as [part of] a different era.... Things are going to change as





society progresses, and technology is a huge influence on how things are changing. The pay phone project started in a similar way, where I just started collecting as many as I could. It was something I started right after I moved to the city. I hadn't seen so many pay phones in one place, but I realized, "Oh, wow, there's a lot of them, and they're not going to be here in the future." In some ways, you're trying to predict how things are going to change. But with the pay phones and the TVs, it's pretty obvious.



S.C.: What tech are you currently tracking?

T.S.: I photograph cash whenever I see anyone who has cash. Newspapers, things like that, things I don't believe are going to exist in the physical form they currently do.

S.C.: How do you approach composing photographs of what's generally considered junk?

T.S.: It's like, "How do you make garbage interesting?" I didn't really think about the reflections until much later, when I was reviewing what I had shot. But I started noticing the reflections being an interesting component. The TVs used to have so many different images on them, but now they're static, unless something moves in the reflection.



S.C.: What was the motivation in making a physical book instead of just, say, a nice website?

T.S.: I've been into bookmaking since I took a class in college on making editioned books. I make the whole thing in my apartment. I print it myself; the binding is a simple staple binding. But I find it's a good way to chronicle the events of a year or a particular project. And I actually felt a lot of pressure to put that book together because I started noticing other people photographing the TVs! They were out there. People are going to take pictures of them. A neighbor from a different neighborhood saw my project and bought my book because he had been running a blog himself about it!

TOM STARKWEATHER (6)