

Interview w/ Vincent Wagner, This Very Instant  
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I had a quick talk with Ben Hoste, a non-fiction, documentary photographer based in Brooklyn, NY. The pictures below are part of his decade long project *Plato, Mo. Population 109*, the mean population center of the United States.

**WAGNER: When did you start taking photographs and why?**

**HOSTE:** I've always been interested in photography. I took photo classes in middle school and high school, but never really thought of it as a career or something to pursue seriously. However, I've always been interested in story.

After college I was working in the film industry and tangentially ended up photographing the burgeoning independent music scene in Los Angeles. For a couple of years starting in 2008 I was photographing concerts four or five nights a week.

I saw a ton of bands, made a lot of friends, and really learned how to use a camera. But it wasn't until after I attended the Missouri Photo Workshop that I really had any idea what I was doing. It was at the workshop where I really learned how to use a camera as a tool to explore a subject or to tell a story.

After the workshop I went back to Los Angeles only to return to Missouri the following year for graduate school. The two and a half years I spent in Missouri were defining for me and I would have to say that it was during this time that I slowly started taking pictures for real-making photographs with purpose.

To this day the only true thing that motivates me to pick up a camera is the unknown. I enjoy making photographs, I enjoy the technical process, but in all honesty what really drives me is the opportunity to explore the unknown and engage with subjects and their stories along the way.

**WAGNER: Please tell us a little bit about your project "Plato, Mo. Population 109" and your fascination with the population center.**

**HOSTE:** The Plato Project started in 2012 about a year after the U.S. Census named it the town at the mean population center of the United States. I was living in Missouri at the time and was looking for a project to sink my teeth into. I decided to just look over the census data and see if anything nearby looked interesting. This is when I found Plato.

As soon as I read that the town at the center of the U.S. only had a population of 109 people I knew I had to visit. At the time I don't think I could have predicted that the project would have grown into what

it has become. But after returning time and time again I just can't help myself.

The fact that Plato is at the center of the U.S. population is so arbitrary yet so specific. The people of Plato embody all the things that make America what it is, the good and the not so good, the old and the new. In no ways does it represent America in its totality but it has a story to tell and that's what I hope to photograph.

At this point I've pledged to continue visiting Plato until the completion of the next U.S. census in 2021. By then I will have been working on this project for a decade. It will be a sad day when it's complete; professionally there is little I have done so far that has been as enjoyable as spending time in Plato, being fully immersed in the community, and making pictures.

**WAGNER: Do you intend to follow the mean population center for another decade?**

HOSTE: I have no plans to follow the mean population center to its next resting point. I've worked on many projects in Missouri and I suspect by the time the Plato Project is complete I will have already moved onto working in other places.

**WAGNER: Any (other) future projects we should know about?**

HOSTE: I do have plans to complete another large-scale project in Missouri between now and when my work in Plato is complete. It will be focused on the town of Fulton, Missouri where Winston Churchill delivered his famous Iron Curtain speech in 1946.

Alongside my prior project exploring Missouri's Old Lead Belt, it's my intention that these three projects—Good Earth, Plato, and The Sinews of Peace—will form a trilogy of projects based in Missouri.

I'm also working on various projects in New York (where I currently live) and feeling out what the next thing is that I want to sink my teeth into. It would be premature to discuss anything, but I have a few ideas that I'm excited about.