The Stray Shopping Cart Project

At some point in 1999 it struck me that there was an interesting art project to be done about the stray shopping carts I was seeing around my city. Knowing that I wanted to go beyond the conventions of social documentary photography, I set out to develop a system of identification for stray shopping carts. The idea was that by classifying the various situations in which shopping carts are found, I could illuminate the workings of a mundane phenomenon and, in so doing, explore the ways in which language and scientific systems of classification shape our perception of things.

Since starting this project I have documented and categorized thousands of stray shopping carts in the United States and abroad. My project, which began with a modest thirteen types of stray carts, has evolved into a complex system of thirty-three types that can be used singly or in combination to describe and thereby “identify” any found cart. The system’s two main classes are Class a: False Strays (carts that will return to the store that they were taken from) and Class b: True Strays (carts that will not be returned to their place of origin). Class a includes such subtypes as a2 Plaza Drift, a3 Bus Stop Discard, and a6 Plow Crush at Source. Class b includes b4 On/As Personal Property, b12 Simple Vandalism, b13 Complex Vandalism, and b19 In/As Refuse.

To see the full Stray Shopping Cart Project go to www.strayshoppingcart.com or seek out the book The Stray Shopping Carts of Eastern North America: A Guide to Field Identification (Abrams, 2006).
b12, Simple Vandalism.

a2, Plaza Drift.

a5, Damaged Group.

b2/b15, Damaged, Gap Marginalization.
b13, Complex Vandalism.

b3/su, Fragment, Source Unknown.

x2/s8/b16, Plaza Drift, Mixed Group, Edge Marginalization.

x2/b13/su, Damaged, Complex Vandalism, Source Unknown.