

COMPULSIVE CLICKER

Ellie Harrison photographed everything she ate for an entire year.



7:32 p.m., March 28, 2001

Ellie ate french fries and salad in naan bread with ketchup and mayonnaise.



8:46 p.m., April 8, 2001

Ellie ate couscous with tomato and kidney-bean sauce.



8:30 p.m., April 20, 2001

Ellie ate two veggie sausages with baked potatoes, kale, onion and gravy.



4:27 p.m., April 26, 2001

Ellie ate a banana.



3:48 p.m., July 19, 2001

Ellie ate strawberry cornetto.



4:37 p.m., Aug. 30, 2001

Ellie ate a Belgian chocolate and toffee-fudge ice-cream cone.



1:28 p.m., Oct. 10, 2001

Ellie ate two slices of bread, baked beans, salad, hummus and a blueberry muffin.



2:47 p.m., Oct. 26, 2001

Ellie ate a pickle sandwich.



3:19 p.m., Dec. 26, 2001

Ellie ate a branch of a Christmas chocolate log.



12:45 p.m., Jan. 2, 2002

Ellie ate a bowl of bran flakes.

A day in the life

By Lara Naaman
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

On the morning of Ellie Harrison's 22nd birthday, she ate half a slice of toast covered with Snickers spread. But first, she took a picture of it. Sixteen minutes later, she ate a quarter-slice of banana cake and took a picture of that, too.

For the next 365 days, the London art student took a picture of every single thing she ate.

"It was a challenge more than anything, to see if I could," she said.

She called this challenge the Eat 22 project, and posted every picture of her eating ice cream, cereal, sandwiches, etc., on her Web site, along with a stringent set of rules.

"All food must be photographed before it is eaten; all food photographed must then be consumed; in the case of party food (crisps in bowls, etc.), wherever possible all handfuls should be photographed. If any of these rules are broken, details must be listed in the log."

"Chewing gum is exempt as it is not consumable."

"I was always obsessed with food, and I wanted to prove how obsessive I was," she says.

And 1,640 photos later, it's hard to argue with her.

In fact, obsession seems pretty trendy these days — at least as an inspiration for photography projects. Anyone with a camera and an Internet connection can share his or her fixations with the world. And people appear to have no shortage of fixations.

On www.obsessiveconsumption.com, a Nebraska graduate student showcases pictures of everything she buys. In "The Doors I Touched Today," social psychologist Allen Bukoff photographed every doorknob he contacted in a 24-hour-period (www.fluxus.org).

"Pastalog" (www.stefo.net) is the ongoing effort where an Italian art student called Stefo lovingly snaps every bowl of pasta he eats.

Mundane detail becomes obsession in photo diaries

"American Mile Markers" is a chemical engineer's record of a crosscountry road trip — with a photograph of every mile between New York and California.

Mark Dery, cultural critic and director of digital journalism at New York University, says documenting the mundane is not a new concept.

"There's a long tradition in conceptual-art genres of exhaustively chronicling the banal things we do, every day, or obsessively documenting the unremarkable aspects of the object world."

And as digital cameras get cheaper, smaller and easier to use, anyone with a fixation or a point to prove can dabble in conceptual art.

"A project like that gets to the core of what photography is about: the passage of time through significant or insignificant moments," says Elaine O'Neil, a professor of fine art photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Miss O'Neil's own project involved taking a picture of her daughter every day for five years. "It does have to do with calendar. It does have to do with subtle change."

Subtle change is exactly what Jonathan Keller tries to show in his Daily Photo Project. The graphic designer in Brooklyn takes a simple, unsmiling photograph of himself every day. But he swears he's not motivated by narcissism.

"When I started, I just wanted to see how different I looked every day, because I'm a pretty average-looking guy. Now it's about time and evolution and metamorphosis."

On his Web site, www.c71123.com (he has an obsession with those particular numbers), Mr. Keller compiles and provides links to similar efforts, which he calls "obsessive photo" projects. "To do something creative and

truly original," he says, "you'd have to be an artist or a truly obsessive person." But it's a term he uses with a certain amount of humor. "Most people think it's funny. I don't know how you couldn't."

The people who create these photo projects don't consider themselves to be obsessives in the medical sense of the word. But then again, some of them don't consider themselves artists, and some don't consider themselves photographers, either.

"I don't think you have to be an artist," says Mr. Keller. "I think when digital photography became an OK medium, people just started experimenting with big projects. They're like, 'OK, it's kind of funny' and they're like, 'OK, I can do this.'"

Keller's Daily Photo Project site gets about 1,000 hits a day. And every two weeks or so, he receives e-mail from people who have been inspired to start photo projects of their own. But he has rules about the types of projects he'll link to from his own site. "I have to like the project, or they have to have a year's worth of work."

While the Internet is the obvious medium for these projects, they are not exactly "photoblogs," the photographic version of the popular online diaries called "blogs," short for Web logs.

The regularly updated photoblogs are displayed in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entry first. These obsessive photo documentaries often focus on a single theme, a specific time period, and are photographed according to a particular set of rules.

That's one of the main things that sets obsessive photography projects apart from blogs: the rules. Every project usually lists its rules on a Frequently Asked Questions page — like the ones in

Ellie Harrison's food project.

"I felt I needed to have some kind of guidelines so I could qualify whether I'd completed the challenge or not," she said. Mr. Keller, for his part, follows a strict no-smiling policy for his self-portraits.

While some might dismiss this type of discipline as simple insanity, Mr. Bukoff insists that the motivation has more to do with humor. "For me, it's like a quick, smart joke. It's a form of dry humor."

He's glad that other people get the joke. "It's wonderful to see all this human creativity," he says of photo projects he sees more and more on the Internet. "We're going to figure out just how eccentric and odd we are."

Sometimes this extreme focus on details reveals something about, well, the bigger picture.

New Yorker Aimee Sealton's One a Day project documents her interaction with a different person every day for a year.

"It had to be someone who impacted me in a big or small way over the course of a day," she says. Subjects include her mailman, a deli owner and a dinner date, and one can follow her progress at www.oneadayproject.com.

At the end of her year, she invited all of her subjects to a party, which she made sure to throw after April 15, so one subject in particular — her accountant — could make it.

"It was like a huge family reunion," she said. For Miss Sealton, the project was about exploring the changing notion of family. "Because in a place like New York, you can feel really lonely, but you're actually never alone."

That could be part of the reason people even look at these projects online.

"To a degree, [people] look at it because they're fascinated by the sight of their own lives," says NYU's Mr. Dery. "They're much taken, it turns out, with the sight of their own faces reflected in the media mirror — images of everyday people like themselves."