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# An Interview with the Man Behind the Photos That Are 'Too Hard to Keep'

Last month, we published submissions to Jason Lazarus's Too Hard To Keep Archive. As a follow up, we asked him some questions about the series.

By **Matthew Leifheit** | Mar 31 2015, 12:00am



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Earlier this month we published a series of pictures titled " **Photos That Are 'Too Hard to Keep'**." The images were from an ongoing project by Chicago-based artist **Jason Lazarus**, wherein he asks people to send him pictures that have such powerful emotional connections they can no longer stand to keep them, hence the project's name, Too Hard to Keep (THTK).

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own stories behind them and form dark narratives. But these stories are more a projection of our own lives and individual experiences.

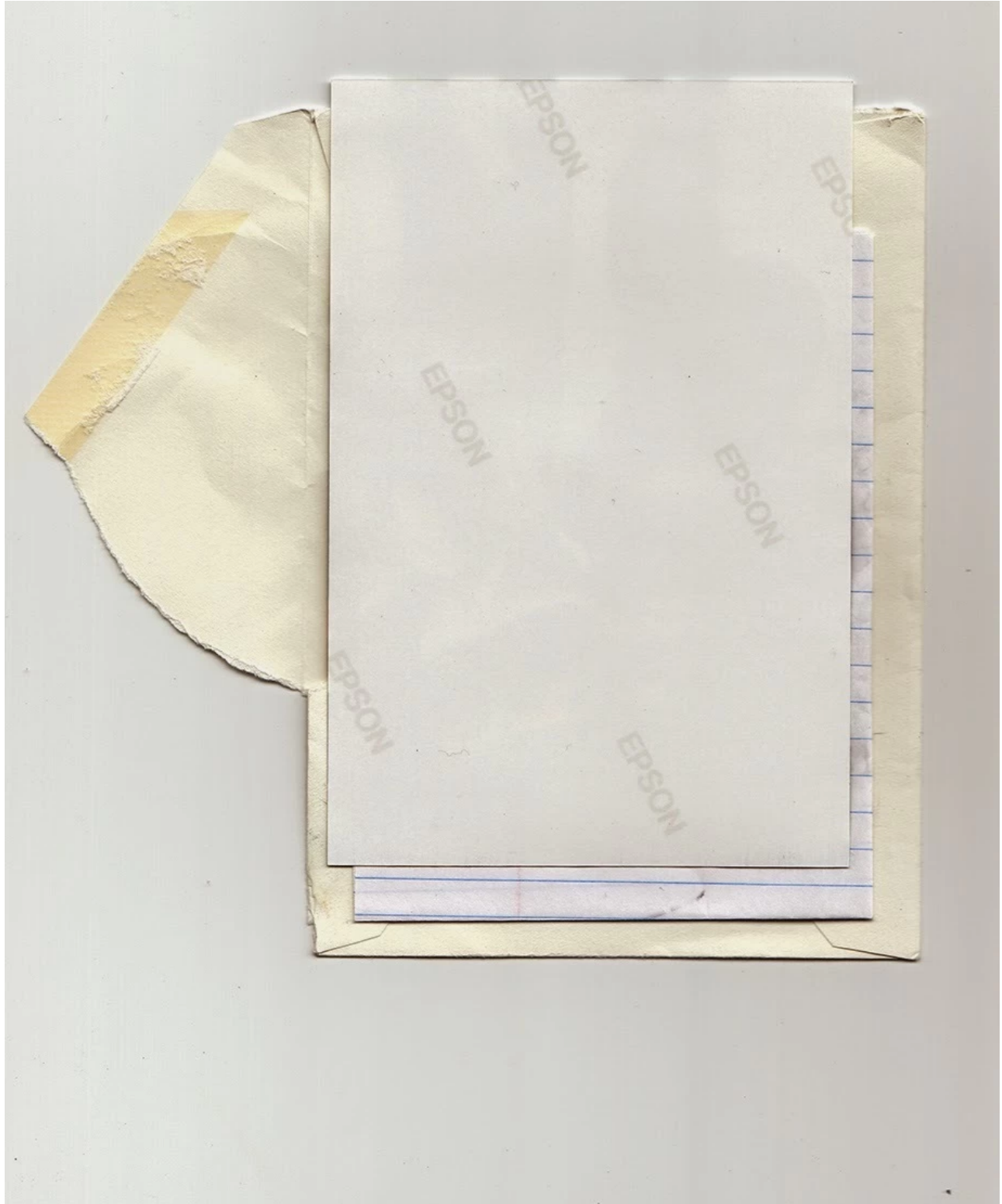
The response to the portfolio was huge, so we decided to follow up with Lazarus via email and ask him some questions about the archive, as well as feature a new selection of images from the project.



A recent single image submission to THTK

**VICE: Why did you start THTK? What was the first photo in the archive?**

**Jason Lazarus:** I don't remember the first image in THTK. I started it as someone who feels the same dilemma that I think many of the participants of the project share: how can I find meaning in this image?

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**I know you try not to have a "white gloves" approach to the archive, often photographing its contents casually in your home. Why is this, and how does it change the way you present the archive to the public?**

Institutions thankfully have many protocols in dealing with images. The way they

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official nook or cranny in an archive that has possibly multiple research tags through which to access it. To me, it's analogous to the humanities in general, which employ standardized formats for generating and attributing knowledge and sources. Artists sometimes mimic these practices and white-knuckle their holdings, place them behind glass, monitor their condition, faithfully document all holdings, etc... But I think artists are best when they are irritants to this form of knowledge-making, when they employ chance, intuition, sensibility, and in some cases, fiction. Artists are in a unique position to queer standardization and knowledge in general.



## Jason Lazarus: Too Hard to Keep (Syracuse)

from [Light Work](#)

08:52

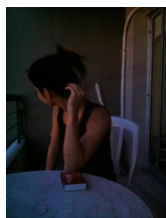


When a submission comes in I sometimes will apply a random text or numeral to the backs of the images to hypothetically match them back to the same group again in the future, but often I don't. Usually when a submission comes in, it's the only time those images are together. After installing this work a few times, and not being present for de-install, I found the work comes back to me helter skelter. I soon decided to embrace this shuffling as part of the project, which I call *archival slippage*. It means I am constantly encountering images that are orphaned from their original comrades, and finding new contexts in which to understand them.


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From a submission of nine photographs to THTK

The archive in this sense is always renewing itself and presenting new networks of understanding. Installations become manifestations of this renewal, further problematizing linear understanding and catharsis... I want to engender *lingering* in the installations—highly personal engagements with reading the material that slow time and give rise to subtle readings and engagement. I respect the audience's ability to find their own meanings on their own timelines given their own idiosyncratic histories.



A recent single image submission to THTK

**The image of the girl with the black eye has become sort of iconic, or emblematic of this project. Why do you think people connect so strongly with this image? I understand you know her—how does she feel about this?**

The girl with the black eye (an old friend of mine, let's call her "Sue") was a submission I received very early on in the project, and it was revelatory on a few levels. It made me realize that the project had the possibility for real significance—not only for me, but for others. The level of trust I was implicitly asking for was being reciprocated in turn with each submission, whether it was violent or banal. Also, the picture immediately reminded me of Nan Goldin's *Nan One Month After Being Battered, 1984*, one of her most iconic images that stands alone, yet plays an important role in her extended narrative *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. When you're not Nan Goldin, these iconic moments and extended narratives often end up in our personal ether—sharp, potent, shape-shifting, foggy, remade in our storytelling, drained, decomposed, and hard to recognize over time. The archive is an unseen body, the submissions are discrete entry points.

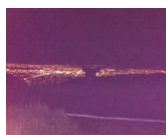
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Back to Sue—I've checked in with her when I use the image in promoting the project. I feel lucky that she's been willing to collaborate on growing the project, and I've dialed back the use of that image over time (although the internet has its own image logic and it often surfaces beyond my control). I don't think it's been effortless for Sue to see that image online when she's not expecting it, to be honest. But when it has appeared in installations and carefully edited publications, it shines brightly, and has incredible generosity toward the images around it and the audience itself. I have a sense this is the larger goal for both Sue and I.



**In a previous VICE [post](#) about the archive, a commenter identified one photo as one of the last shows played by Guitar Wolf before Billy (Bass Wolf) died a few days later. What are some other interesting responses you've gotten to the archive when it has been shown? Do people often identify things in the photos?**

It is rare for viewers to identify specific moments and name them, although this does happen sometimes online, and it is interesting to see an open narrative recalibrated and pinned down by the public.



A recent single image submission to THTK

*Too Hard To Keep is an ongoing archive by Jason Lazarus and is open for submissions. Please indicate whether the photographs you submit to the archive may be exhibited in the future, or are private photographs that are only to be*

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## **Jason Lazarus**

THTK

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