

# DoubleTake loses Harris, goes on

BY GEOFF EDGERS

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**A**lex Harris made his decision last fall. After five years and a flood of critical acclaim, he would step down from DoubleTake, the magazine he has edited since its inception in 1995.

But first, just before Thanksgiving, Harris paid a visit to his longtime collaborator, Robert Coles, in

Alex Harris, center, wants more time to devote to photography.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHUCK LIDDY

Massachusetts. He told his co-editor — the Pulitzer Prize-winning psychiatrist — that he had a simple wish: to be a photographer again.

Coles reluctantly agreed.

"I would abandon teaching and writing in order to keep DoubleTake going," said Coles, 68, in a phone interview last week. "And that's the difference between me and Alex. Alex is 20 years younger than I am. I've had the satisfaction of doing my writing without the demands of DoubleTake. He has things to do, if I may draw from Robert Frost, 'before he sleeps.'"

So the March issue will be the last

with Harris' name atop the masthead. As of January, he stopped working on the quarterly published out of Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies. He still has an office in the center's house, but it has been moved to a corner, away from the action.

"I'm a photographer," says Harris, 48. "The opportunity came up to work on this magazine with Robert Coles, and it's been a great experience. But I need to get back to my own work."

Harris was born in Atlanta, graduated from Yale University and arrived at

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Duke in 1971 to work on a research project. The next year, he and Coles began to work together, collaborating on two books. In 1980, Harris returned to Duke to start a center for documentary photography, which has since been folded into the Center for Documentary Studies.

Harris says he has enjoyed his time at DoubleTake. But he and his wife, photographer Margaret Sartor, have two young children, and that, coupled with the demands of his editing job, have kept Harris from his photography. His last project, a study of aging Triangle residents, took place in 1992 and will be published this spring in a book with photographer Thomas Roma and Coles.

For now, Harris, who holds a nontenured position as "professor of the practice of public policy and documentary studies," intends to continue teaching and working with the organizers of the upcoming DoubleTake film festival.

He leaves the magazine as its influence is growing. Though DoubleTake has been losing money since its first issue, subscriptions are up to 50,000, according to Coles. Its connection

to academe has proved vital, protecting the magazine from the perils of start-up and attracting big name grants, including a \$10 million gift from the Lyndhurst Foundation of Chattanooga, Tenn. In its short history, DoubleTake has received rave reviews from The New York Times, The Washington Post and the Utne Reader, which recently praised the magazine for evoking "life as it really is." There is also a DoubleTake line of books published with W.W. Norton, and, in April, the first of what is planned to be an annual film festival.

DoubleTake's stable of writers includes John Berger, Susan Faludi, Rob Gurwitt, George W.S. Trow, Lee Smith, Bill McKibben and James Alan McPherson. But it is photography — both the caliber of contributors and the space devoted to pictures — that has set DoubleTake apart from other literary journals.

"I wanted to change the way photography was treated and considered in a major publication," says Harris, "and I've had an

opportunity to work with a number of my heroes, everyone from Helen Levitt to young photographers like Thomas Roma and Wendy Ewald."

Harris says he's considering several documentary projects, and unlike his other work — which has taken him to the far reaches of Alaska and New Mexico — he will focus on the suburban South.

"Oddly enough, to work on a magazine has been a lot more isolating for me," says Harris. "It's meant being in an office — I haven't had the pleasure of going out and connecting with people in the world."

Coles says he doesn't know whether he'll replace Harris. For now, he has been working more with New York photography editor Alice Rose George. Coles has, at least, decided on his future with the magazine.

"I've spent my life doing my documentary work," Coles says. "And DoubleTake is now the most important thing for me."

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Alex Harris  
explaining his leaving