

## Photographers as Exhibitionists

*A few of the reasons why gallery and museum exhibitions of photographs are so predictable and dull.*

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There's something basically wrong with exhibitions of photographs. To be more accurate, photographic exhibitions of the type which have become commonplace today always leave me feeling dissatisfied, as though the effort of having a shower, travelling to the gallery, making small talk with the other guests, is never compensated by the experience of seeing the prints.

There was a time, especially in England, when exhibitions of photographs were such rare events that I could wait impatiently for perhaps months, even years, before the next one was available for viewing. This became so frustrating that I felt obliged to instigate many exhibitions in order that I would have a show to attend. Today, the situation has changed dramatically and the medium has become so acceptable, and accessible, that there is a surfeit of photographs on public view. Now I must attend scores of exhibitions each year and there are scores more which are hung, promoted and disassembled before I have had a chance to pay a visit. And I am only talking about the exhibitions available in the photographic community in which I now live. If I was willing to travel greater distances I could attend several exhibitions a day, every day of the year. Everywhere I go on my travels there are always a few shows to see.

But I have a confession. Of the hundreds of photography exhibitions which I have seen over the past few years there have been only a handful that have been worth the effort. The question is: why?

It is possible that I have become jaded over the years, and am suffering from ennui, a boredom with photographs, and that the surfeit of images in my past has produced a picture-dyspepsia, like someone with a craving for chocolate eclairs who ate 20 at one feast and now cannot stand the sight of them. I do not think that this is true in my relationship with photographs. I can still be immeasurably moved, excited, energised, angered, and intellectually and emotionally charged by photographs in almost any other context than hanging in white mats in a spartan gallery setting.

One minor reason for my dissatisfaction with photography exhibitions undoubtedly has something to do with the usual gallery ambience. Most modern shows are hung for commercial reasons – to sell prints off the walls. I have nothing against this idea per se

but I must admit that I feel (am encouraged to feel?) slightly guilty about the fact that I am there to (merely) enjoy the prints and not buy any of them. Inevitably my appreciation of the pictures suffers unfairly because I am constantly aware, through the price tags as well as the environment, that these are commercial objects, and that although browsing among the goods is tolerated it is not wholly welcome. Even when this pressure, this self-inflicted anxiety, is removed, such as in the non-commercial rooms of a museum, I am still conscious of money. These exhibitions reek of wealth, preciousness and privilege. I am well aware of the efforts on the part of caring curators to obviate this attitude, but the fact remains that galleries and museums are inevitably associated with a small- and favored-class of people, and are likely to remain so. Photography becomes under these circumstances less and less democratic, appealing to smaller and smaller audiences as the “language” between artist/photographer becomes more and more esoteric.

There was a time in the medium’s history when the photographer’s work appealed to both his peers and the general public, and was understood by both, if for different reasons. Today, the message or meaning of most exhibited photographs is so encoded that only the initiated can begin to understand them. Even though I have studied photographs all my adult life I still resent this deliberate obfuscation of ideas – being able to decode the image does not give me a feeling of superiority but a resentment that the photographer cannot “speak” clearly and leaves up to me the work of translation. And that is being generous. A good deal of the time I am convinced that the work has nothing to say.

This brings me to another dissatisfaction with most photographic exhibitions. It is necessary to see a lot of shows before finding anything of real value. When exhibitions were rare events there was a fair chance, if a photographer was given space to show his work, that the show was worth seeing. Not any longer. With the plethora of exhibitions you must look harder and longer to find the important ones. That necessitates a great deal of wasted time.

Photographers themselves seem to be becoming jaded with the idea of exhibitions. In the past few weeks I have heard several fine workers say: “I don’t bother with shows anymore. I spend a great deal of money on preparing prints, overmatting, framing, insurance, publicity and so on, and then the exhibition is seen by a handful of people who have forgotten it within minutes.” Another photographer was more succinct: “Exhibitions? I don’t give a damn – they’re a waste of time and money.”

These speakers then went on to list many different forms for presentation of their prints to their peers and public which included self-published books, magazine “portfolios,” displays in public places such as restaurants, theatre and motel foyers, display cases in buses, underground trains and alongside elevators, in shopping malls and so on.

Personally I would agree with Stieglitz when he said that a good slide was one of the finest ways to look at a photograph. There is nothing comparable to the experience of a fine photographer projecting a large quantity of his work while commenting on the images. I not only find words, gestures and inflections of speech extremely revealing of personality (and therefore contributing to an understanding of the work itself) but the sense of participating in the event of viewing with other members of the audience is just so enjoyable. It certainly eliminates the anxiety of tip-toeing around a hushed, empty gallery, staring with isolated reverence at a print surrounded by acres of whitewash, as if in the presence of some sacred icon of Art.

This is a different experience of viewing photographs than was commonplace in the 19th century. The typical show in the first half century of the medium took place in a high ceilinged Victorian room, and hundreds, even thousands, of prints mounted in all shapes and sizes of frames, were hung edge to edge over the whole available wall space, from knee-level to the roof, all jostling for attention with each other, patterned wall paper, gas fittings and furniture. All those prints for which no wall space could be found were casually dumped on a table in the center of the room. I think I would have enjoyed visiting an exhibition in those days. I could have seen more prints in one room than I now see at 50 contemporary exhibitions. And I do believe that quantity is important. I would guess that most modern one-man exhibitions include 40 prints, and I have seen “shows” that included only ten photographs. I cannot help feeling that something intrinsically photographic is lost in such overrefining. The merit and meaning of photography is intrinsically linked with a cumulative effect, each print reverberating with messages in a continuous chain reaction, the final result of which is an explosion of possibilities. Such a continuous progression cannot occur when individual prints are seen in isolation or in excessively edited groups – a chain with missing links is useless for any practical purposes.

Perhaps one reason for such small units of prints today is that photographers do not work so hard. Consider Adolphe Braun. He is renowned for his portraits, landscapes, alpine views and genre scenes of Parisian street life – but also photographed flowers. At the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1855 he showed over 400 plant studies! And it must be remembered that he was working with the tedious, complicated and time-consuming collodion process. Which art photographer today would make 400 prints in a single series, let alone consider exhibiting a final selection of this number?

Of course, the earlier obsession with quantity (as well as quality) could be taken to ludicrous levels. The most extreme case of which I am aware was the exhibition of photographs of colonial life displayed at the Royal Horticultural Hall, London, in 1907. Fifty-thousand photographs were on display for only three days! That would mean looking at just over 16,666 prints per day; viewing over 2,000 prints per hour, assuming an eight-hour day. Or approximately half-a-second for each photograph, and moving on to the next.

Although this exhibition reduced the idea of quantity to an absurd level, it is interesting to contemplate how and why there has been such a massive shift in emphasis from the Victorian notion of a photographic exhibition to the sterile attitude that prevails today. One of the major changes has been the move away from the rag-bag assortment of styles, subjects and processes of the 19th century exhibition to the emphasis on the individual artist, and hence away from the communication with the public to the artist's communication with his peers. To a 19th-century photographer there was no difference in the work which he produced for money, for exhibition to his peers and for personal gratification. The same prints were used in each context. In fact, the Victorian would have been bemused, and amused, at our categorisations of art versus commerce. Nineteenth-century exhibitions displayed art-compositions by Robinson, alongside architectural studies by Bedford, and mass-scale stereoscopic views by William England. All styles and attitudes coexisted amicably. All exhibitions until the 1890s made no distinction between photographs taken with artistic intent and those for more utilitarian purposes.

This situation did not begin to change until the formation of The Linked Ring society in 1892. These "artists" expressly demanded "the complete emancipation of pictorial photography . . . from the retarding . . . bondage of that which was purely scientific or technical, with which its identity has been confused too long." Their first exhibition, in 1893, was called "The Photographic Salon" in order to connote fine-art exhibitions "of a distinctive and high-class character." The rift between art and documentary, or commercial, photography saw its first cracks in the salon, and the gulf has been widening ever since.

It was also at the Salon that the presentation of photographs began its shift away from the higgledy-piggledy jumble of the earlier shows towards the pristine preciousness of today's exhibitions. The individual responsible for beginning this trend was Frederick Evans. In 1902 he was charged with hanging the annual exhibition; the scheme which he adopted was revolutionary and set the style for most future exhibitions down to the present. He covered the Victorian wall coverings with neutral jute canvas. From the skylight he draped a canopy of this white cloth which not only diffused the light but hid all the other visual distractions. Evans was also fastidious in grouping the prints, considering every photograph – its size, its colour, its frame, its mount, its subject – in relation to its neighbors. One awed critic remarked that "The amount of trouble he has taken over the hanging alone is hardly credible" and that the display was "a sermon in massing and composition."

Evans hung the next three Salons, setting the pattern for all future "serious" art-photography exhibitions. When the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession were opened, late in 1905, it was evident that the new style of exhibitions had been accepted. Edward Steichen designed the rooms in neutral colours, the walls covered in burlap with a creamy gray canopy. Each print was displayed in a large light mount in thin-edged

frames. No longer were the prints stacked several deep; the photographs were hung in a single neat line.

This “modern” display of photographs was undoubtedly a welcome change from the chaos of earlier 19th-century exhibitions. But now it is time to ask: Was the baby thrown out with the bath-water? After nearly 100 years of these super-refined, precious little exhibitions, is it not time that the pendulum swung back towards the excitement and rawness of the early shows? Is it not time (now that photography has won the acceptance of the art-establishment) to begin bridging the gulf between art and other photographic applications, including technical, scientific and, yes, even the best of commercial photography?

I, for one, would welcome now and again the excitement, and even the mistakes, of a wall-packed, diverse and chaotic excess of pictures, in a multitude of styles and presentations and subjects. I am tired of only looking at one band of the photographic spectrum. Let’s splash a gallery with the rainbow hues of the medium!