

Private Views on Public Speakers

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A cartoon, clipped from an unidentified magazine, has been pinned to the art department notice board. The drawing depicts a longhaired, bearded, arty-looking fellow sitting alone on a couch while the other guests at the cocktail party are standing in animated conversation. A lady detaches herself from a group and approaches the seemingly lonely man. "Sorry," he says, "I cannot engage in an intelligent conversation - I'm visual. "

I love that cartoon. In a deft sketch and succinct caption, the author has accurately exposed one of the major absurdities of contemporary photography - the inarticulate artist, the visual person who takes pride in his verbal incompetence.

The most pernicious and prolific form of this conceit is in public speaking. I shudder at the thought of all the boring, obscure, unintelligible and seemingly never-ending lectures I have suffered through. And I suspect that most of you cringe at the thought of similar experiences. What colossal arrogance of the lecturer to assume that his/her physical presence will so overwhelm the audience that the words are irrelevant.

One of the causes of the problem is the assumption, at most art photography courses at college and university, that the students will eventually become teachers yet rarely, if ever, are they taught the verbal skills which are demanded by the profession. This is not surprising. Most teachers are hired on the basis of their portfolios and it is not until they begin classroom work that it is discovered, if anyone cares, that they are incompetent in transmitting information and ideas by word of mouth.

There is even less excuse when a photographer is asked to speak at a conference. If he feels that talking about pictures is not his *forte* then he has the option to refuse the invitation. It is puzzling that so many leap at the opportunity to speak publicly and then bore the audience and embarrass themselves. I must admit that the fault lies largely with the audience for tolerating such inadequacies. The standards of public speaking in photography are so low that everyone has come to expect a poor effort; verbal incompetence has become the norm.

It is useless to argue that the photographer communicates visually, implying that this is his primary form of interaction. Does he show a print of the food he requires at the grocery store, while mutely gazing at the manager? The idea is preposterous. Language is the prime vehicle for personal expression (even if it is only an expletive!), for transmission of ideas, and for social interaction - and that is true for everyone, including photographers. Then perhaps it can be argued that the visual artist is merely *less* competent with words than the remainder of humanity. Again, this is not true, and has never been true, in any of the arts throughout their histories. Another objection may be that some photographers are naturally better speakers than others. There is some truth in this, but not much. Effective public speaking can be learned, relatively quickly, by anyone. And to refuse to spend a little time and energy in mastering the rules is disrespectful to the audience.

Although I earn much of my living as a lecturer, I am just as often a member of the audience at someone else's lecture. I would like to offer the following advice to students who are thinking of a career in teaching, to photographers who are asked to give a public talk, and to critics and historians who present papers at conferences. I do not profess to be an expert at public speaking and I am not suggesting that every photographer delivering a lecture should have the intellectual grace of Wright Morris, the rambunctious wit of Harold Edgerton, or the personal intensity of Ralph Steiner. I am merely suggesting that these are the points which I attempt to bear in mind when giving a talk, and which I expect when listening to one of my peers. I have divided the suggestions between "Preparation" and "Presentation":

Preparation of a talk:

1. Know what you want to say. This seems too obvious to mention, yet it is surprisingly common to hear a rambling, disjointed, purposeless lecture and to leave the talk utterly confused at the point the speaker was attempting to make. In any lecture select *one point only* and bring all the evidence to bear on this single topic or idea. At the beginning of the talk tell the audience a) what you intend to prove; b) why it is important to you; c) what relevance it has to the audience. It is also a good idea to end the talk on a *brief* summary of the main argument.
2. Be organized. When preparing the talk write down the key points of your argument on individual note cards. Shuffle the cards until the sequence of ideas is logical and clear. Then you can write out your talk in full - or use the cards as memory-joggers during the presentation.
3. Use analogies and anecdotes. At particularly difficult ideas try to make a relationship between the concept and an event or object with which the audience will be more

familiar. Give examples and collect stories that illustrate the idea. Remember that the audience will learn only if it is *interested* in what you have to say. To some degree every public speaker is an entertainer, and you must use any device available in order to retain the concentration of the listeners. When the audience is bored, you are not communicating.

4. Know your material. Never speak on a subject with which you are unfamiliar. As soon as you step to the lectern you are the authority. Try to fudge your ignorance the audience will spot it instantly - and like sharks attacking a wounded comrade will tear you apart, hopefully only mentally. Always have much more information on the subject than you can possibly include in your talk. A good lecturer is a confident one.

Once you are sure that you have mastered the facts, never apologize to the audience. If you are not confident of your ability there is absolutely no reason why the audience should believe you. Everything you do and say in front of the listeners should radiate confidence.

5. Use good visuals. If you are showing slides with your talk, do not use too many. The correct number will depend on the time allotted for the lecture, and on the purpose of the slides. Remember that the audience will probably not remember more than 15 images. Additional slides can be inserted to make ancillary points but I do not project more than is absolutely necessary. I was at a lecture a few months ago when the audience watched the speaker carry four packed carousels towards the projector. The audience groaned as one body! Make sure every slide is sharp, well-exposed, of consistent color and quality, marked and inserted in the tray the right way up and the right way round. Pre-project the slides *before* leaving for the lecture.

6. Keep it short. If you have been given a time limit for your talk, make sure that you finish *well within* that time. It is bad manners to extend beyond the time you have been given. Give the talk to yourself in private, remembering that it takes much longer to deliver it to an audience than it does to read it in private.

7. Arrive early. Often, your hosts will want to take you to dinner immediately prior to the lecture. If you accept the invitation *insist* that you finish eating with enough spare time to travel to the lecture place and arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the scheduled time of the talk. Do not drink over dinner. As a member of an audience I feel that I have been treated rudely if the speaker nonchalantly arrives late in a boozy crowd of buddies, without explanation or apology for why the audience has been kept waiting. This is most disrespectful and arrogant.

8. Make sure everything works. Another reason for arriving early is that you can check all the equipment and controls. Check that the projector is aligned with the screen, that the slides are changing correctly, that the image is in focus. Carry a spare projector bulb in case one blows. Make sure that the cord of the automatic changer is long enough to reach the podium, and that the microphone, if used, is at the right height and is set to the correct volume. And so on. None of these adjustments should be made once the introduction has begun.

If you have an assistant to operate the light switches and the projector, make sure that the signals between you are clear. Insist that he/she keeps each slide in focus without being asked.

9. Be courteous. Presumably, you will be introduced by a host. Thank him or her for the remarks and thank the audience for attending, acknowledging that you feel honored, not arrogant, in accepting the invitation to speak to those in the audience.

Presentation:

1. Be enthusiastic. If you do not feel enthusiastic - fake it! A monotonous, unanimated delivery is very difficult for the audience to follow. Dullness encourages a lack of concentration, and without attention nothing is understood. Also, a flat uninspired talk is sheer laziness on the part of the speaker. It shows that he is not putting out energy - and he therefore deserves the scorn of the audience. If the lecturer does not care enough about his topic to generate enthusiasm in himself, why should I, as a member of the audience, care about his message? If you are enthusiastic about your subject, communicate that love and interest to your audience and you will have succeeded in informing and entertaining them. Get excited. Rejoice in emotions. Don't be afraid to express anger, reveal passion, or adamantly state convictions. You are not a machine playing back a recording; you are a human being with feelings and excesses.

2. Use your voice. By this I mean: after the pitch and speed of delivery of your words to create verbal variety. A tune with only one note played at regular intervals would soon become tedious. Your voice has a range and variable speed so use these qualities to sustain interest.

If you have written out your talk in full, *never* dip your head to the pages and read through from first line to last. That isolates the audience from your private act of reading, in which case it would be far more satisfactory to hand (or mail) each member of the audience a photocopy of the transcript. The art of lecturing is to perform a public act, with words as the connection between the thoughts of the lecturer and the minds in

the audience. Be aware of the audience at all times. Understand their needs.

For example, if you are quoting a passage or reading a poem it is important that every word is exact - therefore you will need to read it. Do so *slowly* - much more slowly than you would normally read a text. If the quotation was a little obtuse, summarize the main idea which you feel is important. Then, read a sentence or two again. There is no point in quoting a paragraph unless its meaning and purpose in the talk is clear.

On the whole, keep quotes to an absolute minimum. Having slowed down for a quotation you could look directly at the audience and recount an anecdote to provide light relief from the previous seriousness and also to change the pace. An anecdote, story or analogy can be told in a much more colloquial, racy manner. There are scores of other examples on how to break the rhythm of a talk, but the most important point to bear in mind is this: speak with enthusiasm and you will be forgiven much!

3. Speak clearly. You are not, presumably, attempting to impress the audience with your erudition, pedantic scholarship and mastery of obscure 18 century footnotes. You are attempting to communicate, verbally, your own passion for a subject and want the audience to join you in a celebration. So keep the words simple and your manner light. If you insist on talking about "the substantiation of archetypally motivated and monistically identified reality, where fractionalism is supplanted by polysynthesis and configurative-imagistic continuity," then the audience has lost several links in the chain of your argument while they are attempting to work out what that means. By then, you have moved on, and the audience never catches up. So the listeners will sit for the remainder of the talk in a state of trance, wishing you would go home so that they could do the same.

If you feel that you cannot communicate in an entertaining manner without jeopardizing the integrity of your ideas, then do not deliver the ideas as a talk. Write them for publication. At least when the article is in print, the audience has the opportunity to throw it aside and go and make a cup of tea instead. The audience at a lecture does not have the pleasure. The listeners are captives; treat them kindly and with a sensitivity to their needs.

4. Communicate directly. It is a good idea to select a single member of the audience and aim your remarks to that person. This will give you a sense of "connection" with the audience as a whole. If you are a bit nervous you can imagine that this person is the only listener out there, and your confidence will increase as you talk to an individual, and not an amorphous mob.

Be impromptu - even if it is planned. Have several stories available which illustrate certain points in your text. At these passages, push your notes to one side, step away from the podium and say: "That point reminds me of a story" Not only does this alter the rhythm of the talk but it looks as if the story has just occurred to you. It connects you to the audience in a much more human way. Or, after a particularly dense passage, you could stop reading, look up at the audience and ask: "That was a bit difficult to understand, I know; did you understand it?" Asking a question of the audience (even if you do not receive a response) shows that you care about the listeners, and that you are responsive to their needs. In the right context, ask the audience to shout out any questions, encourage interruptions. The chances are that no one will take up your offer, but, again, you have demonstrated your concern.

6. Be frank. For example, there will be occasions when you have lost your place in the text, or your train of thought is suddenly derailed. Don't panic. The more frustrated you become, the less chance you have of picking up the idea. Say to the audience: "Now I'm completely lost; can anyone help?" A plea for sympathy works wonders; the audience is now on your side rather than your antagonists. On occasion when I have lost my place, I admit the fact then talk about *anything* (such as an amusing incident I read in the local paper or saw on television) and, while I am relating the story, the train of ideas seems to get back on the right track.

7. Repeat yourself. A talk delivered to a "live" audience demands a very different construction than a written article. A text intended to be read can be absorbed at the pace of the individual. He can reread single paragraphs several times, refer back to previous pages, note literary allusions and admire constructions of ideas. Not so in a talk. The listener is forced to travel at your pace. Keep him informed of progress. For example: "I have now demonstrated my first point, which is that Now for point two, which is" At particularly difficult ideas, repeat them in various forms. An abstract concept can be quoted, then illustrated by an analogy, and perhaps repeated again in the form of a personal anecdote.

8. Keep an eye on the clock. Finish within the time allotted for your talk. Leave the audience wanting more, not breathing a sigh of relief that the ordeal is over. Usually, you will be expected to field questions. Use this opportunity to give additional information which you could not include in your talk. Treat every question, no matter how silly, with respect and attention. Remember that not everyone is at your own level of expertise - and you, too, had to start from ignorance. Ignorance can be excused; there is no excuse for bad manners, especially on the part of a lecturer.

9. Ride the waves. As you become more adept at public speaking a very curious and

stimulating effect will be observed. You will be able to "feel" the mood of the audience, as though you were in telepathic communication with a single large organism. There will be waves of emotion that are palpable and usable. Nothing is more thrilling than to ride these crests, like a surfer timing his movements for maximum speed. The best lecturers are those most sensitive to the subtle emanations from the audience, and able to propel them as a single body down the slopes of an idea. That "rush" when audience and lecturer are one thinking/feeling unit is one of the most powerful and exhilarating experiences in the life of a public speaker.

Conclusion:

I do not expect every photographer who delivers a lecture to be a great orator. But I do demand that anyone who agrees to occupy the time of a large audience treats the occasion, and the audience, with respect. This means investing time and care into learning a few basic principles of public speaking. The photographer who does not bother to speak well is being disrespectful and disdainful of the members of his audience. I have attempted to list a few personal observations on the subject, but I would beg the teacher, historian, critic, photographer - and anyone else in the medium who is ever likely to be asked to give a lecture - to read one of the books on public speaking that is available in any library, to critically analyze the styles and techniques of other lecturers, to *think* a little before agreeing to give a talk.

Every speaker will have his/her own mannerisms, gestures, voice inflections and speaking habits. My list of "dos" and "don'ts" is not universally applicable. But there are two points which *must* be observed, or I for one will not be interested. The golden rules for every public speaker, in any field, on any topic, in any context are these:

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY.
SAY IT WITH ENTHUSIASM.

Published in *The British Journal of Photography*, 2 October 1981.