

Professors and Professionals

a plea for bridging the divide

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"Professors" and "Professionals" might share the same linguistic root, but that is just about all that they have in common.

As often as not, the professional photographer views the art professor in academia as a photographer who was too incompetent to make it in the professional ranks. The art photographer in academia has the reputation of being a lazy dilettante, playing with inconsequential, irrelevant and largely superficial ideas while the mainstream rushes by, uncaringly. The teacher, it is said, is more concerned with reacting to images with a meaningless pseudo-intellectual jargon than with exploring the medium of photography in any significant manner. It follows that the impoverished students from academic institutions of photography are amazingly inept, at everything, and only fitted to find teaching positions in order to foist similar banalities onto another generation of students.

On the other hand, professional photographers tend to be ignored by academia as mere hacks who, because of lack of intelligence, moral scruples or willful ignorance of the medium's history and aesthetic issues, have compromised with commerce, sold out, reduced themselves to common tradesmen. The professionals, it is implied, have squandered photography's rich heritage in order to pander to the demands of a client. Money, not love of the medium, rules their hearts; "give the public/client the crap they want" is their motivating cry. Professionals, it is claimed, deserve to be ignored by academia because they have nothing to offer young photographers in terms of issues, ideas or inspiration.

Have I exaggerated the situation? Perhaps. But all of us have heard similar sentiments expressed by both professors and professionals. One fact that is not in dispute is that there is a widening gulf opening up between art and commercial photography, between professors and professionals. In my lecture travels to colleges and universities around the U.S.A. it is abundantly clear that art programs in photography are becoming increasingly isolated and incestuous -

and are in imminent danger of becoming totally irrelevant.

At this point, therefore, I should like to take a personal stance. There is some truth, and a lot of misconceptions, in the attitudes of both professors and professionals as previously outlined but *the responsibility for creating this alienation lies with academia*. This remark deserves, if not a treatise, certainly more explanation than space permits in this context. However, here are a few notes as the basis of my assertion:

The idea of teaching photography-as-art in colleges and universities is of relatively recent origin. The first M.F.A. in photography graduated in 1946 (from Ohio State University). Photographic education rapidly expanded in the following decade due to the increasing number of mature students attending the universities under the GI Bill. But it was not until the 1960s that the real explosion took place in photographic education. One of the most influential educators at this time was Van Deren Coke who declared: "I do not know how to train artists or photographers; but I do know how to train assistant professors."

The result was that colleges churned out teachers, not photographers, which had a profound effect on the medium's recent history and led to an alienation between academics and professionals. Inevitably.

When teachers train new teachers how to produce yet more teachers, a closed world is created. Most academics arrive at their college or university positions straight from an educational institution and therefore have no experience, knowledge, or interest in, the world of the professional. It seems churlish to expect them to forge links with a field of which they know nothing. Also, most photography courses are located in art departments, where the air is permeated with the ideas, issues, attitudes and history of art (meaning painting, printmaking, sculpture, etc., not photography). It is understandable if these faculty and students adopt ragbag notions of art-attitudes and wrap them around photography. In these particular (art) environments, life is more amenable that way.

Having created a closed, self-serving (and historically new) field of photography, the art establishment was quick to produce service organizations for this system. Lecture funds brought other teachers from academia to talk to the students; exhibitions were organized - but only by and for academic art photographers; galleries opened up to sell art photography; museums began to buy photographs, primarily by academic/artists; grants and fellowships were offered to

photographers, usually those who had an academic base because the selection committees comprised fellow teachers.

And so on. My point is that a specialized area of photography, comprising art-academics, has arisen in the past few decades which is totally new in the history of the medium and has, by choice and definition, very little connection with photography as practiced by professionals since 1839.

Revealing the wisdom of my age, I will confidently predict that the situation will *a)* stay the same or *b)* change. The ramifications of each alternative are more difficult to foresee.

If the situation stays the same, as I think is likely, then the gulf of misunderstanding between professors and professionals will widen. Many will say that this, too, is inevitable - and laudable. Advocates of art and academia will state that photography is a potent tool in the hands of artists and that the closer relationship between photography and the other arts is long overdue. Because the advocates of this position have only breathed the rarified air of art schools I can sympathize with the reasons why they would feel this way. But I still disagree. Photography, at its best, is not art; photography is photography. It has its own rich history, unique characteristics, singular strengths (and weaknesses) and clearly-defined principles, most of which are not shared by any other visual art. By denying its basic, core principles in the name of Art, photography is in danger of becoming impotent. My fear is that photography-as-art in academia is quickly becoming an irrelevant eddy in the mainstream of photography - and that future history, if it notes this area at all, will accord it merely a footnote.

I hope the situation will change. I hope academics will rejoin the photographic mainstream, by affirming that *the vast majority of the best images in the history of the medium have been made by professionals*. Let them admit that even their heroes and heroines in recent decades did not sneer at earning their living by doing what they did best - making photographs. Look at the careers of Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Duane Michals, Weegee, Margaret Bourke-White, Elliot Erwitt, Harold Edgerton, and so on and so on and so on.

The problem arises: teachers are not professionals so how do they incorporate professional attitudes into their curricula? They do not make the attempt. They admit their inadequacies and find every opportunity, through lectures, workshops, and exhibitions to introduce students to the work, Ideas and attitudes of the very

best professionals. They must build bridges of communication across the gulf toward the professional because the roots of their medium are on the other side, away from the artist.

That will take a lot of courage; it is difficult to admit personal inadequacy and it is even more difficult to alter institutionalized habits. But the results will be worth the effort. Academic photography could be a place of affirmation of the principles of photography, a source of rejuvenation of the medium. Professionals have much to learn from the professors; professors have even more to learn from the professionals.

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