

## Photography: The Contradictions are Clear

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Bill Jay

*What is most interesting about photography's career. . . is that no particular style is rewarded; photography is presented as a collection of simultaneous but widely differing intentions and styles, which are not perceived as in any way contradictory.*

Susan Sontag(1)

Whether presented with delight, bewilderment, or criticism, these words by Sontag are undeniably true and can clarify a good many misconceptions about the medium which are still staunchly held by many contemporary photographers. Although not designed to be so, the images in any anthology, in their diversity and stylistic variety, will serve to illustrate the point that photography of merit is, and always has been, a mixture of antithetical concerns and styles of equal value. Taste in photography is permissive. This is not to affirm that photographic quality - the good versus the bad - does not exist. It does, but only in relationship to the photographer's motives and achievements irrespective of his/her allegiance to a pervasive contemporaneous style. In this respect, as in many others, photography as fine art (or use the synonym, painting) presents problems.

Alongside the rise of interest in the serious making, and collecting, of photographs has grown the academic study of the medium by art historians. This is to be welcomed for many reasons, not the least of which is that a scholarly methodology will often reveal new facts and relationships within and without the medium, cutting through the fogs and mists of ignorance and false assumption and giving us a clearer view of the edifice of photography which, as yet, has only been glimpsed in part (a balustrade of biography here, a patina of process there, now and again a parting in the swirling of the fog which reveals a turret of truth, quickly gone). But there are dangers, too, implicit in such academic study of the medium by scholars trained in fields outside photography. It is a false assumption that the media of photography and painting, for example, are such close allies that an art historical system can be applied directly to the

history of photography with the inevitability of valid conclusions. It is tempting to treat a work of art as a purely formal construction outside its dialectical relationship to the various other products of the culture; it is equally tempting to cross-reference the various media and assume art is art. Both temptations should be avoided. Painting is not without its political ideologies; photography is not painting. It is worth repeating. Photography is not painting. Its history, processes, cultural and societal messages, the motives of its practitioners have rarely been coincidental. Photography's aesthetics are to a large extent dictated by its chemistry and technology; hence a methodology that is not firmly rooted in process (the practice of photography) and which relies on image appearance (stylistic analysis) is sure to deceive.

The proof of this assumption is to attempt the impossible: the listing of stylistic movements, throughout photography's history, which have been considered the apex of photographic quality at any period. The result of such a test will confirm that by and large photography is bereft of such groups, movements, collectives. At least such movements, when they have existed, have not played such crucial roles in the development of the medium as they have in painting. Efforts at defining photography, at any period, in terms of a manifesto or a group's dictatorial style have been short lived - and they have always coexisted, reasonably amicably, with widely differing stylistic movements simultaneously. Indeed, the arch protagonists have often professed their admiration for each other. Hence the topographer Francis Bedford paid his "tribute of admiration for those who, like Mr. [H. P.] Robinson aimed to elevate the art, and for that old master of photographic art, Mr. [O.] Rejlander." (2) Similarly, the purist Frederick Evans recognized "the compelling artistic genius" (3) behind the works of Robert Demachy. Bill Brandt, during his period of social documentation, could call Man Ray "the most original photographer of them all." (4)

I am not attempting to deny the fact that important stances have been taken by photographers with respect to the medium. Photography would be less rich without its credos, manifestoes, Brotherhoods, and secession groups. (At this point, some of you will question "what about Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession?" I would reply: look at Camera Work and the images reproduced will confirm that this high priest of persuasion was not as consistent in his choice of acolytes as his biographers would have you believe.

Also, the Photo-Secession was a noisy, well-publicized but not as universally adopted a concern as might be supposed. And, in parenthesis still, note that Eugene Atget was working at this period. )

The basic point remains: at any point in time many, widely different styles and attitudes have cohabited the field of photography and produced such a plethora of diverse images, all of which could be considered as having merit, that no period in the medium's history has been stamped with the look of a single movement. What was *the* stylistic trend of the 1930s? The large-format precision of the West Coast (Weston) or photomontage (Heartfield) or newspaper press work (Weegee) or miniature camera aesthetics (Cartier-Bresson) or pictorialism (Mortensen) or social concern (Bourke-White) or studio fantasies (Beaton) or camera-cataloguing (Sander) or. . . All these photographers were/ are considered 'good' photographers, even within the eclectic taste of the style-makers of the decade.

If the body of work by an individual photographer has only a superficial relationship to a stylistic movement how much more problematic when the work itself does not have a formal coherence. In large measure the art historical study of a painter relies heavily on his connection to an art movement and on the relationship of the individual pieces of his production to his growth as a mature artist. In photography, such stylistic analysis and connection is forced at best, silly at worst. The work of two of the greatest photographers of our age support this idea: Bill Brandt and Harry Callahan. Brandt has swung from social documentation to distorted nudes, from barren landscapes to portraits of celebrities, from architecture to constructions. Callahan's total output. . . well, it defies categorization of style or content.

There will be the assumption among some readers that the absence of major and dominant movements in photography works towards the detriment of the medium as a subject of serious study. As consolation I would offer the thought that it is, in fact, a source of its strength - if we are able to leave in abeyance our (un)natural urge to equate photography with painting. In this sense, photography is language not art; or rather, it is an art with connotations beyond formal construction or style - an *art* of the *science* of signs. (5)

And here we enter the core of the problem which has bedeviled and bewitched photographers since the birth of the medium: can a process-oriented science deal with the questions besetting the practitioner-as-artist? Two quotations will reveal the horns of the dilemma.

*When I have such men before my camera my whole soul has endeavored to do its duty towards them, in recording faithfully the greatness of the*

*inner, as well as the features of the outer man.* Julia Margaret Cameron (6)

*. . . less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these relationships.* Bertold Brecht (7)

Cameron, typical of the romantic/mystical aesthetic notion which still prevails today, arrogantly assumes that the appearance of reality masks an inner essence or truth about a place or person which only photographic genius can reveal through the photograph. Brecht, typical of the topographical/photograph-as-document attitude, which also has adherents today, naively asserts that the machine-made image is not influenced by the human being operating its controls, and that the image cannot operate as an equivalent.

If there have been any major movements in photograph's history, they have not been defined by geography, or decade, or personality. Yet two major concepts have served to divide the diverse splendors of stylistic anomalies of the medium from 1839 to the present day. The 'movements' differ only in the emphasis given to reality versus individuality. The question is, which has precedence: content or creativity, subject or self? At some times the photographer sees himself as an asocial being, aloofly observing reality, coolly regarding his surroundings with self-effacing detachment. At others, he sees himself as a willing accomplice of reality, struggling to shape and mold it, with the ironic result that it is the self that is pictured.

Literally and metaphorically, a photograph is not black and white, but an infinite number of grays between the two extremes and it is these shades which reveal the illusion of reality. In the same way that the photograph is considered incomplete without a black and a white, so the polemics of manifestoes, unequivocally affirming the photographer's right to stand at the edges of the controversy, are important in defining the parameters of the medium. The photographer must, does, understand that the richness of photography is enhanced by the multiplicity of attitudes between the two extremes. It is in these subtle gradations of tonal range, coexisting simultaneously on the surface of a single print, that the photograph is defined. A photograph is its tonal range.

Photograph *is* the diversity of its imagery. Photography needs its artisans as well as artists, its priests, its clowns, its snake-oil salesman, its idealists, its rebels

and revolutionaries, its popes as well as its posturers.

**References:**

1. "Photography in Search of Itself", Susan Sontag, New York Review of Books, 20 January 1977, p. 56.
2. The Photographic Journal, 16 January 1869, p. 208.
3. The Amateur Photographer, 12 November 1903, p. 393.
4. Album, no. 2, March 1970, p. 47.
5. This is not the place to discuss the ramifications of this point. For those interested, I would recommend the writings of Victor Burgin. See: Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics, Robert Self Publications, 1976. Or: "Art, Common Sense and Photography", Camerawork (San Francisco), no. 3, July 1976.
6. Quoted by Helmut Gernsheim, The History of Photography, p. 238.
7. Brecht was quoted by Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography", Screen, Spring 1972, p. 24.

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