

The Other Side of Photography

For a discussion on photography/art education

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In August 1989 I was invited to participate in a symposium on the future of photographic education at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, Holland. The speakers were asked to present a brief synopsis of their opinions as the bases for discussions during the conference.

Opening remarks.

According to one philosopher, there are only two types of problem: convergent and divergent. A convergent problem means that the more questions which are posed, the more likely is it that the ideal solution will result. As a simple example, imagine that you needed to invent a means of transportation with which to cross Amsterdam, which was faster than walking, but which relied on human muscle power. The more you thought about it, the more likely that your ideas would *converge* on to something which resembled a bicycle. In this case, the solution is specific.

A divergent problem means that the more questions which are posed, the *less* likely is it that a single, specific solution will result. Indeed, each question seems merely to spawn yet more questions at an alarming rate. Issues of "education" and "art" fall into this category of divergent problems.

Therefore, do not expect unanimity from so-called experts, any consensus from the majority or even direct, specific answers from individuals.

Nevertheless you will get my opinions, expressed as simply and forcibly as possible.

What, then, are the "problems" in photographic education? In a letter inviting me to this conference, Victor Levie asked several questions which perfectly express the issues which give rise to problems in photographic education, each one of which could provide never-ending discussion. In attempting to answer his first, and simplest, question I found my thoughts spreading horizontally across all the

others and vertically into issues of politics, economics, history and philosophy.

But do not worry ... I promised to keep this simple. The first question, then, was deceptively straightforward in its wording but infinitely complex in its divergent nature: *What does photography education mean?*

It means, says the cynic in me, that western culture has vastly overrated the value of higher education and that we are pressuring our youth to waste time in academia. A young person faced with the assumed need to attend college might as well engage in an activity which he/she finds vaguely interesting, such as photography. Beyond that general liking for the medium there is a confusion of purpose - both by the student and by the institution.

You can put this assertion to a crude test. On the first day of class I often say to the assembled group: "Students, I don't know you or your aspirations. In order to help you most effectively, we are dividing this class into two sections. Those of you who want to be *successful* photographers, go to that side of the room; those of you who want to be *good* photographers go to the other side of the room". The result is rampant confusion.

Those who want to be "successful" had not considered that this goal might entail a divergence from personal creativity; those who wanted to be "good" (fine artists?) had not considered that this goal might mean a rejection by society and, consequently, unemployment.

My point is merely that the purpose of photographic education has not been considered even at the most primitive level of survival - its usefulness to the individual following graduation.

Institutions foster this ambivalence of purpose in their catalogues, course descriptions, and in the attitudes, mannerisms, and conflicting desires of the instructors. And how could it be anything else? Institutions and teachers, like political parties and politicians courting the popular vote, hope that their vagueness will be acceptable to the majority, offend no one, and never be held against them in any future crisis. Who can blame the students for their aimlessness?

Photography education means providing a speeded-up access to information and experience which are directly related to the student's needs - whether a career as a local newspaper photographer, a medical technician, or a fine artist. But such

specificity of purpose is rarely possible to achieve in practice. Institutions and academic systems, by definition, are not capable of providing this clarity. It is much more suited to an individual mentor or apprenticeship system.

This problem of lack of specificity is rampant throughout photographic education but is particularly troublesome in the area of fine arts.

Not the least problem is that no one, as far as I am aware, has any idea how to train an artist!

A generation ago this was not a problem. Under the guise of a fine-art education the institutions trained art teachers, who would, in turn, train yet more teachers. We still pursue the same goal even though, at least in the USA, the "market" for photo-educators was saturated years ago. But change requires energy, a singularly lacking power in education. Daily, therefore, we are committing fraud by implying an end result (a teaching position) which does not exist.

There are two possible solutions to this problem.

Assign to one teacher the duty to look forward into the future and predict society's needs and, most important, give that person the power to reshape the courses and curriculum to meet those future needs. This is not likely to happen. Even if you could find such an individual capable of farsightedness, he/she would not be trusted with the power to adjust the program's direction, especially if our own specialty was threatened by the change. Also, the larger the institution, the less likely it could, even if it wanted to, alter direction at a fast enough pace.

A more practical solution is to encourage the breakup of large programs into small, adaptable, highly specialized units with limited life-spans, catering to the needs of a few, motivated and specific types of photographers, for a particular need at a moment in society's evolution. But this solution, too, is not likely to happen. An educational institution, like all systems, has an inherent urge to *increase* in complexity and bureaucratic top-heaviness, as well as a built-in need to perpetuate itself. Who, in this room, at a college or university, does not think our teaching is increasingly being directed by administrators, *not* by the demands of the field or the needs of our students?

So, given the lack of focus in photographic education, especially in the area of fine-arts, it is inevitable that a multiplicity of circles of confusion will be created, if you will forgive the photographic metaphor. Let me point to a few examples,

noting that all these circles overlap and have no clear edges where they melt into the surrounding culture.

Fine-arts education spawns and responds to an outside system of galleries, museums, grants, fellowships, awards and a collecting market place. Within this support system is a hidden agenda which has nothing to do with our ideals as teachers or even as photographers. The corruption which we absorb from these outside forces is all the more dangerous because it is insidious and devious. In the same manner we are constantly being assaulted by winds of change in our political systems manifested in a myriad of unfaced and therefore unseen ways. In the USA its symptoms are the suspicion of education by right-wing politicians, the fear of sex engendered by fundamentalist preachers, the guilt of racism and its production of hiring quotas for minorities, the stridency of feminists and a white-male backlash, the fear of controversy by the institution which provides censorship in all its subtle forms. And so on. My point is that photographic education is *not* free and isolated from the mass forces in our surrounding culture.

As members of society we are changed by these forces merely by the act of breathing. Our teaching reflects these changes, often in ways which we would deny.

At the university where I teach, the engineers/chemists, physicists call the Art School the "welfare case". In the scientific age in which we live, their disciplines are rewarded with multimillion dollar grants, especially by the weapons and pharmaceutical industries. In comparison, the artists are university beggars, hoping for a few measly crumbs to fall from the scientists' table. Do we (unconsciously) court their respect by making our courses increasingly intellectual, and difficult to comprehend, pretending that we are doing it for the edification of our students?

Like other institutions we are increasing our emphasis in criticism, aesthetics, philosophy, history. In terms of higher education this is reasonable; in terms of practice it does not seem to work. I regret saying this because I teach the history and criticism of photography. But in all honesty I have to admit that these intellectual pursuits seem antithetical to the creative art. Students, so often, become mentally constipated, incapable of looking through a viewfinder without responding to a theory, concept or style. The pleasure of direct seeing has been blocked by the mind. I hate to admit it but there is something anti-intellectual about the best photography throughout the medium's history.

Photography is *picture*-making, first and foremost, an emotional response through the eyes and into the heart, only reaching the brain at a later time, if ever. But we encourage ideas, brain-responses, and wonder why the results are emotionally barren. And we produce students who are often more skilled at talking about photography than at practicing it.

Photography, at its deepest core, is a visual response to charged living.

Which brings me to my final point and the most important message, in my opinion, which I can communicate to this conference.

Up to now I have been totally negative about the future of photographic education. In my opinion fine arts education in photography is already irrelevant to the medium and its history. But (and here's the positive note) in terms of the broader, deeper issues of education, of culture, of life, all these problems fade into insignificance if we can step back and see our field in perspective.

I will try to explain what I mean.

It is right and proper that those of us who, through the chaotic turbulence of existence, find ourselves teachers or students should meet together at this conference to earnestly and energetically explore the problems of photographic education. It is not a contradiction that we can, and should, see the field in its wider context and, from this perspective, declare the problems of minor relevancy. It is not a contradiction, I repeat, to be fully committed to photographic education and simultaneously step back and, in all humility, see its limited usefulness.

So, just for a few minutes, let us put aside the nuts and bolts of photographic education and talk about the only really crucial issue: the chance encounter between two existences, the teacher and the student. When two lives intersect something magical can happen, and photography becomes merely the means to communication and change, not the end. As the old saying goes: the good teacher points at the moon; the good student sees the moon, not the finger.

Here in Amsterdam do not let us concentrate on the finger to the neglect of the moon, because when the moon is in focus the instrument of pointing pales into insignificance. There are thousands of pointers in life. Because photography is our finger we care about it, as we should. But where it points is more important

than what it looks like.

I am a teacher, lecturer, writer because I want to transform young lives. I am almost too embarrassed to tell you this fact, because it sounds so conceited, even dangerous. But in all honestly I know this desire is at the heart of all my contacts with young photographers, and it would be dishonest not to admit it. As teachers, the best we can do for our students and for the medium of photography is to constantly strive to become actually what we are potentially. If that could happen to each and everyone of us, photographic education would take care of itself.

This, in my opinion, is The Other Side of Photography.

Thank you.