

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 2, 2006

Tod Papageorge

Filed under: [artists](#), [Papageorge](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:53 pm

Is Tod Papageorge an underrated photographer? It is hard for me to say. I've only seen a handful of his pictures. He's never produced a book and hasn't had a New York gallery show in twenty years. But he certainly has a reputation. Papageorge is one of the lynchpins of Yale/MOMA matrix. His name is all over the history books of photography. But where are the pictures? In the current issue of Bomb, Richard Woodward begins [an interview](#) with Papageorge by asking what took so long to publish a book.

The easy answer is that nobody asked me. In the past, people have suggested monographs, but I was never interested. Several years ago, though, I put together a book of photographs that I'd made in Paris. And I tried different publishers, all unsuccessfully. Obviously, persistence—or the lack of it—in the face of rejection becomes at some point a question of psychology. And since it's my psychology in question here, I reserve the right not to study it too deeply.

Later in the interview, Papageorge discusses his absence from the gallery scene by again referring to psychology. Part of this psychology seems to include a near fixation on the opinion of John Szarkowski:

Woodard: You mention, semi-hyperbolically, that unless John Szarkowski approved of a picture it went back into storage. Did his opinion count not only above everyone else's but excluding anyone else's?

Papageorge: The real point is that there was no place else, that's all.

Woodard: You mean there weren't places that counted, in your opinion. There were certainly galleries that showed photography.

Papageorge: And, certainly, Szarkowski's understanding was more important to me than that of anybody in a gallery. But, to get back to your first question, what happened to my career was

that Daniel Wolf closed [where Papageorge had shows in 1981 and 1985] and nobody called. And I wasn't going to go around and ask people to show my work. That's where the psychology figures in. My reputation was always that of an arrogant son-of-a-bitch, so I imagine that a not-so-disinterested observer might assume that that was part of my problem. I don't really believe that, especially the characterization. But I was teaching at Yale by then, so it's not as if I was desperate for money; it's not that I was rich, but I was able to survive and continue to work.

Whatever the reason, Papageorge's absenteeism is a shame. Here in the hinterlands of Minnesota (Szarkowski left a long time ago) Papageorge is a name without a face. The good news is that this is all about to change. Next year Papageorge will be publishing two books and exhibiting at Pace/McGill. Is Papageorge underrated? We'll soon find out.

7 Comments

1. [...] alec soth – blog photographica, miscellanea, etcetera « Tod Papageorge [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Papageorge quote](#) — November 2, 2006 @ [2:16 pm](#)

2. He's a good friend of a couple of good friends– seems that most of his energy has gone into teaching the last number of years. I agree– the books/show should be interesting. He's an articulate, living link to that 60s-70s generation, in which so many great documentary-based artists emerged.

Comment by Tom Morrissey — November 2, 2006 @ [2:16 pm](#)

3. It borders on semantics, but perhaps some delineation should be made between "underrated" and umm... sexy, current, whatever.

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — November 2, 2006 @ [2:39 pm](#)

4. Aperture 19:1 — the early 70's "Snapshot" issue — has both an essay and a collection of snaps by Papageorge in the company of collections from Meyerowitz, Winogrand, Friedlander, and Frank. When I found this in the library a year or two ago I was left scratching my head wondering: what happened to him? Good to see his return to some prominence.

(That issue of the magazine is also interesting for its selection of Nancy Rexroth's IOWA, which imo covers about 90% of the toycamera aesthetic in one go — long long before Holga was hip)

Comment by [Kevin Bjorke](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [1:39 pm](#)

5. [...] That was all in the fall. I don't really know when my mind changed, but by the time I actually got around to starting my applications this week, I basically had come to agree with both of them, and so I'm dying to go to Yale, even though it's not actually in the place I'm dying to live. Their program is incredible. Tod Papageorge, the department's chair, is this luminary thinker about photography (Read Alec Soth's post about him from a few months ago), and their senior critic is none other than Philip-Lorca DiCorcia. Also among the faculty is John Lahr, whose work is basically the model for the kind of thing I want to be doing. [...]

Pingback by [Greg Wasserstrom / Blog](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Grad School Part 1](#) — January 12, 2007 @ [3:46 am](#)

6. As a teacher, Papageorge was generous, honest and appropriately sharp. (I was an undergraduate student of Papageorge my senior year.) From what he shared of his work with us, his practice of photography and practice of teaching seemed very much in sync with each other, in that his understanding is wide and his vision is open. I look forward to seeing his new book because his work is beautiful. Ratings shouldn't matter, and maybe they don't in this case.

Comment by [ese](#) — February 9, 2007 @ [1:38 pm](#)

7. Papageorge IS an overrated photographer! Papageorge made a great career out of educating other photographers...but that's about it. Furthermore, this renewal of attention is akin to giving Martin Scorsese an Oscar-by default-even though there is much better work out there. Papageorge's work is old, out of style, not at all contemporary...even the content is really old now...and unlike Harry Connick, Jr. who makes a very decent contribution "remaking" music-goneby, Papageorge has not moved forward out of his genre-goneby mechanical formalism.

Comment by Bob — April 7, 2007 @ [3:54 pm](#)