

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 15, 2007

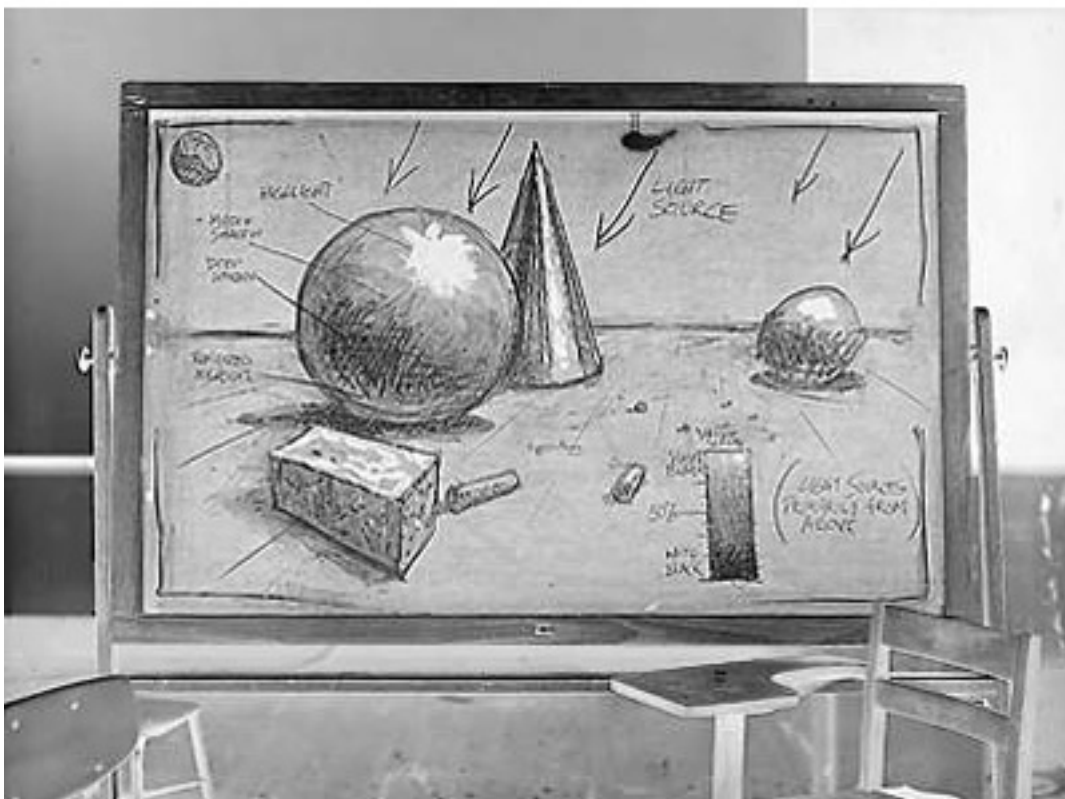
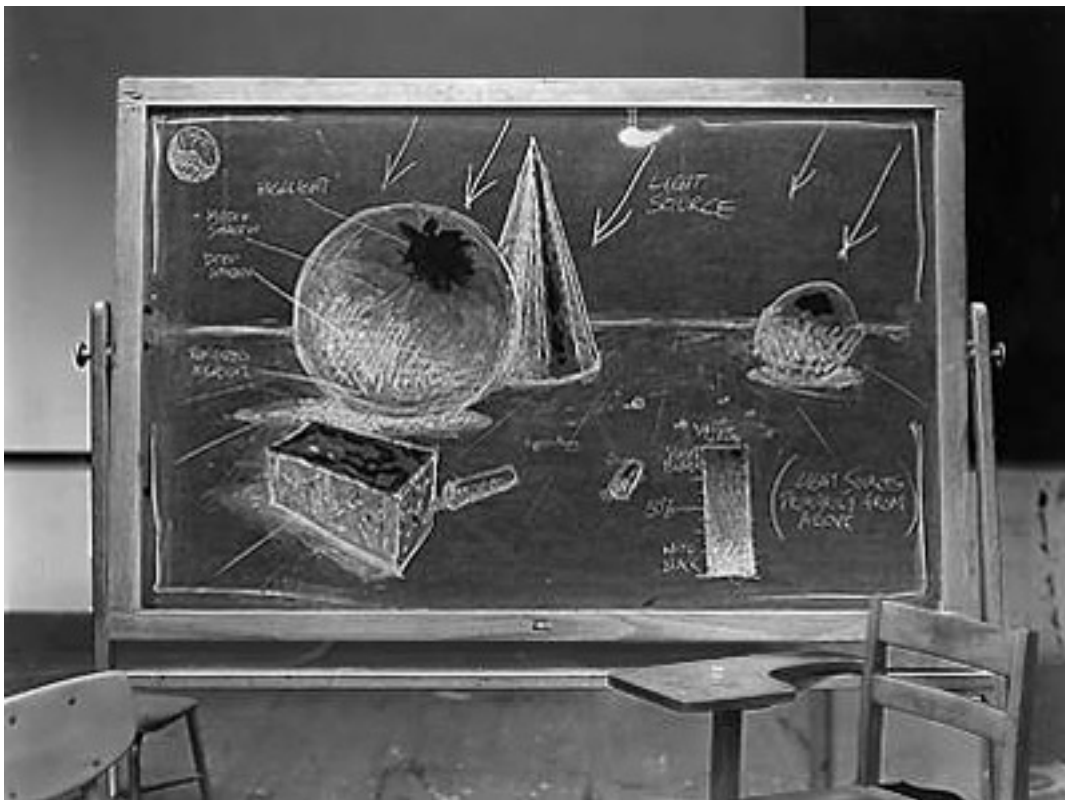
That 70's Show

Filed under: critics & curators — alecsothblog @ 10:43 pm

Joerg Colberg emailed to ask if I agree with Joel Meyerowitz's assertion that many contemporary photographers, "burdened as they are with Photoshop additions and market driven ideas, and fake 'reality'," are making work that is "flimsy, empty, trendy."

Yes, probably, but I think this has always been the case. I've recently been looking at Szarkowski's book *Mirrors and Windows*. In the introduction, he writes that most arguments about contemporary photography "revolve around the distinction between 'straight' photography, in which the fundamental character of the picture is defined within the camera during the moment of exposure, and 'synthetic' (or manipulated) photography, in which the camera image is radically revised by darkroom manipulation, multiple printing, collage, added color, drawing, and other similarly frank and autographic modifications."

Szarkowski included a large selection of this 'synthetic' photography in the book. But anyone looking at this work now, 28 years after its publication, will likely agree that much of it appears 'flimsy' and dated. All of that solarization just looks silly. (Read this post last September). But now and then some of the synthetic photography looks quite good. I particularly like Robert Cumming's diptych:



Academic Shading Exercise, 1974 by Robert Cumming

And I've always had a soft spot (or is it a jaded spot?) for Leslie Krim's staged photography:



Pregnant woman making large soap bubble, 1969 by Les Krims

Someday we'll look back and see another list of names. Take the photographers chosen for the recent book, *Vitamin PH*. Whatever process they employ (synthetic, staged, straight, stupid) – how many of these artists will look worthwhile in thirty years?:

Armando Andrade Tudela, Alexander Apostól, Miriam Bäckström, Yto Barrada, Erica Baum, Valérie Belin, Walead Beshty, Rut Blees Luxemburg, Luchezar Boyadjiev, Frank Breuer, Olaf Breuning, Gerard Byrne, Elinor Carucci, David Claerbout, Anne Collier, Phil Collins, Kelli Connell, Eduardo Consuegra, Sharon Core, Rochelle Costi, Gregory Crewdson, Nancy Davenport, Tim Davis, Tacita Dean, Olafur Eliasson, Hans Eijkelboom, JH Engström, Lalla Essaydi, Roe Ethridge, Peter Fraser, Yang Fudong, Anna Gaskell, Simryn Gill, Anthony Goicolea, Geert Goiris, David Goldblatt, Katy Grannan, AES+F group, The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Mauricio Guillen, Jitka Hanzlová, Anne Hardy, Rachel Harrison, Jonathan Hernández, Sarah Hobbs, Emily Jacir, Valérie Jouve, Yeondoo Jung, Rinko Kawauchi, Annette Kelm, Idris Khan, Joachim Koester, Panos Kokkinias, Luisa Lambri, An-My Lê, Tim Lee, Nikki S Lee, Zoe Leonard, Armin Linke, Sharon Lockhart, Vera Lutter, Florian Maier-Aichen, Malerie Marder, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Gareth McConnell, Scott McFarland, Ryan McGinley, Trish Morrissey, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Zanele Muholi, Oliver Musovik, Kelly Nipper, Nils Norman, Catherine Opie, Esteban Pastorino Díaz, Paul Pfeiffer, Sarah Pickering, Peter Piller, Rosângela Rennó, Mauro Restiffe, Robin Rhode, Sophy Rickett, Noguchi Rika, Andrea Robbins/Max Becher, Ricarda Roggan, Anri Sala, Dean Sameshima, Alessandra Sanguinetti, Markus Schinwald, Gregor Schneider, Collier Schorr, Josef Schulz, Paul Shambroom, Ahlam Shibli, Yinka Shonibare, Efrat Shvily, Santiago Sierra, Paul Sietsema, Alex Slade, Sean Snyder, Alec Soth, Heidi Specker, Hannah Starkey, Simon Starling, John Stezaker, Clare Strand, Darren Sylvester, Guy Tillim, Nazif Topçuoğlu, Danny Treacy, Fatimah Tuggar, Céline van Balen, Annika von Hausswolff, Bettina von Zwehl, Deborah Willis, Sharon Ya'ari, Catherine Yass, Shizuka Yokomizo, Amir Zaki, Liu Zheng, Tobias Zielony

51 Comments

1. great street photography is very hard to record and very subtle to appreciate. it's like the quote from the Meyerowitz book about photos being "tough".

Westerbeck: I remember hearing Garry and the rest of you often calling pictures "tough" or "beautiful." Why was "tough" such a key word for you?

Meyerowitz: "Tough" meant it was an uncompromising image, something that came from your gut, out of instinct, raw, of the moment, something that couldn't be described in any other way. So it was TOUGH. Tough to like, tough to see, tough to make, tough to understand. The tougher they were the more beautiful they became. It was our language."

there are fewer people trying to make these images today i feel. whether for reasons of marketability or fashion or maybe just because they are so hard to make.

Comment by j zorn — July 16, 2007 @ 12:06 am

2. check out meyerowitz's old colour street photography on in-public.

<http://www.in-public.com/JoelMeyerowitz/image/1188>

my main problem with contemporary street photography is that photographers are still trying to catch up with the likes of winogrand & meyerowitz, no one had busted it open like they did 40 years ago with something we haven't seen. -except gilden and diCorcia with a bit of flash-

i can understand people constructing photos simply to move into an area that perhaps hasn't been explored as much, however, like with anything you can tell those who have something to say and those who are trying to be different. the ends have to suit the means. it's the process of hundreds of hours of walking the streets simply looking that produces one good street photo, those hours are something you can't replicate.

photography is an exploration and not a print on the wall, perhaps that's why so much staged photography feels thin.

Comment by pj — July 16, 2007 @ 3:13 am

3. If you think Mirrors and Windows looks flimsy in parts, try revisiting some of those Minor White anthologies like Celebrations, Light7, etc. Argh! On the other hand, the series of Creative Camera Yearbooks from the 70s hold up rather well.

That bad work should get rewarded over good work with visibility and 15 minutes of infamy is the fault of the selectors (anthologists, curators, etc.), not the fault of the bad photographers. It seems there's always a greater supply of photography than good judgement...

Comment by Vinegar Tom — July 16, 2007 @ 4:07 am

4. Manipulation certainly seems to be flavour of the month with the photographic establishment. A quick flick through a British periodical such as Portfolio magazine will underline that. Also the recent book from Thames & Hudson "reGeneration" which claimed to be 50 photographers of tomorrow I would say at a rough guess is over 75% photoshoped (if thats a word) Street photography is "tough" and getting tougher, the public are a lot more wary of being photographed and their reaction to having a camera pointed at them is getting more confrontational, certainly here in the UK at least.
Perhaps the fact that the UK has more CCTV than anywhere else in the world may have something to do with that and people are just photographed out. I also think that maybe in the 70s the image of the photographer such as winogrand was a little romantic but the "Paps" have turned us

into sleazy bad guys.
Maybe with all that said it's easier to retreat into your head and computer software.....

Comment by Mark page — July 16, 2007 @ 4:45 am

5. [...] alec soth – blog » Blog Archive » That 70's Show Szarkowski included a large selection of this 'synthetic' photography in the book. But anyone looking at this work now, 28 years after its publication, will likely agree that much of it appears 'flimsy' and dated. All of that solarization just looks silly. [...]

Pingback by On Deciding . . . Better 3.0 :: alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » That 70's Show — July 16, 2007 @ 5:28 am

6. [Apologies for the long post]

RE: "photoshopped (if that's a word)", above.

This may seem like a joke, but has been presented by Adobe with a straight legal face. The actual correct and proper way to express what Mark said, according to Adobe®, is as follows:-

"At a rough guess, over 75% of the images in "reGeneration were enhanced using Adobe® Photoshop® software"

There is a quite amusing article on this marketinglegalspeak here:- <http://www.epuk.org/Blogs/562/thh-hdln-cnsrd-b-db>

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To respond to Alec's original post about staged or altered photography, we will always be able to find examples of bad solarisation, but I do not feel that this takes away from Man Ray [Lee Miller's accidental discovery in his darkroom.] It quickly became a cliché through overuse by others.

It is similar in a way to the crazy focal plane tricks used by some view camera photographers today, where it suddenly looks like they have shot a toy city or a toy train set. I remember seeing this a year or so ago and thinking it was great, then suddenly every magazine I opened had a different photographer doing a similar thing and it quickly became really boring to me. You see above I unthinkingly simply called it a "focal plane trick" whereas, had I not tired of it, I might have called it a technique. There are still examples of this kind of photography that succeed marvelously however, though I am afraid that names escape me at the moment.

Similarly, computer enhanced/constructed images should not, I believe, be dismissed. I do not believe that Joel M was suggesting we do that. I think he was saying it is being overused by people who have really nothing to say or show of much merit. I do not believe he meant to say that Jeff Wall or Andreas Gursky fitted in that category.

As to spotting who will last – well that is I suppose a game that collectors and dealers are playing every day. For every Cindy Sherman print sold for \$200,000 how many photographs are bought that end up worth nothing? Looking at the list above, Alec's work is already one that looks tipped to last the course, if the recent auction of a first edition of "Sleeping..." for over \$900 means anything. Perhaps in twenty years people will be saying "all those large format shots just look boring these days" and it is true that since Shore (I am sure he wasn't the first, but he seemed to be in at the start of a new way of using the view camera) showed his LF work there are nowadays a lot more photographers working in the art market using LF. I love much of the work of Polidori or Burtynsky but we do seem to be seeing more and more photographers doing similar kinds of pictures.

Goldblatt will also always be remembered for his apartheid era PJ shots, which are quite something. Olafyr Eliasson will at least always be remembered for what he did in Tate Modern a couple of years back. Here's a picture I took of that, in case anyone is not familiar with it. It was, to my senses, truly truly great.

http://www.robertdphillips.com/tate_weather.php

Who will last ? Well certainly it is not workable to say, for example, "Photog X is of no value because he used photoshop". Because the pictures are boring, perhaps, but not because of how he achieved the pictures. Bill Brandt (a man Ray apprentice) did a whole lot of manipulation – even going so far as to at one time be accused by David Hockney of producing "stalinist photography". Who today would not recognise BB as a master ?

to quote Wordsworth:

To quote Wordsworth (as they do in the Delaney biog on Brandt):-

Ah! Then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet's dream;

@obert

Comment by Robert Phillips — July 16, 2007 @ 5:36 am

7. I have always wondered how it is possible to be a traditionalist in a medium as young as photography. there has been very little that has been consistent technologically in photography, especially in color, which is why a color photo from the 70's looks like a color photo from the 70's. the digital is just a continuation of an ever evolving medium, it very likely is not even the final phase.

Comment by stefan abrams — July 16, 2007 @ 8:19 am

8. I'd be the last person to hype digital technologies, but this dismissing of "Photoshopping" is so useless and pointless, I don't even know where to start! Of course, Joel left himself enough wiggle space to exclude people like, say, Andreas Gursky from his ire (or maybe he won't? maybe Gursky is also "flimsy, empty, trendy"?), but that doesn't make his assertion any better. Photography didn't stop with the ideas worked on in the 1970s, and it will not end with people using Photoshop.

Comment by JM Colberg — July 16, 2007 @ 8:38 am

9. Joerg – of course, what you meant to say* was "Adobe® Photoshop® software"

[*satire alert]

Comment by Robert Phillips — July 16, 2007 @ 9:09 am

10. One could place the registered trademark symbol next to Leica too if one were so inclined. But whats the point? The leica, and small hand-held 35mm cameras in general, were a technology that transformed photography when they were introduced. Photography is an inherently technological medium. As Marshall McLuhan once wrote, "the medium is the message." I suppose there were those who cried for the daguerreotype or the glass plate negative when they became obsolete as well.

Of course, as in all art, the medium is only part of the message. Great art is always about a certain balance between medium and intention. Oh yeah, some talent helps too. The same applies to photography. If, to express one's vision, one chooses the daguerreotype (see Chuck Close's recent work in the medium), the wet plate process (I sight Sally Mann yet again) or Photoshop, so be it! Carry on and create great Art, I say! And by the way, to hell with the almighty Art Market!

I was please to see Alec sight the work of my former teacher Les Krims. Yet another example of brilliant staged photography-his work in the medium stands second to none. I began a website a

while back (where I post staged photography next to, dare I say it, Poetry!), my first post featured one of Les' many amazing series of photographs, check it out if you like:

<http://www.texasnyc.com/>

Comment by Jake Rowland — July 16, 2007 @ 9:58 am

11. Photography may not have stopped evolving, but it also may not be "photography" any more.

Used to be the moniker was "artist that uses photography" for the more synthetic stuff. That seems to have fallen out of favour, (as has the work..) but it was an attempt to draw a line between the straight and synthetic, a blurry dotted line I guess.

While there is no "proper" use of a camera (fence-post-hammer?) I do think there are certain intrinsic limits to the medium, certain attributes, all of this was articulated very early in the debate between the pictorialists and the "straight" practitioners, that was at a time when photography was campaigning for its own artistic independence based on its own merits, not on those merits borrowed from other media. So generations come and go and those concerns are now assumed, and the limits immaterial. Perhaps. I still think the reason photography is compelling comes primarily from the sense of, or contradiction between the reality of what is depicted and the unreality of its depiction, if you get my meaning.

I can see two camps forming, those who argue from effect and those who argue from process. From effect you can't tell-there is no way you can tell from "a picture" what is happening, so it is immaterial whether or not it is straight or synthetic. I think we all get that, but that was a strategy of modernism that has now been played out. I think we are past working with that contradiction. We have exceeded it. Those who argue from process (me) will say that since you cannot predict or control the effect, the only control you have is over process. This is the only guarantee you can get, to what end I am not sure. But taking photography as a medium, there are constraints, and these formal attributes essentially define "photography", not "pictures." So you can look at it either way, from whichever end of the telescope you like, and find your justifications there.

The test is what sticks on the wall, and what speaks to a generation. So far, the bulk of the "sticking" work trends towards the straight...

Comment by Robert Wright — July 16, 2007 @ 10:04 am

12. Before Krims began his incredible staged work he also had a few exemplary documentary essays, among them one on little people and another on hunters- and even those had a very surreal context to them.

Those looking for what street photography can look like today should check out Trent Parke's work!

Comment by Stan B. — July 16, 2007 @ 10:14 am

13. As Mark Page pointed out, "street" photography is getting tougher to practice. People are much warier about getting their photo taken by a stranger...understandably so what with the internet and all. Here in L.A. just raising a camera gets you a heap of suspicious looks and, sometimes, aggressive questioning..

Comment by patrick — July 16, 2007 @ 10:37 am

14. I think that people need to realize that Photoshop is just another extension of the darkroom. You wanna see dated and (bad) photography (in my opinion) check out some of the OVER darkroomed work of Jerry Uelsmann, Harry Callahan's egg pictures and some of the fashion work of Guy Bourdin. And do't get me started on Lucas Sammaras (sp?).

You old guys need to back off about us "Photoshuppies" what we're doing with a computer, you

were doing with scissors and an enlarger.

PS: It killed me when I was a student and found out that Aubrey Bodine had a drawer full of clouds to put in the sky of his pictures.

Comment by Joe Giordano — July 16, 2007 @ 11:00 am

15. matt connors combines photoshop with street photography
<http://www.mattconnors.com/>

Comment by Dan — July 16, 2007 @ 11:21 am

16. "Here in L.A. just raising a camera gets you a heap of suspicious looks and, sometimes, aggressive questioning.."

I've been shooting street in LA for over a year now and haven't had too many problems.

Also, I'd like to note that 'street photography' is alive and kicking on Flickr. I know a few people that are out there day to day grinding away looking for those 'tough' shots. Granted, there aren't too many people working on long term projects but I think it's encouraging to see an interest in a genre that maybe dying.

<http://flickr.com/groups/onthestreet/>

It's not an easy thing, walking for hours and hours in the hopes of getting one image, which is why what Papageorge has done is remarkable.

peace.

bryan

Comment by bryanF — July 16, 2007 @ 11:34 am

17. @bryanF:

i've seen your work on flickr..nice stuff. You have better luck than me..or perhaps your appearance is more benign. Just last week taking a picture of a car on a public street i had a guy and a security guard in my face. After some lengthy haggling i got the shot. When i started shooting i wanted to be Robert Frank and took to the streets..until i got tired of people yelling "don't take my photo" or demanding some payment.

I'll keep checking out your work on flickr..

here's me: <http://flickr.com/photos/patrick73>

Comment by patrick — July 16, 2007 @ 11:55 am

18. I was taking a photo of a big blue Bureau de Change at Venice rail station a while back and the lady in the booth started getting all agitated and waving at me. I went over and she was really flustered and asked why I was taking the photograph. I simply said "I'm a photographer" and she calmed down instantly, and smiled, and decided that if that was the case, I could carry on.

Strange world.

Comment by Robert Phillips — July 16, 2007 @ 12:51 pm

19. I think Joe Giordano has it right that there's no real ethical difference between Photoshop alteration and old-fashioned darkroom tricks. (but re: his "old guys" remark, I'm an old guy that has taken a fair bit of criticism for my choice to push the documentary envelope with PS). Yes, some PS enhanced work around now is just plain bad. For me, those are images in the "because he can" category. (Re: the old joke; "Why does a dog lick his (privates)?") I'd include some pretty

big-name contemporary artists in that group. Over time, though, I'm sure we'll regard this discussion as just as uninteresting as any "controversy" about tools and materials (color vs. B&W?).

Comment by Paul Shambroom — July 16, 2007 @ 12:59 pm

20. Regarding the link to Matthew Connor, this is a snippet from his "artist statement":

"... By seamlessly collaging a collection of moments into a single image, I challenge the idea that the temporal and spatial are inseparable. The result is a waking dream, a believable conceit. The factual assumptions inherent in photography are called into question as I soften the boundary between the probable and the improbable."

Excuse me for taking this discussion into a new area, but can someone explain to me why so many fine art photographers go to such extreme to complicate and elevate what they do? Do they think they'll come off as more educated, and thus, their prints will be worth more money? Do you think if I bumped into a fine art photographer at a Starbucks, or at a grocery store, that they'd actually speak in that manner? Is there some school out there, (maybe Sarah Lawrence?) that requires these students to come up with the most words and syllables to explain their work? I'm somewhat kidding around, (but not really). I just don't understand it. It seems so silly to me. So forced. So artificial.

Please, someone — make it stop. Across the board, industry-wide. Someone tell all of these fine art guys that people are laughing at them, for these ludicrous Artist Statements.

Just close your eyes and imagine the classroom setting called, "Composing Your Artist Statement for Maximum (Bullshit) Effect, and Profit". Some Thurston Howell guy at the front of the class, wearing a fake ascot and a herringbone jacket with those elbow protectors. And all the students with their iPods in their \$300 jeans, all looking puzzled, and trying to pronounce the word "temporal" in a way that seems believable.

It just doesn't need to be this way. Let the images stand on their own. (Or not). Why the need for four syllables? Do the galleries require it?

Mark Tucker, Lowly Commercial Photographer

Comment by Mark Tucker — July 16, 2007 @ 1:48 pm

21. I can't speak for Meyerowitz, but I don't think he is making the bland digital/analog distinction — I might have to ban that argument from this blog. I think Meyerowitz is talking about staged or fabricated pictures.

One of the reasons for writing this post, besides Joerg's question, was that I'd just been reading Szarkowski's essay in *Mirrors and Window*. Szarkowski writes the following:

"The distinction between straight and synthetic photography is a real and valid one, which defines two contrasting and perhaps antithetical concepts of aesthetic coherence. Although real, however, the distinction is of little utility as a tool for analysis. Since the distinction is based on the principle of mutual exclusivity (straight or not straight), it can serve only to divide the whole of photography into two parts. Although each part will contain a startling variety of work, their differences cannot be illuminated by the critical principle, which has exhausted itself by dividing the subject in two.

The division of photography into straight and synthetic halves has the further disadvantage of suggesting an a priori balance, or equity, between the two. In fact, few would argue that the achievements or influence of synthetic photography could be considered comparable to those of the much larger and broader body of work that we would call straight photography. To classify photographs in this manner is a little like

dividing the human race into Irish and Others, an analytical method that would surely seem tendentious to the Others.”

In the thirty years since this was written, I would say the playing field has evened out. Sometimes 'straight' photography almost seems like it has become the Irish. In a recent post, Joerg points out that the photographer Taj Forer had trouble approaching galleries as a 'documentary' photographer. This, I think, is at the root of the frustration. This isn't about Photoshop. This isn't about artist statements.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 16, 2007 @ 2:02 pm

22. It would be nice if people started naming names...I'd like to see which photographs Meyerowitz is talking about that gave him this impression.

Mark, goodjob making a blanket statement.

Comment by Dan — July 16, 2007 @ 2:23 pm

23. isn't part of the problem that galleries want big prints so they would rather have the photographer use a LF camera which in turn limits the types of pictures that can be produced. maybe i'm wrong. are there a lot of photographers using 35mm that are having success in the art world these days?

Comment by j zorn — July 16, 2007 @ 2:25 pm

24. @Patrick: i think any photographer whose spent time shooting street has had a few tense encounters with people. That's part of the game. It really boils down to how you react and behave. If you smile and give an honest explanation of what you're doing, most people will back off. However, some won't and there's nothing you can really do but smile and walk away.

“are there a lot of photographers using 35mm that are having success in the art world these days?”

i maybe naive but wouldn't documentary/street photographers kind of fall into the book type as opposed to the gallery type? Most of the great street/documentary work I've seen has typically been more effective when grouped together under a theme (The Americans, Koudelka's Exiles, Under a Grudging Sun, The Animals, East 100th Street, etc.)

Comment by bryanF — July 16, 2007 @ 2:43 pm

25. Perhaps Meyerowitz is lamenting the loss of a reality or kind of truth, kind of like missing grandma's home baked bread vs supermarket packaged bread.

Taking his words literally is like announcing that no-one can say anything unless it is absolute truth. Why spend time trying to discredit his words. I'm certain we all feel something of what he says, though we may also spend an hr or two photoshopping.

But I can say, when all is said and done, there is still, perhaps more so with so much trickery, a feeling of loss and disappointment, when it is discovered that the picture does not reflect what the camera saw. And don't start splitting hairs and taking me too literally by saying that that cameras or the eye behind them don't see reality.

Comment by Philip — July 16, 2007 @ 3:43 pm

26. @brianF: I've seen people enlarging full frame digital shots quite a bit, so I guess that with interpolation 35mm can get quite big too. Anyhow, all proper classy 35mm street shots that I've seen enlarged don't go over 12x16". Also, I saw recently an exhibition on East 100th Street and Times of Change... and I assure you that it works as an exhibition as well :oD

On the general discussion. I usually don't like staged photography or anything that comes too much out of the mind of the photographer. I prefer to see what is out there and surprises the photographer (which usually is a guarantee to surprise me too). For example, at the beginning I was a bit wary of the work of Alec Soth due to the large format, arrangement, extremely clean shots, etc. but with time I started to see how it all was found out there in the real world and displayed to us in the way he wants to.

Comment by Joni Karanka — July 16, 2007 @ 3:48 pm

27. I agree, Alec! Let's all talk about photography! Why talk about Photoshop or about print sizes when we could talk about, for example, which of the artists in the Vitamin Ph list "will look worthwhile in thirty years"? We will probably not be able to agree on that easily (it would be boring if we were able to agree easily!), but at least we'd be talking about photography!

Comment by Joerg Colberg — July 16, 2007 @ 4:01 pm

28. Alec,

To add to your discussion (and Meyerowitz Month).. a discussion between Joel Meyerowitz and Colin Westerbeck, from Bystander A history of Street Photography

"It's been very hard for young American or Western European who do this sort of work (street photography) to get shows, do books, attract articles, sell prints....I think the ones who do it, the best of them, feel they are just keeping the discipline alive, waiting for attention to return to it. I have in mind somebody like Tom Arndt, who's been working in and out of Chicago for a number of years now. He's out there every day, day in and day out, doing the work for it's own sake, keeping the faith." CW

Heres a link to some of Tom's work.

<http://www.artsmia.org/viewer/search.cfm?v=3&keyword=ARNDT>

Another photographer I think is working in a similar vein (getting out and shooting everyday) is Ed Panar. I was studio mates with him my first year at grad school, and I swear to God he spent 3 months straight stamping dates on the back of his proof prints. He is a voracious photographer...and to tie in with the L.A. thread:

<http://www.jandlbooks.org/GP.html>

Comment by Brett Kallusky — July 16, 2007 @ 4:20 pm

29. i started with digital imaging and it was convenient and all that and i still love digicams, but then i decided to try film. when i started shooting slides it was just like total freedom, because all of a sudden the art was all in the seeing and making choices when the picture was taken. so much of digital photography is about what you do after you take the picture, like darkroom working of negs. yes, there is lots of skill and an art in that, but it can be such a drag, knowing that you _have_ to work over an image to get a high quality result. now what i love about digital is that it has made this an incredibly good time to shoot slides. the combination of analog capture and digital printing is superb.

k.

Comment by kevin — July 16, 2007 @ 4:23 pm

30. "I think the ones who do it, the best of them, feel they are just keeping the discipline alive, waiting for attention to return to it."

There are people doing interesting street work all over the place. It's just difficult to find amongst the clutter of imagery out there.

<http://www.raoulgatepin.com/>
<http://www.hinius.net/corporatewhore.html>
<http://flickr.com/photos/mecan/>

It's also interesting to look at the work of some of the old school street photographers who never really received attention despite producing excellent work.



<http://flickr.com/photos/tonyshots/sets/72157594374124624/>

Say what you want about Flickr, but it's been a great place for street photographers to come together and share their enthusiasm for the genre.

bryan

Comment by bryanF — July 16, 2007 @ 4:38 pm

31. @kevin: I don't think it's about digital vs film (or slide) at all. All of these can be used to portray reality in a way or another. I don't even think it's about manipulation of the image. I mean, you can put in front of your camera a completely artificial scene, and the piece of equipment -if working properly- will capture it without any need of postproduction. It's a bit like that quote: "the newspaper lies, the TV lies, the radio lies, the street, they howl with the truth". Classic street photographers, not manipulating, shooting candidly, etc. are the most faithful impersonators of the very straight photographer trying to capture reality. (Of course, even so, there's a lot of manipulation and choice... before the light hit the film.)

Comment by Joni Karanka — July 16, 2007 @ 5:07 pm

32. Joni.... just to be clear my post isn't about digital vs film and reality or anything like that. personally i use both and like them for different reasons. i'm simply relating my experience with the different approaches and what works for me.

k

Comment by kevin — July 16, 2007 @ 5:32 pm

33. I'm just a schmuck librarian with a big photo book collection, but in answer to Joerg Coelbergs question—"which of the artists in the Vitamin Ph list "will look worthwhile in thirty years?"—I have to answer, very little. Not because the photography isn't worthwhile today, because most of it is, but because contemporary/conceptual photography/film/art/furniture is by definition of its time. I just paged through Phaidon's blink compilation published a mere five years earlier, and much of that already seems quaint.

So who do I vote for for posterity: Roe Ethridge, Tim Davis, Alex Slade, Catherine Opie, Rinko Kawauchi, our gracious host, and Paul Shambroom (gotta cheer for the hometown team)

On the "so that's what they called 'art' in the 2000s" harrumph: Walead Beshty's shopping series, Olaf Breuning, Yinka Shonibare, Esteban Diaz, and countless others.

Of course this just reflects my personal bias toward "straight" photography to begin with so...

Oh, and I just have this gut feeling that Katy Grannan's Mystic Lake series is going to be off the charts on the unintentional comedy scale in 2027.

Comment by sean — July 16, 2007 @ 6:21 pm

34. nail on head Alec. it is the artist statement slash packaging of the work rather than whether it is documentary or staged. I feel this is the main problem with the art scene today. People want the work to be backed by theory, words. you can't simply have a street photo anymore. It's as if people are so detached from their life that they are bored by it. we expect art in a gallery to offer more than day to day life.

"go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light"

Saul Bellow

Comment by pj — July 16, 2007 @ 6:57 pm

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Saul Bellow

Comment by pj — July 16, 2007 @ 6:57 pm

36. Well I have been doing street photography on and off since 1990. I am trying to stay away from the documentary style or being pigeoned holed as that or the quirky style of street photography and trying to lean towards a fine art type of street photography, because honestly that is mostly what I concentrate on when shooting street. I do not concentrate on as much getting quirky strange moments or trying to show any documentary point of view, it is primarily a visual thing for me with the camera on the streets and people. I shoot a lot, every day, but my main

concentration is odd and strange compositions that are completely straight raw photography with as little as possible blurring or forced abstraction or relying on as little as possible gimmickry. My goal is to test the bounds of acceptable composition using straight ahead photography. I have only seriously got back into shooting street for the last 1.5 years and only tried to start showing my stuff since sept and in these last 10 months have been in 10 shows, 4 of them juried. I feel it is tough, because generally I am a straight ahead street photographer, but I do not really fit in with the "street photography" vibe completely because I really do not concentrate on those quirky moments or moments that are documentary which seems to be what I see in a lot of the street photography today, the quirkyness that is, that has noteriaty, <http://www.in-public.com>.

Street photography to me is like the straight-ahead jazz of music, it will always have a following, it will always be something other photographers and musicians know is really one of the hardest forms of the art of photography or music. It takes discipline and lots of practice that one can not skimp out on. It does not rely on gimmicks for when the sax player plays those 3 notes in the upper register over and over in the same succession until all the crowd goes wild for they truly know themselves the gimmickry they are relying on that jazz musicians do not fall back on for audience approval. Whether popular or not it is my favorite type and the only type for me worth lifting my camera to my eye.

Comment by Lara Wechsler — July 16, 2007 @ 6:58 pm

37. [...] In response, Alec makes an excellent point: [...]

Pingback by SHANE LAVALETTE / JOURNAL » Blog Archive » Straight/Synthetic, Thirty Years From Now — July 16, 2007 @ 10:43 pm

38. RoyRecently I experienced two hours of unalloyed pleasure viewing the current Tate Britain exhibition "How We Are: Photographing Britain", which features both well-known and unknown photographers from 1839 to the present day.

The show is about Photography, capital P, and I gave little thought to the technique used to produce the images; each was appropriate to its time; it was the end result that mattered.

Some of the photographers and images featured never appear in any anthology or history. The curators had purposely researched content that portrayed those elusive concepts 'Britain' and 'Britishness', discovering in the process complete unknowns from the past producing quite remarkable work alongside the famous names.

Today, many of those unknown photographers would be posting their work to Flickr or suchlike, unseen by the majority, ignored by galleries, maybe picked up by Joerg if they blip on his radar (names too numerous to mention), maybe finding a mass audience through controversy (Rebekka Guðleifsdóttir most recently), but more often just adding to the vast image lake that the internet sustains.

I agree with any early commenter, Vinegar Tom, that the Creative Camera anthologies from the '70s do hold up rather well.

John Heartfield's photomontages are just as powerful today, when viewed in their historical context. How much quicker it would have been for him to create those had he had Photoshop, and they would have been no less powerful. Tony Ray-Jones' street photography is every bit as eloquent as Winogrand or Meyerowitz (a good friend of Ray-Jones) and no software can emulate – or simulate – what those practitioners achieved; John Davies and John Blakemore were producing stunning large format film-based landscape work then and still are now.

At that time the 'signal to noise' ratio was so different; there was no 'gallery scene', no opportunity for photographers to get their work seen by millions at the click of a mouse, no international dialogue on photography – except for the few who knew of Szarkowski's brilliant efforts or amongst the relatively small readership of Creative Camera.

Now that all this has changed, let's not lose sight of the messages; the medium may evolve, just as daguerreotypes gave way to calotypes and onward through wet plates to film and digital, but in the end it's the image that counts.

Comment by Roy — July 17, 2007 @ 2:44 am

39. One issue with "synthetic" photography of any kind is that it breaks the contract of "chance and choice" that some of us think links photography so closely to the nature of the universe, and our life in it. Frederick Sommer said somewhere that he could never improve, aesthetically, the arrangements that chance made with a handful of dropped pebbles. But he could photograph these arrangements.

To one way, at least, of looking at the way "art" works, photographs are Evidence (of what, who knows?). As with legal proceedings, there are rules of admissible evidence and, if these are broken, some photographic imagery becomes inadmissible evidence... One thinks of the fuss about the alleged staging of famous photos by Capa, Doisneau, etc. If everything (or even one crucial thing) in an image is staged, it just becomes evidence of (and limited by) the photographer's own imagination. Of course, some people think that is all that matters.

Comment by Mike C. — July 17, 2007 @ 3:27 am

40. Alec, you mentioned book photographers and wall photographers. How would the world of art photography be different today (if at all) if there were more viable outlets to exhibit photography no larger than, say... 16X20. Just a thought...

Comment by Stan B. — July 17, 2007 @ 3:09 pm

41. What if paintings could only be made on a canvas the size of a pin?

I suppose the world would be very different - though probably not better. Less sensual pleasure, more eye problems.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 17, 2007 @ 3:17 pm

42. Sorry if I sound flippant Stan. I like having wall photographers and book photographers. I think we're lucky to have both.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 17, 2007 @ 3:19 pm

43. I've enjoyed the Papapalooza Tour.

Maybe you can organize a Gossage vs. Fill In Name Here WTF Smackdown .

I happened to glance thru my copy of The Pond last week and was reminded of much I appreciate Mr. Gossage. Best living artist IMHO.

Him and Bob Adams. We're lucky to have them.

Comment by Mlchael Lardizabal — July 17, 2007 @ 5:00 pm

44. No problem, I definitely enjoy photos of every size. Recently at SFMOMA, I was treated to a breathtaking Mitch Epstein color photo of wall sized proportions from his latest American Power series- right before entering Henry Wessel's exhibit of B&W photos, none of which were larger than 16X20. Interestingly, after that blockbuster experience, Wessel's impeccably printed images did not suffer in the least from their decidedly smaller dimensions. And sensuous is one term I'd definitely apply to his, or Krim's early, moderately sized prints.

Again, I well appreciate all sizes, just think things have gotten a tad bloated in the gallery scene when it comes to size. I'm also thinking of the sheer expense it takes to mount a "current" photo exhibit- from the cost of making mural sized prints, to the cost of buying large format equipment... I love my photo books, but I enjoy seeing the original prints- whatever the size.

Comment by Stan B. — July 17, 2007 @ 5:15 pm

45. I can't keep out of this one – it will run and run. At the moment I'm struggling with an essay along these lines – It might be art, but is it photography?

I love some synthetic photography, I hate a lot of it, and I guess that my heart is with photography in the 'documentary mode', for one good reason. One of the most fascinating things about photography is the way it interacts with history, and if you over-photoshop an image, you are eliminating its credibility as a 'document', and therefore eliminating much, if not all of the medium's relationship with history, and denying arguably its greatest strength, and for me much of its emotion. To look at Gardner's 1860s picture of the Conspirator Payne, for instance – a modern looking youth, not long before he was hanged – is amazing. It's a terrifying, moving, awesome experience. If the manacles around his wrists had been photoshopped in, it wouldn't move one half as much. But then again, maybe they were.

A lot of photographers are creating fake worlds, but to my mind the 'real' world is a lot more interesting. And in many cases, all those art-historical references in photographs, all that art that is about art rather than the world – this is not 'content', in the words of the great Walker Evans, much of it is just flimflam. But as always, the best of it – ie the Gurskys and the Walls – is as valid as anything thing else.

In the long run, it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. But retruning to John Szarkowski. The man loved photography, not pseudo-painting.

Comment by GERRY BADGER — July 18, 2007 @ 5:40 pm

46. i think that the "market" has a lot to do with this, certainly in spain here where photography is only starting to gain acceptance in the art world the galleries look upon digital manipulation or "ideas" photography as artistic intent and "pure" photography is not quite art.

the collectors of course buy what the galleries tell them, and the kids in college want a piece of the cake so copy the peers. i suppose in today's egoistic society people with real courage to follow their heart are fewer and fewer, bus as stated in a previous thread time will sort out the wheat from the chaff, but what a LOT of chaff...

Comment by adrian tyler — July 20, 2007 @ 12:56 am

47. A few thoughts on the differences between straight and staged photography:

- 1) I wholeheartedly agree that this crazy world of ours comes up with much more wonderful things than my imagination does.
- 2) A photograph is a one-to-one mapping of the world as it existed for at least an instant as seen from one vantage point. It is an objective record of that instant in almost infinite detail with virtually no explanation. As such, it can be an irresistible invitation to a viewer to scrutinise the image and try to deduce its context and story from those details. If I perceive the photograph to be staged, I no longer am tempted to try and figure out what is going on here because I know what's going on – it's a photo shoot. I'm no longer getting first hand information, I'm getting someone's propaganda.
- 3) A straight photograph carries the message that "the world is a wonderful and strange place and that if you pay attention you will find things like this." Where the staged photograph may give a man a fish, the staight photograph teaches him to fish.

4) Having said all that, I must admit that artists like Zeke Berman (<http://zekeb.com/>), Chema Madoz (www.chemamadoz.com), Teun Hocks (www.chemamadoz.com) and Les Krims (www.leskrims.com) are fascinating.

5) Staged photography is like other media, in that you start with something that has no literal content until you shape it to bring that content to it. With straight photography, however, you start with pure, dense, solid content, to which you must bring form. (A chimpanzee with a camera gives you realism, while the same chimp with a paintbrush or typewriter gives you abstraction.)

6) As you are thinking about the relationship between photography and writing, I think that straight photography is very closely related to writing in the style of someone like Raymond Carver, whose work is about finding and showing you just the right detail that will tell you more than you ever expected to know.

Comment by Chris Rauschenberg — July 22, 2007 @ 6:03 am

48. In response to Chris, while I'm somewhat resistant to advocate for staged photography, I have to disagree that straight photography better shows the world as a strange and wonderful place. Diane Arbus is a case in point, and I could make more. Distinctions like that sound too exclusive, and it seems like in these discussions some people are really talking about so many different approaches and drawing lines where there are none. I'll boil it down to this a. street/straight approach (no explanation needed) b. "found portraiture", kind of a street photography that is "staged" and a photo shoot, often w. collaboration (not necessarily propaganda), c. constructed photography, also a photo shoot, but with elements built to suit the photographers vision, concept or whatever expression they might be approaching, d. manipulated imagery, which could combine any of the above with the aid of darkroom, photoshop, drawing table work on presentation. I can get something, and have, from any one of those approaches.

I feel like there's a resurgence for "street" photography and a new acceptance and challenge to bring something to it that feels current. (As opposed to the perceived market for "staged" images.) That can be pretty subtle, but mostly it has to do with the sort of poetic/literary intelligence that's always been at play – nothing new there. Just as in fiction or poetry writing. Still, I think to equate straight photography to a fiction author is tricky. Portions might be descriptive in the same sense, and there may be a similar sensibility. I see fiction as more related to cinematography. Still photography is its own animal with many styles that I'm glad to see further exploration and evidence of, all with their own particular challenge.

Propaganda may be a pretty harsh word... many people pinned that on Robert Frank's book, perhaps the greatest example of a book photographers' straight approach to the world and a poetic display that was very real for its time. As a side, he also took approach d. (described above) and worked as a fictional cinematographer as well. No lines there, except maybe the ones on his hands...

Comment by mark s — July 22, 2007 @ 2:43 pm

49. I'd have to add another type of portraiture that's beyond "found" and closer to constructed. No doubt there's more, but that's the general picture, I think >

Comment by mark s — July 22, 2007 @ 2:50 pm

50. People are very atomised – there's perhaps not as much attention and intuition as there used to be –

Comment by steven — July 23, 2007 @ 8:31 pm

51. The title convention—Vitamin PH—with all the photographer's initials in a Periodic Table (At, Aa, Mb, Yb, etc.) is such a tired old trope I could not be bothered to look at the book. I can only guess the same with the contents...

Comment by Christopher — August 2, 2007 @ 1:23 am