

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 17, 2007

Teenage Lust

Filed under: aesthetics, artists — alecsothblog @ 4:33 am

This weekend I went to the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin to see a show that included the work of Larry Clark. After recent discussions on this blog ([here](#) and [here](#)) it was interesting to see Clark's pictures from *Teenage Lust*. He shows a girl who is tripping on acid being raped, male hustlers, a brother with an erection tying up his sister in bed. Clark was in his thirties and early forties when he produced this work. In several pictures we see him naked with the teens. It is disturbing stuff. But seeing it in the safe confines of a museum, I somehow find all of this 'acceptable.' Again, it comes down to context. If I saw *Teenage Lust* in the waiting room of my kid's doctor, yeah, I'd have a big problem. I'd also be troubled if Clark's pictures were turned into ads. Remember those banned Calvin Klein spots from the 90's. ([Watch them here](#)). Yeesh.

But should context be a safe-haven? Is it fair to disparage Jock Sturges because his books are sold in Barnes & Noble instead of Printed Matter? Does Clark use the prestige of high art to protect his own Neverland Ranch?

31 Comments

1. About 3 years ago I saw a major Larry Clark exhibition in Tokyo. In addition to photographs, the show included all sorts of materials relating to his life and work; magazine articles, letters, dirty novels, and among other things, the dummy head from the movie KIDS. What caught my attention was a terrifically typical group photograph of his son's baseball team up on the wall surrounded by the kinds of photographs that he is known for. It was a normal team photo, the boys were in two rows and Clark was behind them with another dad. A brown die-cut paperboard mat, complete with the regulatory embossed clip art baseball player image and team name inlaid with gold foil, framed the whole thing. It looked exactly like what was on the top all my friend's TV sets in the late 1980s. The "safe-haven" of the museum kept the other work in check (validation?), but seeing something so benignly familiar in amongst everything else was shocking (in a wonderful way) in it's own right.

Comment by John Sypal — September 17, 2007 @ 7:58 am

2. does high art use the context of high art to promote shit? everything is acceptable within the right context. someone like clark isn't the issue really but i'd hazard the whole industry of advertising. not to mention 70% of the internet being made up of porn. that is 70%.

Comment by paul — September 17, 2007 @ 8:10 am

3. yes clark's images would be more socking if used for advertising but i'm thinking we're not far off as it is.

Comment by paul — September 17, 2007 @ 8:41 am

4. "He shows a girl who is tripping on acid being raped"

The world is full of ugly things, as well as beautiful and strange things, and I suppose part of the job description of a certain kind of photographer is to bring these ugly things to our attention. However, although it's surely always right to question the motives behind a photographer's choice of subject matter (and their reasons for not intervening or not just walking away or even just not taking a damn photograph) it's just as important to question the motives of the audience for looking at or admiring or buying "disturbing" material. "Context" is merely the marketplace in which this selling/buying transaction takes place.

Tell me this: Why is everyone so enchanted with being shocked? Are we really so deeply ashamed of our comfortable, compromised lives? N.B. Alec: you do realise you don't *have* to lead your life in themed weeks, don't you (or is this part of a larger project — "Theme Year"??).

Comment by Vinegar Tom — September 17, 2007 @ 10:08 am

5. Tom, I went to Berlin to visit a friend. The Clark show was across the street from the train station. How could I not go? I love when life develops a theme. I wish it also had a soundtrack.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 17, 2007 @ 10:20 am

6. context may be an easy way out for "explaining". Not many photos stay in context, moreover. They can be bought, copied, leave the museum setting, and then the context changes, and the picture is controlled, used within a different environment.

Of course, I have no idea if that's the case here.

Comment by herve — September 17, 2007 @ 12:12 pm

7. I post various portraits I've done on Flickr. Sometimes the portraits of young girls, always just a head and shoulders type of shot. I am a little disturbed that I seem to get a lot more "visits" to

some of these shots than an equally done portrait of an older person, in general (there are exceptions). I then wonder if there are a lot of people who just enjoy photos of children, particularly girls, or are the pedofiles lurking around Flickr too. Creeps me out some and I hesitate to keep on posting photos of young girls, even though I am putting them in childrens groups.

Comment by Steve Murray — September 17, 2007 @ 12:16 pm

8. context is clearly important, as so many artists have shown, from Duchamp to Warhol to Richard Prince to Richard Pettibone, to Robert Mapplethorpe. But the museum does not always give art a "safe haven". Consider the controversy surrounding the Mapplethorpe exhibitions, or Chris Offili. Perhaps the reason is that the white box/museum creates a space for contemplation that your doctor's office does not. It is a site of removal, where things can be looked at in a kind of separate way, outside of life itself. This seems the point of performance art or street art, reestablishing that connection to life, or the frame establishing that dis-connection. One does not look at Clark's images without discomfort, or the questioning of the artist's motivations, but that is also not only what the work asks the viewer. This is a difference between Clark and run-of-the-mill child porn. The museum does offer a safe place to look at difficult things, as it probably should.

Comment by stefan — September 17, 2007 @ 1:48 pm

9. It's a bit precious to think just because something is in a gallery, it somehow justifies whatever is being shown – as if it's placed in inverted commas for a more rarified and knowledgeable audience whose aesthetic understanding and cultural depth renders them above the hoi polloi of Barnes and Noble, Borders or Waterstones – good for the alphas but not the betas and the gammas – or something like that. They show Clark's films on TV every now and then in the UK, but they're on late and I always fall asleep before the end. And I just couldn't be arsed renting them.

Comment by colin pantall — September 17, 2007 @ 3:04 pm

10. Clark and Sturges play in a different league: Sturges' indiscrete photographs are about youth, Sturges makes sexual objects out of his models.

Comment by Zoltán — September 17, 2007 @ 3:07 pm

11. Probably, I imagine, Sturges would state he photographs innocence and Paradise, and Clark's work is about fucked up earth.

Comment by Zoltán — September 17, 2007 @ 3:29 pm

12. North America controls the internet but let us not judge any global morals by its standards – last year a woman cautioned my wife to put a swim suit on our 3 year old daughter at the municipal splash pool in some Canadian suburb. The world is much too big for that. To overcome the 'I think' and 'I believe' perhaps approach the issue of child nudity in terms of children's rights. This is a good beginning: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_the_Rights_of_the_Child

Comment by Peter — September 17, 2007 @ 3:35 pm

13. Caravaggio was a great painter, but he was still producing works for the appetites of perverts.....

Comment by Mark Page — September 17, 2007 @ 3:51 pm

14. oh yes and Alec yeesh is not a word!

Comment by Mark Page — September 17, 2007 @ 3:55 pm

15. picking up on colins response. it is not that placing something in a gallery justifies it being shown, but that placing anything in a gallery changes its context. for whatever reason, it changes how we approach an object. that is not to say anything placed in a gallery becomes art because of the context that it is an art gallery, but that because of the intentionality, or at least the supposition of intentionality, the context of the gallery makes us pause and ask certain questions. go to wall mart and buy anything and put it in the middle of a chelsea gallery. people will begin to wonder about the meaning of the action. perhaps they will conclude that there is no meaning, and maybe that makes it either interesting or not interesting, but that same object back on the shelves of wall mart does not cause the same questioning. it is not about alphas or betas (or any hidden soundsystems in your bedroom-just a joke), it is about context, but it is also about art that is interesting vs not interesting...i think?

Comment by stefan — September 17, 2007 @ 4:01 pm

16. Mark: read this

Colin: I really appreciate your contributions on this subject. I don't think your work crosses into this terrain at all, but given the fact that you photograph your daughter, I wonder if these issues have influenced your editing process.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 17, 2007 @ 4:08 pm

17. yeesh-kapish

Comment by stefan — September 17, 2007 @ 4:13 pm

18. Always wondered why Sturges got criticized, scrutinized and ostracized- while Clark got a relatively free pass. Still do..

Comment by Stan B. — September 17, 2007 @ 4:16 pm

19. Yes – absolutely. These issues definitely affect what I photograph. It is really a form of self-censorship. I love Sally Mann's work for example, but deliberately avoid the level of physicality apparent in her work.

I have my particular interpretation of what my work is about – but as soon as it enters a public space that interpretation is, to an extent, redundant. The way people see my work did change a little what I photographed for the Sofa Portraits – but also expanded it into different directions.

At the same time, I think some of the editing has stayed the same – children behave in certain ways and you can see this not just in photographs, but at any children's playground, any swimming pool or any place where children interact – and I don't think one should succumb to a particular view of what is acceptable in a picture and what is not – that way leads to an excessive control of both childhood (and Peter's example of someone finding something sinister in a 3 year old being naked in a splash pool is a really good example of this) and other forms of completely normal physical behaviour (especially of women) – breast feeding in public being a prime one.

I think alot of the response to contemporary photography of children comes out an understandable fear, but a fear that is out of proportion to the reality. It's important to resist those fears and portray just how raw, vivid and vital childhood is – and also to realise how important it is not to project adult ideas onto children, be they Victorian ideas of an idealised and contolling innocence or contemporary ones that have their origins in the commercialised sex industry.

Comment by colin pantall — September 17, 2007 @ 4:30 pm

20. maybe Sturges is seen as a fine art photographer where everything he does is very controlled (so he is more responsible). Clark is more of a documentary photographer. and he has produced two pretty important and influential photography books (Sturges not so much).

Comment by j zorn — September 17, 2007 @ 4:31 pm

21. Life really does go in themes. I think.

Comment by catharine — September 17, 2007 @ 5:30 pm

22. Thematically speaking, a 12 year old fashion model named Maddison Gabriel has stirred up some recent outrage and controversy.

Yeesh, indeed!

Comment by Jen Bekman — September 17, 2007 @ 9:28 pm

23. "I have my particular interpretation of what my work is about – but as soon as it enters a public space that interpretation is, to an extent, redundant."

Colin: I believe the viewer always brings their own unique inner experience to bear when looking at any photographs, and the interpretation or intention of the photographer is really quite irrelevant to the viewer. One has no control over that.

Comment by Steve Murray — September 17, 2007 @ 10:45 pm

24. Isn't part of the problem here the paradoxical idea that you can somehow counteract or critique an appetite for by creating images that simply feed that appetite? You can *say* that your picture of a heaped plate of french fries critiques our eating habits, but it will probably just make most people hungry (Martin Parr's food shots, it's true, do have the opposite effect, but British food is uniquely disgusting).

I've decided you're onto something here, Alec, and will try theming my life for the next few months (perhaps you are a fan of The Dice Man?). As a tinnitus sufferer, I unfortunately do already have a permanent soundtrack...

Comment by Vinegar Tom — September 18, 2007 @ 3:09 am

25. Hi Alec!

I happened to visit the show in Berlin just a week before you. I had seen in the past some of Clark's pictures printed in books (e.g. on the cover of the book 'Freiheit macht arm' by Diedrich Diederichsen; by the way Amazon.de does not show the book cover: <http://www.amazon.de/Freiheit-macht-arm-Diedrich-Diederichsen/dp/3462023071>) and was curious to see them in an exhibition. I do not think that the context makes them 'acceptable'. I don't see why you'd be troubled if they were ads. Isn't every single picture that a photographer exhibits to the public an 'ad' for himself and his personal universe?

Comment by Leonidas Halkidis — September 18, 2007 @ 3:30 am

26. Context is bs. If it makes a difference to you, it's because you want it to. If a rape is art in a gallery, why not in real life?

I can't judge Larry Clark, I don't know anything about his "art", but not attempting to stop a horrific act occurring to someone else (if indeed that's the case) would be wrong by almost any

set of morals, putting it in "context" doesn't change anything. If he kept his photos in a dark, dingy, downstairs office in his house, he'd be arrested.

Comment by Kevin — September 18, 2007 @ 7:52 am

27. Context is bs. If it makes a difference to you, it's because you want it to. If a rape is art in a gallery, why not in real life?

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Comment by Kevin — September 18, 2007 @ 7:52 am

28. Speaking of context, Allen Ginsberg is a self professed member of NAMBLA- the reason why he was banned from being the grand marshal of the Pride parade in NYC a couple of years back...

Comment by Stan B. — September 18, 2007 @ 10:30 am

29. I saw the Clark exhibit last week with a friend and I thought it was like a bad fashion shoot. I guess he's finally toned down a bit, since instead of full frontals with these young teens, the kids only "mooned" Larry.
After Tulsa, each of Clark's books have been more and more disappointing . Teen Lust is full of images which men, both gay & straight won't admit enjoying, but will take a long look at. Since Clark was twice the age of his "models" I understand people feeling it was wrong. But we live in a very weird country these days. Just a few years ago taxpayers spent 42 million dollars investigating a f*cking blowjob! Sturges is right, the Europeans must think we're retarded. Cincinnati went crazy over Mapplethorpe a few years ago and even though I don't want to look at a guy's arm inside another man, I think freedom of speech is too important to suppress. Isn't art an extension of speech?

Comment by matt — September 18, 2007 @ 1:04 pm

30. At some point you have to ask yourself "Is Ellsworth M. Toohey winning?".

Big questions and there probably is no simple answer.

Feli

Comment by Feli di Giorgio — September 18, 2007 @ 1:26 pm

31. I was just in Berlin last week and saw this exhibit. I didn't know much about Larry Clark before seeing it, but three things stood out:
1. His statement about how these pictures reminded him of all the horrible things he did (I remember a mention of a gang bang) was troubling. He wasn't just documenting, he seemed to be reliving events that he thought of fondly.
 2. Some of the pictures made me feel slightly ill. I suppose they were supposed to.
 3. Did you see the video Clark had put together that was a few clips from the Phil Donahue show in 1992? It was in the back video room, along with videos that were documentaries about Newton and Gibson. I found the stuff on the Donahue show as disturbing or more than Clark's pictures. It wasn't so much the things described on the show as it was Donahue's insistence that young high school boys recount and even reenact rapes they suffered. I found Donahue's actions much more appalling than Clark's picture taking.

Comment by Chris Norris — September 20, 2007 @ 7:48 am