

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

December 10, 2006

The sentence

Filed under: [career](#), [media](#), [the sentence](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:35 pm

NPR's *On The Media* aired [an excellent piece](#) on how the popularity of penguins has turned them into political pawns. First anti-abortionists [praised](#) *March of the Penguins* saying, "Almost every scene and narrative verified the beauty of life and the rightness of protecting it." Now liberals are being criticized for co-opting the penguin with a [pro-gay](#) children's book *And Tango Makes Three* and a [pro-environment](#) animated film *Happy Feet*. I haven't seen any of these productions, but it has been interesting to watch both sides spinning penguins.

This mix of penguins and propaganda got me thinking about Bruno Penguin Zehnder – the Swiss penguin photographer who died in a blizzard in 1997. While I don't really know Zehnder's pictures, I'm fascinated by his legacy. Zehnder is the ultimate example of a photographer who is directly linked to a single subject. When anyone brings up Zehnder's name, people respond by saying 'He's the guy that photographed penguins.'

I have a theory that no matter what kind of photographer you are, everyone will end up saying one sentence about you. It is a kind of cultural shorthand. Some examples:

- He took celebrity portraits with a white background
- She took pictures of freaks and committed suicide
- He took picture of Parisian architecture at the turn of the century
- She makes creepy digital pictures of kids with big eyes
- She takes large-format pictures of her wealthy family and friends

Zehnder embraced his sentence so much that he changed his middle name to Penguin. This biographical fact, along with his death in a blizzard, has actually become part of his sentence. (For an example read his Time Magazine obit [here](#)).

Biographical details often make their way into the sentence: 'She was Arbus's teacher' (Lisette Model), 'He was Edward Weston's son' (Cole & Brett).

Some artists have a sentence that is tied to a single picture: Iwo Jima Flag Raising (Joe Rosenthal), Piss Christ (Andres Serrano), Couple Kissing in Paris (Robert Doisneau).

While artists aren't usually as blatant as Penguin Zehnder, most work to shape their sentence. In the recently discussed [interview](#) with Henri Cartier-Bresson, for example, he downplayed his early interest in Surrealism but repeatedly described himself as 'an anarchist.'

I admire the way Paul Shambroom has shaped his sentence. On the front page of [his website](#) he writes: "Artist/Photographer Paul Shambroom's work explores power in its various forms." I've heard Paul repeat the same thing during his lectures. Repetition, after-all, is what makes the sentence.

But while photographers can help shape their sentence, they can't control it. No matter how many times Cartier-Bresson called himself an anarchist it would never make the sentence. And if Paul Shambroom ends up taking a picture of George Bush's assassination, that will be his sentence. Unless you change your name, the sentence can only be shaped, not controlled.

Hmmm, Power Shambroom does have a ring to it.

30 Comments

1. hi alec, nice correlations you found there. when i first saw your work at the yossi milo gallery in NYC and then at the whitney bienale i first couldn't remember your name. but in my mind you were the guy taking pictures along the mississippi. When your book was published some time later in germany the very same thing happened. I way asked by a friend: have you seen the book of this american large-format-photographer, who traveled along the river.

Comment by [Thomas Dashuber](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [3:13 am](#)

2. Others...

Southern color photographer.
1960's B&W New York "street" photographer.
She Photographed friends and family, 1980's and on.
Cigar biting "crime photographer".

Accurate descriptions?

I unfortunately agree with your theory.

-d

Comment by [Danny G](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [3:27 am](#)

3. German couple photographing furnaces, water towers and chimneys in B&W.

Comment by [Thomas Dashuber](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [3:43 am](#)

4. Half the time, it's an (unfair?)summary of their best-known work and not a sentence. People won't get Paul Shambroom from the power line, they will get it if you say he's the meetings guy.

She photographed teenagers on beaches.

She photographed her naked children.

The Japanese bondage guy.

Six-fingered pioneer war photographer.

Best ones are those who reinvent themselves – photographer of the depressed english seaside town who became the garish chronicler of his nation's tack who became the catalogue of the photobook and everything else. And he's fast becoming a national treasure from the sound of the Lionel Richie post. Come on Martin, you can't let that happen – everyone loves you (almost). Time to stir things up again.

Comment by [colin](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [4:01 am](#)

5. I know this is not the point of this post, but if it's penguins you want, you should check out Willy Puchner's "Penguins – traveling the world", in which a pair of fibreglass penguins are photographed, um, travelling the world. Demented, but fun (and still available on Amazon isbn 3829014120).

Clearly you can't write your own sentence any more than you can choose your own nickname (I think of Roland Weary in Slaughterhouse 5 and "the three musketeers"). HCB is also apparently convinced his drawings are as significant than his photography. Of course, Henri.

I offer:

Crows. Lots of crows.
Bed & Breakfast signs (and that black dog again)
Splendid but tiresomely perfect mountain scenery
Characterful types in front of a sheet
Grainy gypsies (reinvented as Travelling Panorama Man)
One camera, one lens, rocks, sea, dark.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [5:29 am](#)

6. it is probably more frustrating for photographers that a single photograph from the thousands that they take over their careers often becomes their iconic image. the one shown over and over whenever they are brought up.

Comment by [j zorn](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:57 am](#)

7. He did those patchy paintings and cut his ear off.

He did that painting that was featured in that Hollywood movie with Scarlett Johanson.

He was deaf when he composed his last work.

It's better to burn out than to fade way (20th Century)

It's better to burn out than to fade away (18th Century)

He painted the smiling lady and was a genius.

Hmmmm, this doesn't look like this is a problem that's unique to the photo world.

Comment by [Joerg M. Colberg](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [12:44 pm](#)

8. "She Photographed friends and family, 1980's and on"

who's that?

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [12:48 pm](#)

9. >>"She Photographed friends and family, 1980's and on"
>>who's that?

Nan Goldin!

Here's one:

He staged movie-like shots of flat, midwestern towns at twilight.

Comment by [Joe Holmes](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [2:49 pm](#)

10. He painted lilipads.

He painted that girl with the pearl jewelry.

He photographed thrift stores.

He lived with "the guy that did those patchy paintings and cut his ear off," didn't he?

She wrote the book about the monster with a flat head.

He photographed men working on skyscrapers.

He was in that movie about going back into the future.

He wrote about a pounding heart.

Comment by [Ryan](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [2:50 pm](#)

11. in all seriousness, the 'one sentence' theory only applies to a very few artists. what could you say about robert frank? if you say he authored 'the americans' then you are missing the point of his life's work. and cartier-bresson, what sentence could possibly sum up his life's work? even alec soth, would you like to be the guy who photographed the mississippi?

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [4:07 pm](#)

12. Yea, it was Nan Goldin who I was trying to sum up..maybe I should have mentioned drugs or something.

"He was in that movie about going back into the future"...that's hilarious, but lets not forget he was also a teenage werewolf unless of course you're talking about that other guy that was in a movie about going back into the future, haha.

Comment by [Danny G](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [6:35 pm](#)

13. This is an interesting blog, not only because I can honestly say that I've never read about penguin spinning, but also because it brings to mind William Wegman.

Though he's know as "the guy who photographs dogs," his pre-dog work is amazing and completely different.

Comment by [Jodi Bullock](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [7:50 pm](#)

14. John, I'm not saying I like the 'one sentence', but it is a reality. Robert Frank is actually a great example. His sentence is: 'The Swiss photographer who created an outsider view of American culture with his influential book The Americans.' Despite everything he has done afterward, he can't escape it.

As for Joerg's comment that this isn't unique to photographers - of course not. It isn't even unique to creative people. In my neighborhood I'm 'that guy with the beard that walks the big black dog and the tiny white dog.' Does that describe my achievements, my soul. I hope not. But it is what I'm stuck with until my house burns down, I kill the white dog, etc. It is just reality.

Where it gets interesting, I think, is with someone like Meyerowitz. First the street work. Then the very different Cape Light. And now Ground Zero. No single project dominates. So I suspect his sentence wouldn't speak to a specific project. It would probably be 'one of a group of photographers from the 1970's that popularized the use of color in fine-art photography.'

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [7:53 pm](#)

15. Wikipedia is good for looking at the 'one sentence.'

For William Eggleston it says: "William Eggleston is widely credited with securing recognition for color photography as a legitimate artistic medium to display in art galleries."

For Joel Meyerowitz it says: "He is a landscape photography revivalist, influenced in part by William Eggleston, and author of the seminal book on Cape Cod, Cape Light."

Was Meyerowitz influenced by Eggleston? I don't know. I think of them as contemporaries. But history is shaping Eggleston as the 'Father of of Color' with Shore and the two Joels as his disciples. I don't think it is accurate, but it is interesting to watch these sentences take shape.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:05 pm](#)

16. joel meyerowitz might now be:

'the guy who made the most disappointing photo book in history'

i was looking forward to something special with the publication of 'aftermath', assuming that it wouldn't come out until the new site was finished. i didn't see much in that book that was new or compelling, especially compared to a book and project like 'Here is New York'

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:09 pm](#)

17. with the first one man color show at the MOMA, it's hard to say anyone but eggleston is the true father of color (and marie cosindas the mother). but i encourage the inclusion of mitch epstein, who was working as early as '73 in color, as early as shore and earlier than at least one joel.

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:12 pm](#)

18. "[Meyerowitz] is a "street photographer" in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, although he works exclusively in color."

quoted from joelmeyerowitz.com, i guess they didn't like the 'worst photo book' idea.

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:20 pm](#)

19. I agree John. Epstein is a genius and he doesn't even have a Wikipedia entry. He is an example of someone who's sentence has been shifting. For a long time he was 'the guy doing color photography in India. The City and Family Business changed the sentence. Recreation has him moving in with Shore and the Joels. This is the point about this entry. Artists can shape the sentence - but they control it.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:26 pm](#)

20. Alec, do you have a sentence in mind for yourself?

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:28 pm](#)

21. I really don't Zoe. I just have a long list of things I don't want it to be.

This is the case most people, I suppose. In interviews with Eggleston, he is always downplaying the South. He doesn't want to be 'that Southern photographer.' In the much discussed interview with Simon Norfolk, he doesn't want to be 'that photojournalist who uses a large format camera.'

This is what I like about Paul Shambroom. He has enough clarity about his work that he can help write the sentence. I don't have that kind of clarity.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [8:37 pm](#)

22. [...] In the discussion regarding my recent post on the sentence used to describe an artist, Zoe asked: "Alec, do you have a sentence in mind for yourself?" I don't. I just have a laundry list of things I don't want it to be. I'm reminded of a picture I took a long time ago: [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Q: What is your sentence](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [9:06 pm](#)

23. I recently discovered Saul Leiter's fantastic color work made during the late 1940's/early 1950's.

If you take him into consideration it makes the "father of color" discussion an interesting one.

..and he was definitely making "color" pictures.

Comment by Danny G — December 11, 2006 @ [10:17 pm](#)

24. Danny G, I'm glad you caught onto the double meaning in that sentence.

Comment by Ryan — December 11, 2006 @ [11:00 pm](#)

25. with the first one man color show at the MOMA, it's hard to say anyone but eggleston is the true father of color

What about Ernst Haas? Look at his color work from the '40s & '50s and don't forget his show at moma in '62 I don't have anything against Eggleston except for the "father of color" crap

Comment by matt — December 12, 2006 @ [7:59 am](#)

26. Alec, all I was really trying to show is that stuff like that is probably inevitable given that people prefer to have simple labels – just because it makes it easier to mentally file information (and I admit my brain works the same way)....

Comment by Joerg M. Colberg — December 12, 2006 @ [1:27 pm](#)

27. Eggleston may have had the most widely referenced one-man show of color at MoMA, but Helen Levitt's color work in slide form was shown there two years earlier, and she began shooting color in 1959. It's all too complex for a single sentence or a single parent.

<http://millerprojects.typepad.com/journal/>

I had a curator that I greatly respect ask me to sum up my work in a sentence. I'm still trying to figure out what that sentence might be.

Comment by Sybil Miller — December 12, 2006 @ [2:13 pm](#)

28. correct me if i'm wrong, but i'd say you're "the emo photographer from minnesota".

Comment by aizan — December 12, 2006 @ [5:26 pm](#)

29. The whole one sentence thing is based off a psychological process called "least effort principle"(it is also responsible for the dirt paths that cut across campus greens). It is just how the brain works. We need to have things condensed down into manageable parts so they can be organized. I don't think that it equates someone's sentence to one's lifetime achievements or soul; but maybe it does however serve as a folded page corner to something that is worth reading again.

I think that I disagree with your comment about being able to shape the sentence. To me shaping something implies some degree of control. It is my belief that the only thing anyone can truly control is their own perceptions. One can plea their case but it doesn't mean that it is actually shaping it. At the end of the day there are much worse problems to have then having a sentence.

P.S. I am just striving to have my sentence not be "that guy who took uninteresting photographs of stuff that no one gives a shit about"

Comment by [bradley peters](#) — December 17, 2006 @ [11:15 pm](#)

30. Anyone remembering the “guy who shot birds in color with a large format camera using a flashlight” ?
No?
Well that wouldn't actually be his sentence, but Eliot Porter had a one-person exhibition organized by the NYC MOMA in 1943: BIRDS IN COLOR. 54 Prints.

So if we call WE the father of color photography, what then is EP, the godfather?

Comment by [bernd](#) — February 6, 2007 @ [2:31 pm](#)