

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 12, 2007

## Papageorge interview

Filed under: [interviews](#), [Papageorge](#), [the sentence](#) — alecsothblog @ 2:10 am

### I interviewed Tod Papageorge on July 11, 2007

**Alec Soth:** The day after I started writing about your work online, we all learned of the death of John Szarkowski. At first I felt awkward about continuing to dig into your work and life. But in a way Szarkowski's death makes it all the more meaningful. Your generation is so closely identified with Szarkowski. Can you talk about how he shaped you specifically?

**Tod Papageorge:** It's difficult to untangle the past, of course. The easiest thing would be to suggest that John showed me, and other photographers, a kind of way to go, but, in fact, we were already going there, pushing and jamming each other, riding out, most immediately, the possibilities that Robert Frank's great book had pointed to. What John really did was give the greatest imaginable sanction to all of this by throwing the weight of the most powerful art institution in the world—and his inimitable eloquence—behind us, and then expanding our sense of the possible through the remarkable shows that he put together.

Individually, his gift was to understand at some incalculable level what each of us was trying to do: just imagine, for example, this guy from the Minnesota woods tracking into Manhattan and being faced with the work, and person, of Garry Winogrand. And then through some emotional/intellectual identification—how? with what magic?—recognizing the radical brilliance and promise of Winogrand's pictures. It's still astonishing to me—and the list grows from there. In my particular case, the fact that he could look at a portfolio of my photographs and unfailingly pick out what I thought was, or might be, the most interesting or challenging, etc. of the group, thus allowing me to gather my underdeveloped thoughts to a greater focus, was a tremendous help, but this is what he did for everyone I knew who was bringing work into MoMA.

The fact, too, that he invited me to curate an exhibition, complete with catalog and essay, at MoMA was a tremendous affirmation for me. And I don't doubt that that essay was instrumental in establishing me at Yale.

I think that slightly younger photographers such as Stephen Shore or (who I imagine was your teacher) Joel Sternfeld, would have a different take regarding the arc of John's influence, in that they were just that much more distant from Frank, and therefore that much more open to the possibilities of the view camera, and then color, that John began to explore more regularly in his exhibitions of the early 70s.

**AS:** Recently Szarkowski began receiving attention for his photography. What is your opinion of this work?

**TP:** "The Idea of Louis Sullivan" is, I think, a great book, wielding text and pictures extraordinary well. Because it has cities, and shadows, all through it, it also strikes an entirely different set of chords than, say "The Face of Minnesota," or John's landscape work in general, does. In any case, because I'm blackhearted to some degree, I respond to that darkness more than I do the beauty of John's landscapes, as gorgeous and full-hearted as they are.

**AS:** One of the things I recently learned about Szarkowski was his fascination with apples. Somehow this further enlarged my picture of the man. It sounds corny, but I'm wondering if you have any hobbies?

**TP:** Reading and listening to music: Mozart is my god, Haydn his tribune, Bach the god THEY worship, and Beethoven their sullen charge.

**AS:** Do you still read and write poetry?

**TP:** I'll occasionally look at poets I already know, and try to read "The Odyssey" every year. But I don't write any kind of poetry now.

**AS:** You've said that you see photography as 'at least as close to writing as the other visual arts.' Are you talking about a specific kind of writing (poetry, journalism, fiction)?

**TP:** Poetry, because it and photography can both be similarly condensed.

**AS:** Photography that aspires toward a literary experience seems to benefit from been seen in a literary context – namely, the book. I often say that there are 'wall photographers' and 'book photographers.' I've only seen one of your photographs in the flesh. It was lovely, but I'm still certain that you are a book photographer. Would you agree?

**TP:** Yes, I love the book—but you should have seen my recent exhibition in NY while you were there: the prints glowed (not through MY efforts, of course, but those of my printer, Sergio Purtell). After all, why bother to use a 6 x 9 cm. camera if you're not going to make beautiful prints w/it?

**AS:** Which photographic books stand out for you as an example of literary photography?

**TP:** There are only a few, but, of course, they are also the usual suspects: "American Photographs," "The Americans," and, combining pictures and text, John's "Idea of Louis Sullivan and Strand's "Time in New England," a great book.

As you've indicated here in this blog, I've tried to do something that I think is new in "Passing Through Eden," and that is to follow an established narrative through the long opening of the book, and then trace out the residual 'literary' energies of that narrative through the rest of it.

**AS:** Just out of curiosity, what do you think of Bruce Davidson's Central Park book?

**TP:** I think it reflects a commercial enterprise. (And I admire the recent Steidl book of his early work in the British Isles.)

**AS:** Unlike a novel, a series of photographs rarely tells a complete story. There isn't the engine of narrative suspense pushing you from beginning to middle to end. I'm wondering if this was a frustration as you began assembling your Central Park pictures.

**TP:** No. As a reader of pictures, one wants the experience to be open-ended, I think, even in the face of some kind of narrative impulse.

**AS:** When was the editing complete? Did you make changes at the last minute?

**TP:** After months of ceaseless noodling with it on my part, Michael Mack, my editor on the book, and I got together (he was in from England) and finished it up. I'd pretty much completed the 'Biblical' section to our mutual satisfaction, and from there it was a case of clarifying a few knotty groups of pictures later in the book. It was a great, and invaluable, few hours.

**AS:** Now that it is in print, do you have any regrets?

**TP:** I WOULD change a few things in the sequence if I could, and also the small mistakes of copy editing in the text.



Central Park, 1989, by Tod Papageorge ([click](#) to enlarge)

**AS:** There is one specific image I wanted to ask you about. The man with the eye chart (p.20) is unbelievable. Do you remember taking the picture? Do you know what was going on?

**TP:** It is what you see. Who knows? It's New York, after all. I have no idea why he had the chart there.

But let me add something here apropos of some recent discussion in this blog:

I have no real argument against so-called set-up photography, at least as a process. The fact that I've had many successful students doing it in different ways I think makes my case. I also think that the reason they've felt free enough to work in this way at Yale is because I profoundly believe in—and teach—the proposition that photography is inherently a fiction-making process. Don't speak to me of the document; I don't really believe in it, particularly now. A picture's not the world, but a new thing.

That said—too briefly—my argument against the set-up picture is that it leaves the matter of content to the IMAGINATION of the photographer, a faculty that, in my experience, is generally deficient compared to the mad swirling possibilities that our dear common world kicks up at us on a regular basis. That's all. Remember, T. S. Eliot made the clear, brutal distinction between the art that floods us with the "aura" of experience, and the art that 'presents' the experience itself. ANY artist, I feel, must contend seriously with the question of which side of that distinction he or she is going to bet on in their work. Obviously, I'm with Eliot—and Homer—in this,

believing that the mind-constructed photograph almost necessarily leads to a form of illustration, the very epitome of aura-art.

All of which is to ask: what imagination, what choir of angels, what souped-up computer, could come up with that eye-chart and its desperate chartist?

**AS:** In 1974 you wrote, "Photography investigates no deeper relief than surfaces. It is superficial, in the first sense of the word; it studies the shape and skin of things, that which can be seen." Do you still believe this to be true?

**TP:** How else can the photograph begin, but there? It's this discursive descriptiveness that makes photography unique, and gives it whatever place it might have in art-heaven. We can follow all of this descriptiveness to emotionally moving places, of course, but we have to begin where and how the lens begins, literally tracing the lineaments of things.

**AS:** In the essay to *Passing Through Eden* you mention being particularly taken by a Brassai retrospective: "I felt the palpable presence of bodies and things." You talk about how this led you toward using a medium format camera. But I'm also wondering if it led you to a particular subject matter. Brassai's work had a lot to do with sexuality and temptation. During this time I understand you photographed at Studio 54. And certainly *Passing Through Eden* involves sexuality and temptation.

**TP:** In another essay somewhere, T. S. Eliot (and I haven't had occasion to mention him like this, or nearly this often, in decades) coined the phrase "the disassociation of sensibility" to describe what he understood to be the separation, or even abyss, between feeling and intellect in John Doone's poetry. What I felt I saw in Brassai's photographs was a remarkable integration of those two things; in other words, a superb intellect (read his "Conversations with Picasso," for example) unselfconsciously married to a profoundly sensuous apprehension of the world that expressed itself, in his photographs, as a perfect union of form and (dense literary) content. THAT's what captivated me about his work, not sex per se, or sex perverse, but his great-hearted/great-minded reading of the physical world. I might add that, after seeing an exhibition of mine in Paris, his wife wrote to me to say that Brassai saw in me a "fils espíritual," his spiritual son—a remark that I treasure.



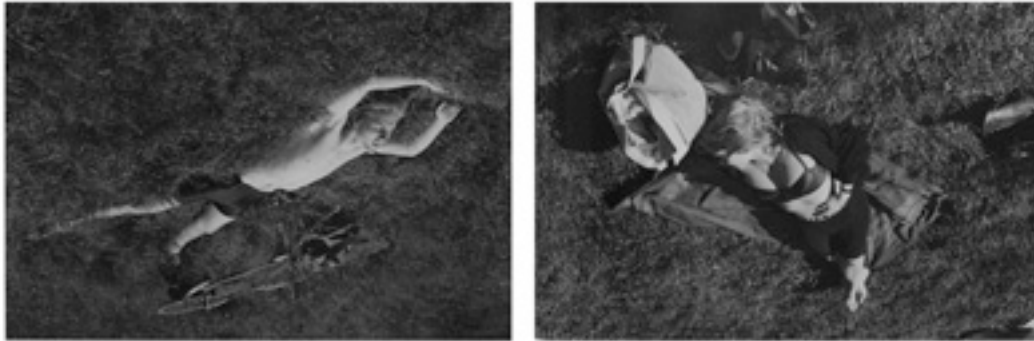
Central Park, 1981, by Tod Papageorge

**AS:** You like to photograph beautiful women.

**TP:** Well, why not? Although I can't really say that I like to do it: I have to. If you accept the idea that photographers, or some of them, are actually artists, then you have to look at their work less as a document of

something than as a personal vision of the world. And my imaginary world, informed by music and books, as well as photography, is one in which beauty and some notion of ravishment are central. What more eloquent 'objective correlative' (Eliot again) for me, a man, to express that than women?

I've always felt that an artist is some kind of holy fool who is willing to be misunderstood in service to the larger goal of fully investing him or herself in their work. In other words, the issue is much less woman, or attractive women, or (dread word) voyeurism, than shaping an artistic vision suggestive, in many different directions—not just women, of course—of how rich and extraordinary beautiful the world might be.



Central Park, 1987-88, by Tod Papageorge ([click](#) to enlarge)

**AS:** Talk about the upside down pictures. When did this idea come about? How was it received? Did you exhibit these pictures?

**TP:** Well, speaking of ravishment, there it is, encountered with a man, a woman, and two couples. And that's exactly what I was trying to get to, an almost-angelic transcendence coming on the heels of everything else before returning to a relatively wrung-out world.

Additionally, I wanted these pictures to 'teach' readers of the book—if they hadn't learned the lesson already—that, "yes, this whole book has been willed into shape, it's a made thing, a self-conscious artistic object where a picture might even be reversed to make a poetic point crucial to the meaning of it."

**AS:** How were these pictures received?

**TP:** Generally, people have been disconcerted by these pictures, but that's just a first reaction. I hope that, in time, they'll come to be seen as organic to the whole book.

**AS:** I believe that no matter who you are, most people are going to say one sentence about you. "He's the guy who photographs Weimereimers." I think your sentence used to be "He's the guy who hung around Winogrand." Now it is "He's the guy who runs the Yale program." Or maybe, "He's the prick who runs the Yale program." Do you agree? Do you care? What do you want to be your legacy?



**TP:** Well, of course I dislike the one-sentence sum-up, as anyone would, or should: it leaves too much out. Garry Winogrand and I were close friends, not a god and his hanger-on. Sure, I direct the Yale program, but what does that mean apart from whatever the person saying it thinks about the Yale program—which will be incomplete and uninformed if they haven't been through it? So, no, while I ultimately don't really care, I'd also point out the obvious—that "the sentence" is a pernicious and profitless way of looking at things.

As for a legacy, I hope it becomes clear with time that everything I did—in my work, my writing, and even my teaching—was done passionately, out of a love of photography, to the furthest degree I could accomplish it.

**AS:** I know that you have a new book coming out from Aperture. Are there another dozen books planned after that?

**TP:** I have a completed maquette of work I made in Paris over the years, mostly in the 90s; also a group of early pictures from New York. Then there are California pictures, and any number of other projects.

**AS:** Are you shooting new work?

**TP:** As for current work, given the exigencies of teaching, family, and life, I photograph for the most part during the summer, primarily at Lake George, Stieglitz's old stomping ground. Want to lend me your view camera?

- permanent link to this interview [here](#)



## 37 Comments

1. wow...its like zues came down from olympia to speak in thunderbolts...mr. soth seemed vehement while Tp stayed close to the battle.

I think Tp is closer to the truth.

Zues is so strong!

*Comment by pinocchio — July 12, 2007 @ 3:11 am*

2. i hope you continue to publish interviews you conduct ,or just interviews you think are interesting.

*Comment by pds — July 12, 2007 @ 3:35 am*

3. Great interview – wish it was longer. Mr. Papageorge clearly shows his depth of literate knowledge, decades of study, and profound love for the medium. His answers are in a class of their own.

I'd love to know the root of your animosity to the Yale program – is this a Bard vs Yale thing, or what is going on?

The Yale MFA is obviously led by someone of immense vision and insight, with an understanding that outstrips 99% of even the ultra aware readers in this forum. It's graduates are some of our leading photographic artists today, (even if we remove all the 'Brides of Crewdson' team) so – why the overt skepticism that borders on hostility, from an otherwise genial Mr Soth?

*Comment by narikin — July 12, 2007 @ 7:44 am*

4. Terrific.

*Comment by zbs — July 12, 2007 @ 8:22 am*

5. Great interview.

*Comment by Tom Leiningner — July 12, 2007 @ 8:38 am*

6. Hey there Alec. Like you and most others, I had seen bits of Papageorge's work here and there but never really knew much about him aside from Yale. Thanks for taking the time to enlighten us with your interview.

*Comment by Chuck Shacochis — July 12, 2007 @ 8:48 am*

7. [...] Alec Soth just posted an interview with Ted Papageorge. It's pretty interesting throughout, although my attention definitely spiked at this: [...]

*Pingback by Gramarye » Blog Archive » Alec Soth interviews Ted Papageorge — July 12, 2007 @ 9:11 am*

8. Thank you, Alec.

*Comment by Shane Lavalette — July 12, 2007 @ 9:25 am*

9. Terrific job.

*Comment by Dan — July 12, 2007 @ 10:09 am*

10. lovely conversation.

*Comment by j zorn — July 12, 2007 @ 11:03 am*

11. This Papageorge week has been great, not least because before this I hadn't a clue who he was.

*Comment by Amy — July 12, 2007 @ 12:25 pm*

12. Quite an illuminating interview! I knew Papageorge's name and reputation at Yale, yet had only seen a few of his photographs. More striking (for me) than his work, are his ideas and philosophies about the medium. Once again, quite a thought-provoking interview.

*Comment by Ben Alper — July 12, 2007 @ 12:28 pm*

13. What a great exchange of thoughtful questions and revealing responses. Complete with a cliff-hanger towards the end...

Or maybe, "He's the prick who runs the Yale program." Do you agree? Do you care? What do you want to be your legacy?

*Comment by Phillip Carpenter — July 12, 2007 @ 1:08 pm*

14. Both you and Mr. Papageorge are extremely interesting and inspiring.

Thank you!

*Comment by catharine — July 12, 2007 @ 1:11 pm*

15. Now, whos week will it be next time?

*Comment by dan — July 12, 2007 @ 1:15 pm*

16. this has all been fabulous.i am alerting all members of the collectors circle at the birmingham museum to read all TP related material.

*Comment by jack drake — July 12, 2007 @ 2:03 pm*

17. [...] I must (for the sake of discussion) clarify where Papageorge stands in this as the last quote that I extracted may have not allowed him enough text to elaborate. In this quote he professes that now, as I explained above, "a picture's not the world, but a new thing." From Alec's interview with Papageorge: [...]

*Pingback by SHANE LAVALETTE / JOURNAL » Blog Archive » The Content of the Imagination and That of the Real World, Continued — July 12, 2007 @ 4:43 pm*

18. Cheers Alec, fantastic. I would love it if you could do an interview with the great British photographer Euan Duff, He fits nicely into that whole photography/narrative thang..... but i think he is a little shy.....

*Comment by Mark Page — July 13, 2007 @ 1:18 am*

19. Very good Post! More interviews please..thanks!

<http://www.lucianobove.blogspot.com>

*Comment by luciano — July 13, 2007 @ 3:12 am*

20. real questions and answers. thanks!

*Comment by christoph — July 13, 2007 @ 4:53 am*

21. I love it! How affirmative to read his words regarding experience/real life trumping imagination/illustration. My sentiments exactly! Thank you Alex for this masters seminar on photography that you modestly call a blog.

*Comment by Mike Peters — July 13, 2007 @ 5:57 am*

22. The whole "regarding experience/real life trumping imagination/illustration" argument seems useless to me. It is like arguing against using words for poetry and fiction and only for history and biography.

It reminds me of rockers DJs who would steam roll disco records.

*Comment by Ron Diorio — July 13, 2007 @ 8:06 am*

23. I agree, Ron, when it's said as dogmatically as it was first attributed to Papageorge. But as he makes clear here he means to simply emphasize, to increasingly 'imagination-driven' (we need better jargon) young photographers, the distinct possibilities of photographing happenstance. I think he too would be wary of saying much about these photographs capturing "real life". But, on the other hand, I agree with you if you mean to say we should be wary of drawing these divisions too broadly. From an interview from Winogrand,

D: That's an interesting point, particularly coming from someone who takes — or rather, composes and then snaps— lightning-fast shots.

W: I'll say this, I'm pretty fast with a camera when I have to be. However, I think it's irrelevant. I mean, what if I said that every photograph I made was set up? From the photograph, you can't prove otherwise. You don't know anything from the photograph about how it was made, really. But every photograph could be set up. If one could imagine it, one could set it up. The whole discussion is a way of not talking about photographs.

D: Well, what would be a better way to describe that?

W: See, I don't think time is involved in how the thing is made. It's like, "There I was 40,000 feet in the air," whatever. You've got to deal with how photographs look, what's there, not how they're made. Even with what camera.

D: So what is really important—

W: Is the photograph.

*Comment by zbs — July 13, 2007 @ 9:16 am*

24. zbs – Thanks for that.

I think of photograophy as big tent – labelling some kinds as better than the others tends to create ghettos of practice. As Winogrand says much better than I, all that counts is what you see between the edges – "how photographs look, what's there".

*Comment by Ron Diorio — July 13, 2007 @ 9:36 am*

25. Ron, check out <http://www.liamspencer-art.co.uk> and step away from the camera!

*Comment by Mark Page — July 13, 2007 @ 9:51 am*

26. Thanks for the deeper exposure to a great photographer, I look forward to seeing more of what I've missed...

Also, the useful distinction of "book photographers" and "wall photographers"... somehow it's more apt than "mirrors and windows".

*Comment by mark s — July 13, 2007 @ 11:26 am*

27. Great post, enlightening interview, can't wait to get hold of the book. Thanks Alec! Following up on Mark S' remark, I also think that the distinction "book vs wall" mentioned is very useful. And I would add that there is a third distinct variety: "magazine photographers". I remember the first time I saw an Annie Leibovitz on a wall: an exhibition of her work in Sao Paulo, Brazil, many years ago: it didn't work. I correct myself: it didn't work at all. On the same premises, at the same time, there was an exhibition of classic Magnum photographer Marc Riboud: it blew your head off. But I would argue that Leibovitz work doesn't translate well into books either. However, it looks pretty decent (for me) in the medium for which it was originally shot for: Vanity Fair, or, in the past, Rolling Stone...

*Comment by Federico — July 13, 2007 @ 12:23 pm*

28. "what imagination, what choir of angels...?"

amazing quote! i wish i could speak that way.

*Comment by philip bowen — July 13, 2007 @ 6:17 pm*

29. I am finding this whole discussion of Papageorge quite interesting. I attended one of the weekly critiques at Yale in the fall of 2005 and was simply amazed to find a bunch of inarticulate self-interested mediocre students. At many points I wanted to get up and begin leading the discussion myself—to breathe some life into everyone. . . Papageorge, Crewdson, diCorcia and Schorr were on the panel. . . Let's just say, at least on this day, Yale was not what I expected it would be. As a documentary photographer I ended up doing the one year MA in documentary photography at The London School of Communication under Paul Lowe, a former Magnum photographer.

p.s. Szarkowski's farmhouse is just over the New York state line from me here in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts—25 minutes by car. My best friend's father, a sculptor, was friends with him.

*Comment by Davin Ellicson — July 13, 2007 @ 6:28 pm*

30. "Fils spirituel", surely, assuming that Mrs Brassai was speaking correct French.

*Comment by David Paul Carr — July 14, 2007 @ 2:28 am*

31. I KNEW that spelling looked wonky Thanks.

*Comment by Tod Papageorge — July 14, 2007 @ 8:38 am*

32. Great interview. I was thinking that Alec's question sounded like speech but Papageorge's answers read like prose. Brilliant & poetic prose, yes, but definitely created & worked for the page. The above tells me I was probably right. Not that it matters, one way or the other. Amazing eloquence.

*Comment by Tim Connor — July 15, 2007 @ 12:25 am*

33. Alec, what a wonderful series of posts, you're edging me on to take a deep look at Papageorge's work when before I only had touched the surface.

On his literary quality which has been getting so much attention, if you can find it, take a look at his essay "Walker Evans and Robert Frank, an essay on influence", its been ten years since last I saw this book and yet its still fresh in my mind. His observations on the relationship between Evan's "American Photographs" and Frank's "The Americans" woke me up to the possibilities of the relationship of images in the photo book, and their dialogue with the greater tradition. It may be one of the great works of photo criticism, at least in my own personal mythology.

*Comment by Mathew Pokoik — July 15, 2007 @ 11:14 am*

34. Does any one have a copy of the text for "Walker Evans and Robert Frank, An Essay on Influence"? Even though it is on my "to buy" list, I would love to read it.

*Comment by John von Pamer — July 17, 2007 @ 1:39 pm*

35. I am quite interested in Papageorge's upside down pictures (particularly the one of the male) because they seem to disrupt the very ideas of the aura of experience he has quoted. The power of these images is, for me, their ability to simultaneously embody the world as I know it and an alternative upside down world where a man whom I just saw stretching in the comfort of the sun is now falling in bliss or possibly agony. The image has two lives, but depicts only one instant.

Perhaps Papageorge could have never imagined the circumstances of his image of a man with an eye chart, but I see the realm of "aura" that the upside down images exist in as out of line with his interest in the "mad swirling possibilities that our dear common world kicks up at us on a regular basis" even if his mind dreamt the "imagined" qualities of the photograph post shutter snap. I realise this interview was posted a while back, but I would be interested in the opinions of others, including Mr. Papageorge on the differences and similarities between his upside down images and "set-up" images of other photographers.

*Comment by Allison Grant — July 22, 2007 @ 7:33 pm*

36. [...] I have a lot of things on my mind this Saturday evening. I have left the city of Boston for the first time this summer. It is a break I greatly need. In the blogging world I have always tried to do my own thing as there are many great photographer/bloggers out there and there is no need to repeat what they say. However, I have been closely watching Alec Soth's Tod Papageorge week over at his blog and find it an interesting discussion of the state of photography in many circles today. I would like to point out that I first wrote about Papageorge back on April 3rd in this regards. Though obviously I was beaten with an actual interview that Soth got. [...]

*Pingback by Jon Bakos | Blog » Blog Archive » Questions and Answers — August 8, 2007 @ 4:08 pm*

37. Mr. Papageorge has the mind of a true artist. But I'm afraid I'm just not drawn to his photographs.

For example: the cover photograph of his current book. The trash is just too obviously ironic, yet at the same time doesn't make an impact. Compare it to Koudelka's image (Exiles) of a baby lying in a bassinet and the bassinet next to trash cans in an alley. Granted its a set-up, but THAT makes an impact.

Papageorge's essay on Evans and Frank and his introduction to Winogrand's Public Relations are classics. Here his sense of touch is genius.

And the obvious reference source for the expensive and hard to find books: The Library. Almost anything is available anywhere.

Take care and blessings for your next project

*Comment by Merritt Hewitt — September 22, 2007 @ 10:13 am*