

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 3, 2006

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Filed under: [books](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:23 am

Been catching up on the pile of magazines. Rather than reflect, I thought I'd just pass along a handful of obliquely related quotes:

Martin Parr as quoted in *PDN*:

Ultimately it's the book that lives on and keeps the images going. If I had to choose one, the book would be it.

Bill Jay in *Lens Work*:

A major core characteristic of the medium since its inception has been its democratic nature, its ability to produce an unlimited number of identical copies, its very ordinary, everyday anti-art aspects.

I remember ... (here we go again, the old fart in his dotage remembering the good old days)... when photographs were treated with love for what they depicted, for their love of life, not of cash value.

Now we are at the opposite extreme, and I cannot adjust. There is no way I could work in a museum and invest photographs with the necessary preciousness. I would love the images, but would not / could not care, beyond basic steps, about their multimillion dollar price tags. I would prefer to see them in a book.

Vince Aletti on Steven Meisel in *Modern Painters*:

It's become apparent that Meisel isn't concerned with exhibition prints or artworld exposure; his work is conceived for the printed page, and that's where nearly all of it has stayed. (I doubt that he has more than a drawerful of what other artists call "personal work.") He knows his place, occupying it with such assurance and authority that nearly everyone else looks like an upstart.

Vince Aletti on Annie Leibovitz in *The New Yorker*:

Annie Leibovitz has never been particularly good at translating her work from the printed page to the gallery wall. No matter how smashing her celebrity portraits may appear in *Vanity Fair* or *Vogue*, they tend to look merely clever in exhibition, at once overblown and oddly deflated.

Tod Papageorge in an interview in *BOMB*:

Why no book until now? I don't photograph for exhibition, but to engage in this process of understanding photography itself. ... We all have to deal with our strengths and weaknesses, and while I guess my strength is my willingness to engage repeatedly with this deeply difficult problem of making coherent pictures, my weakness is an equally strong tendency to want everything in my pictures to be part of a perfect web—not a very healthy or often-satisfied ambition when trying to clarify such complex chunks of the visual world.

27 Comments

1. If I were rich enough, I wouldn't own a single photobook. They don't work for me. Unfortunately, I have a large collection.

Comment by burke — November 3, 2006 @ [7:34 am](#)

2. If I were rich enough, I would own every single photobook. They really work for me. Unfortunately, I have a large enough collection.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [8:17 am](#)

3. DON'T dang it, I mean to say, "DON'T have a large enough collection." Grrr. Nothing worse than a botched clever.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [8:20 am](#)

4. yes i believe in the photobook. very intimate – and where else can one see all those pictures together long after the shows.

Comment by j zorn — November 3, 2006 @ [8:21 am](#)

5. i both love and hate photobooks and books on other subjects — some i keep going back to over many years, some are just good for a week or so — but i tend to keep them all and only hate them when i move. what looks reasonable on the shelf becomes overwhelming when they have to go into small boxes and then be carried down the stairs, to the car, and back up the stairs to a new resting place. so i often think i should cull the herd and only keep the essentials.

then i think about judd's library out in marfa, all those books on so many subjects in their odd order, and how they represent years of inquiry and curiosity, a map of the mind. and i think of my aging mother, her mind's map being erased a little more every year. and i keep my books.

Comment by [Sybil Miller](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [10:33 am](#)

6. I think we should move on, get rid of all them; they are, mostly, akward, oversized and spend most of their lives gathering dust.

Comment by [Philip](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [11:36 am](#)

7. Philip, please tell me you are kidding.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [12:21 pm](#)

8. ah, photobooks. i love them all. except the expensive ones.

Comment by aizan — November 3, 2006 @ [1:32 pm](#)

9. I'm really not kidding, we're probably not there yet, in terms of visual quality, but that's entirely within our reach. There is no reason why you shouldn't have your electronic book leather bound if you must. Think of all the possibilities, not just in the ability to have multiple books, in one 'binding' but interactively especially in terms of audio. Stone tablets are good for collectors, and there are plenty around for collectors, but value, besides quality of the content, comes from rarity; books are coming out of the conveyorbelt by the ton.

I'm hard to please. I've been bought up thinking that a book is never a waste of money. It's the content that is important to me and I find myself actually buying 'handeable' books (ie a size I can hold comfortably) with proper quality images, plenty of background detail, texts etc (I don't reject books

without those outright, there may be reasons). Yet I really find so few. I'm at home on the web, or printing stuff out. People read very much more stuff on computers now than they did before. I'd like to carry my library with me.

Comment by [Philip](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [1:37 pm](#)

10. I own very few books of and on photography but I mostly love the ones I have purchased and wouldn't trade them for some sort of digital megabook. I read quite a bit online and I enjoy photography and other imagery on a screen but for me there is something more intimate and sensual about a carefully edited and printed book of photos.

Maybe it's simply nostalgia, I'm not sure. Or maybe it's my own strong involvement in design and a personal attachment to paper, ink, and the tangible aesthetics that can enhance the viewing of words and images. The most elegant e-paper would never replace that for me I don't think.

Comment by [Davin](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [3:11 pm](#)

11. Sorry didn't mean to sound so 'harsh' in my first comment.

Comment by [Philip](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [3:14 pm](#)

12. I believe that the computer is the absolute worst way to look at photographs.

I also believe that books are by far the best. I've worked in a photo gallery long enough, and of course visited plenty, to realize that I personally feel more engaged with books than walls.

Comment by [Ross](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [3:22 pm](#)

13. I'm a big fan of books (all kinds, but of course especially photo books). There's just so much to be said about books (and, coincidentally, many of those things actually make the sheer idea of "ebooks" even sillier than it already is), and I don't want to clog Alec's comment section here with something long about how much and why I love photo books.

The other day, I read an interview with Stephen Shore (in a book, but I just found the link [see my blog – I just can't refrain from creating a post about it]), where he talked about the limited- and small-edition books he has been working on. I find this all endlessly fascinating, especially since you can literally now create your own books and have them printed on demand. What better way is there for an artist to have a book exactly the way s/he wants one?

Comment by [Joerg Colberg](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [4:07 pm](#)

14. Well, I can feel the tide surging swelling over me here. Alec do you have a tone extractor/regulator button somewhere on your site? Perhaps I should cork it!

Anyway, I would just point out again that it is the content that is important to me, not the container in which it is held necessarily, except in so far as it improves my experience and convenience. I did say that there are problems with the quality of displaying images on the current screens, which implies that I would be looking at images, if the technology were available, in high quality.

The word "ebooks" rather misrepresents my vision. I don't look at pdf ebooks, for example, nor think they are a good idea.

I have an enormous number of books, and I have got rid of as many in my life of living between three different continents. Would it be too much to ask that I have a 'tablet' with a nice 'book-like-feel' within which I could view the photography that I like from many photographers that I like? Let's not forget the ease of transporting such an e-file, as well, to far flung corners of the world – to people who may not have the opportunity to read the actual book – perhaps in their own language. It's an absurd idea, because, clearly, it seems, the tide and all its invested interests will wash this idea away.

I don't really like artifacts. Is that the word? I would buy a handmade special edition book just as I would love to buy a beautiful original print by Stephen Shore were they works of art in their own right. The fact is, a 'huge' number of books don't quite fit the bill in that respect.

I would wager that many of you are viewing pictures and reading far more on screen, than off, already.

Oh just, one teeny little last thing, here's an "e" experience you can feel for, now tell me you don't: <http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/fotografio/pag1.html> . Its not so bad is it?

Right I'm departing

Comment by [Philip](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [5:32 pm](#)

15. *I don't photograph for exhibition, but to engage in this process of understanding photography itself.*

Alec, I read somewhere (probably here) that you pre-conceive the shot, go take it, and that's about that. I think I'm more towards Tod Papageorge's end of the spectrum — while cameras and lenses and f/stops and fixers are all well and good, and it's nice to see my work out there somewhere, it's the epistemology of it all that fascinates me the most. What is the picture saying, what is it not saying, how can we know what it says, and from what can we infer that which is implied?

But don't get me wrong: I'd take a book deal.

Comment by [Clint Weathers](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [6:39 pm](#)

16. I don't register Philip's apparent photobook angst as negativity, but rather a cry for the photobook to continue evolving. It is of course evolving before our eyes. As Joerg alluded to, producing a short run artist's book no longer requires perseverance and craftsmanship. Granted it takes worthwhile content, a wad of cash, or some balance of the two, but it is fast becoming a democratised endeavour. Holding it back somewhat is haphazard quality control, printing a book without concerned eyes on site is rare. But the revolution in desktop printing — which has resulted in much better quality control — will eventually hit the presses. I suspect the technologists are pouring attention into this rather than creating some e-gadget.

Most people really do prefer artifacts (though there is nothing wrong if you do not) and, as long as it complements the photography, the more artifice that goes into them the better. Many works don't make sense outside the book form (left as an exercise for the reader!). And some photographers work feels a little limp as gallery prints, stripped of the poetry and harmony they have on the printed page (eg, Frank). Or maybe that's just the debilitating effect public spectacle can have on some types of photography.

Interesting to note that while gallery prints get ever larger and impersonal (Gursky, anyone?), photobooks may be becoming more personal. For instance, like them or loathe them, Nazraeli's success with the tiny volumes in the One Picture Book series are a case in point.

I've begun to ramble from the point, if there ever was one, so will leave it there. I'll go back to dreaming about owning one of Raymond Meek's 'Edition of 1' photobooks (<http://www.raymondmeeks.net/Category.cfm?nL=0&nS=4>).

Comment by [rg](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [7:39 pm](#)

17. Regarding Clint's comment: "I read somewhere (probably here) that you pre-conceive the shot, go take it, and that's about that." Chalk this up as another reason I'm so ambivalent about blogging. Words are subject to misinterpretation and exaggeration. I don't know what you are referring to Clint, but that is just about the opposite of my working process.

Regarding Philip's thoughts on ebooks. I own Pedro Meyer's original CD-ROM for I Photograph to Remember. It remains one of the most outstanding examples of interactive media (despite the fact that

I can no longer open the CD-ROM). I'm a huge fan of Magnum in Motion and other examples of combining image and narration on the web. Within that form is the future of Magnum and, probably, the future of photojournalism. I appreciate where you are coming from. I'm prepared, for example, to give up newspapers. But for me books are different. The artifact (the size, texture, paper quality, etc) is such a delight. But like any form of connoisseurship this is personal. And I'll probably end up like those old fogies that still prefer vinyl albums. You aren't wrong. I'm just surprised to hear it. I know there is a tide against photographic prints (a la rg's Gursky comment), but I hadn't heard an anti-photobook sentiment before. It is interesting. But, as they say, you'll have to pry them from my cold dead hands.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [9:21 pm](#)

18. *I don't really like artifacts. Is that the word? I would buy a handmade special edition book just as I would love to buy a beautiful original print by Stephen Shore were they works of art in their own right. The fact is, a 'huge' number of books don't quite fit the bill in that respect.*

It doesn't have to be handmade for the book to be a work of art. From more recently, there is Moriyama's '71/NY, *Sightwalk* by Pinkhassov, *Telex Iran* by Peress, and lots more. Ed Ruscha's books were cheap when they were published, too.

Besides, there are plenty of fine press photo books and portfolios that are merely well printed (ok, exquisitely printed) on fine paper and bound and/or cased by master bookbinders, but don't really do anything with the book as art.

In the spirit of Ed Ruscha, however, there is a lot of untapped potential in using websites as art form to show photos. Either that or I'm out of the loop. Forget photoblogs! HTML, CSS, Javascript, and all the rest aren't that hard to learn.

Comment by [aizan](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [9:23 pm](#)

19. Never one for poetry, I nonetheless envied how poetry lovers could always find solace and joy in the simple act of reading and rereading their treasured books of verse and rhyme. I adopted that simple act of joy and satisfaction when I acquired my first photo book in the mid seventies.

That said, I remember walking away (more than once) quite the disappointed after viewing a spectacular exhibit, only to find that the reproductions in the accompanying book were woefully inadequate, and an injustice to both viewer and photographer alike.

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [9:31 pm](#)

20. *Words are subject to misinterpretation and exaggeration. I don't know what you are referring to Clint, but that is just about the opposite of my working process.*

Re first sentence, you ain't whistlin' Dixie there.

Re second, I'll poke around but it could well be misinterpretation/bad interview/me up at 4am/all the above.

Re the tide of anti-print sentiment, is there an analogue in other visual arts? Did this happen that you know of in painting, sculpture, architecture, etc?

Comment by [Clint Weathers](#) — November 4, 2006 @ [1:55 am](#)

21. Photobooks are absolutely essential. Case in point – there's no way any of us could afford a single Soth print, but we can all get 100% of the narrative point of 'Niagra' for \$37.80.

I also second the anti-gigantist movement: there's good selection of UBS's modern photographic collection in Tate Modern at the moment, and there are some gorgeous late 70's Ruff prints of domestic

interiors that look stunning at 8×10", against some really overblown large scale prints; though I think that in this show at least, Gursky is the exception that proves the rule.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — November 4, 2006 @ [4:01 am](#)

22. Sorry I did not mean to sound anti-Gursky. My point was that some works are for public spectacle and all the more intriguing at large size, whereas others call for private contemplation in a smaller size. They aren't 'personal' usually because they are not designed to be so.

Comment by [rg](#) — November 4, 2006 @ [7:30 am](#)

23. What's the point of "ebooks"? Can someone explain this to me? Why in the world would I want to rely on some plastic tablet (or whatever else it is going to be) when in fact actual books are way more convenient (and feel and [usually] smell better)? My books always work. I take them out of the shelf, and there they are. No batteries, no outlet required. No ads, no problems with file formats. None of that stuff.

And that's not even it as far as photography is concerned. Computers still fail to reproduce the range of colours that photos have. And what kind of freakingly huge tablet would I have to buy to look at one of Alec's or Edward Burtynsky's books?

Also, why are books somehow less valuable because they're mass produced? Is that what some people are saying here? I mean, as [guybatey](#) points out most people will never be able to fork over a few thousand \$\$ for a single print, but they will be able to enjoy nicely printed and affordable photo books. And it all depends on the publisher. The vast majority of books in my collection is excellently printed (Steidl's, say). Unfortunately, there are lots of photo books that aren't – but I usually don't buy those.

And, you know, assuming that you have the money to buy photography, how much wall-space do you really have? Isn't it much easier to have a bunch of books?

Comment by [Joerg Colberg](#) — November 4, 2006 @ [8:49 am](#)

24. Aside: Pedro Meyer's "I Photograph To Remember" is [now available](#) for the iPod generation. Free.

Comment by [rg](#) — November 4, 2006 @ [10:52 am](#)

25. One word for you fellow photobook phetishists, and that word is "[Blurb.com](#)". If you don't know what I'm talking about, then you have a very pleasant surprise coming. If ever a thing was too good to be true, this is it. But it's not, and I'm holding the proof in my hand. I'm impressed and very, very pleased.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — November 4, 2006 @ [12:02 pm](#)

26. There is nothing like a good book. What's all the fuss about?

Comment by [Martin Buday](#) — November 5, 2006 @ [1:10 am](#)

27. There's an interesting parallel of sorts I think in the roll of the book in photography and architectural design culture – in view of the production / dissemination of ideas – the potential to influence is a pretty universal concern of the arts after all.

If you think a photograph is expensive, imagine the cost of a building to house such things... so in this sense books are great deals!

Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) — November 9, 2006 @ [3:15 am](#)

