

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

December 3, 2006

Where are the people?

Filed under: [media](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:47 pm

In the current issue of the New Yorker, there is [a profile](#) of the legendary 96-year-old architectural photographer Julius Shulman. The article discusses Shulman's disapproval of the way most architectural photographers only photograph empty buildings:

"Why is there such a fear of using people? Richard Neutra was always furious if I used people in pictures of his houses – he was afraid they would overpower the architecture. But my photographs show babies and cats and dogs and children. Why not? It makes it interesting to connect it with the life."



Case Study House #21, 1958 by Julius Shulman

Fine art and documentary photographers often appropriate the techniques of architectural photography. Perhaps the most notable example in the fine art arena has been Andreas Gursky. I think Gursky is a great photographer (I sense a backlash against him amongst other photographers, but I think this is largely due to overexposure and outrageous auction prices).

I enjoy Gursky's clinical, god's eye view. And I like the work of his contemporaries Thomas Struth, Peter Bialobrzeski, Candida Höfer, etc (are they all German?). But a little goes a long way. After awhile I get hungry to see people in the pictures. Instead of Gursky's iconic [*99 cent II Diptychon*](#) (which recently sold at auction for 2.48 million... ironic), I might want to look at, say, [Brian Ulrich](#):



Chicago, IL by Brian Ulrich

Luc Delahaye is another photographer I greatly admire. He maintains Gursky's god's eye view, but the view often includes people. A few years ago Delahaye created controversy when he exhibited this image at the Ricco-Maresca gallery:



Taliban Soldier by Luc Delahaye

The controversy had to do with commercialism. The image was printed large and sold for approximately \$15,000 (a drop in the Gursky bucket). Why are people so uncomfortable with this kind of photography depicting real life and real death? As Shulman asked, "Why is there such a fear of using people."

Of course one of the other reasons that Delahaye got into trouble was because he was applying journalistic imagery to a fine-art context. But so what? Are we supposed to erase images of people to make photographs palatable for the art market? I suppose people are disturbed by the idea of, in the words of Shulman, 'using people.' It is disturbing. Photographs of people use people. It makes us uncomfortable. But it is also what makes the medium so potent.

I've been thinking about this issue in relation to the spate of fine-art images from Katrina: Robert Polidori, Chris Jordan, Katherine Wolkoff and others. I think these are all terrific photographers. And they've done admirable work. But after awhile I find the absence of people in the pictures a little frustrating.

Katrina is a good example of why I often defend the efforts of photojournalists. Certainly photojournalism has numerous faults, but I admire the attempt to connect the subject (in this case Katrina) to real people. Along with all of the images of destroyed homes, don't we also need to see pictures like this:



15 days after Katrina hit New Orleans, Edgar Hollingsworth, 74, is rescued from his Broadmoor District home, photograph by Bruce Chambers/Orange County Register

"It makes it interesting to connect it with the life," said Shulman. Of course! Architecture isn't some frozen box, it is a home, a place where life is lived. While it is worthwhile to see the architectural devastation of New Orleans, I also want to see the people – the lives actually living in this mess.

Architect Richard Neutra was afraid that pictures with people would overpower the architecture. I sometime wonder if the contemporary art world is afraid that pictures with people will overpower the art.

56 Comments

1. [...] Alec Soth has written an interesting post that deals, among other things, with the use of people in photography and the inherent exploitation attached. He writes: Are we supposed to erase images of people to make photographs palatable for the art market? I suppose people are disturbed by the idea of, in the words of Shulman, 'using people.' It is disturbing. Photographs of people use people. It makes us uncomfortable. But it is also what makes the medium so potent. [...]

Pingback by [Greg Wasserstrom / Blog » Blog Archive » From Alec Soth](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [1:26 am](#)

2. While I respect the sentiment behind the post, the use of the Dusseldorf academy (Bechers, Hofer, Struffsky) to support the argument is weak. Human absence is not merely a characteristic of their work but the very intellectual and artistic framework of it. Hofer's 'Architecture of Absence', for instance, strips humanity away from very human places such as theaters and libraries with an almost archaeological detachment. Humanity, as expressed in photographs, is largely an individual and subjective display. But the Dusseldorf group is all about objectivity and the collective. When Struth, for instance, turns to portraits it is in the collective tradition of Sander, discovering typologies. I see bravery rather than fear in their approach.

I feel great power from the human absence in the Katrina photos. A city famous for the way it lives life has had its blood swept away. Sadly, I've become inured to the Magnum tendency as depicted in the final image above. I've become jaded and cynical unable to view such photographs without thinking of the gaggle of photojournalists elbowing each other to get the same shot. Pathos erodes.

There is room for both approaches, and more. No reason to see fear or fury.

Comment by [John McCarney](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [2:03 am](#)

3. I can empathize with a lot of the ideas in this post, but I question a lot of it as well. I believe that it is very difficult for the people in the art work to not overpower the real message behind it, unless they themselves are the message. People carry such weight, and in photographs it's mostly based upon appearance. How they look, how they feel, the slightest twitch can change what the artist was trying to say with the piece. I think of how Crewdson dealt with this dilemma, how portraying the models as emotionless took the weight of the model as being a person and made the model more of an object. Then again I don't feel as though I can truly connect with those images simply because of that exact idea.

I guess it all just comes down to the preference of the artist, and what they feel best represents their intentions. I don't feel as though contemporary art is afraid that people will overpower the art but I do think that artists are more knowledgeable now as to how it changes the art.

Comment by [Chad Muthard](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [2:03 am](#)

4. An empty space can invite me in; an inhabited space can push me away.

Human presence can be respectfully depicted by its traces, marks, memories and absence, just as by a literal, sometimes unwilling, depiction.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [3:49 am](#)

5. You mention photojournalism, and I wonder if almost every photo that includes people makes a viewer think "photojournalism" rather than "fine art," and to unconsciously devalue the image.

Plus — isn't there a voice inside every art buyer's head asking, "How will this look above the sofa?"

Comment by [Joe](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [7:22 am](#)

6. John, I'm not sure why you are writing a defense of the Dusseldorf photographers. I made of point of saying that I admire their work. I'm not criticizing them.

"There is room for both approaches, and more." I absolutely agree. What I'm saying is that little room has been made on the gallery or museum wall for the other approach. Documentary pictures of people are underrepresented in the art world.

Why are they underrepresented? Joe mentions the need for pictures in galleries to be saleable – to look good over the fireplace. While this might play a role, I think contemporary collectors are more sophisticated than that.

Guy has a good point that empty pictures invite us in – inhabited spaces push us away. I think that is a really worthwhile artistic experience to be invited in. But we should also question why inhabited spaces push us away.

When it comes to documentary work on subjects like Katrina, I think there is room for a multiplicity of approaches. Again, I praised the work of Polidori and others. But I'm troubled that the other work, the pictures of people, don't seem to have a place on the gallery or museum wall.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [8:48 am](#)

7. Your argument is presented in a tricky way. I followed the link and couldn't find what the controversy was about. But I suppose it was not that the image was not palatable with the art market. Rather, I am inclined to think that it was about the traditional dispute on whether it is ethical to commercially exploit world suffering. The typical defense of the humanistic photojournalist is "I take these pictures to increase awareness, put pressure, change reality". But when the photo is sold for fifteen grand in a gallery that argument will not hold.

I also enjoy the devoid "German angle" of the Bechers, Candida Hoffer et al but, from time to time, need a little human presence. And I can sense a good balancing act of the kind in your own work. But, as Chad says, it all comes down to the preference of the artist.

Comment by [Federico Rubio](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [9:16 am](#)

8. Well we live in a culture that values celebrity and fetishizes technology objects, so I think it is not surprising that people only want to see unreal people in unreal environments. I think the goal in our society is to put as much distance as possible between what is really going on and what we would like to be going on, and images of real people in real environments are antithetical to that.

When I look at Gursky I just think of pornography-the intentional manipulation of voyeurism-creating an experience where we are simultaneous desire an object and are separated necessarily from it. To put it another way, you are drawn in by the detail, the scale, the manipulation of perspective, and yet photograph is made from a disconnected and priveleged position, high up, removed. It is a perfect non-experience.

I think the art world just reflects our current mindset, which is to fetishize and covet, not to experience and be moved emotionally.

Comment by [Robert Wright](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [9:24 am](#)

9. Of course, talking about Katrina, Polidori's aestheticized images are less vulnerable to these kind of attacks than, say, (to exaggerate my point) a dramatic picture of a man drowning during the disaster. If the latter were hung on a gallery wall, I guess it would receive a lot of criticism. On the page of a newspaper, instead, it would cry: We are not doing enough. What is the government doing?

Comment by [Federico Rubio](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [9:26 am](#)

10. I don't think there is a dearth of people in art photography. Think about Thomas Struth's "Audience" museum series, or any of Gregory Crewdson (staged, yes) or Tina Barney or Larry Sultan's "The Valley" or Angela Strassheim's work. I could go on and on. Of course, the stylings of all these artists is distant from typical photojournalist technique, but why should the presence of people require a specific approach, even if documentary? An "objective" mis en scene is surely as contrived as something more formalist, no?

Comment by [Todd W.](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [10:32 am](#)

11. Fair enough Todd. I'm probably overstating my case. But just to be clear, I'm really not talking about staged work like Crewdson and Strassheim. I'm talking about documentary photography. I'm aware that there are fine-art photographers working in a documentary mode that include people. I cited Ulrich. I could have cited Shambroom or numerous others. I guess the crux of my argument relates to the pictures of Katrina. Am I wrong that the absence of people in these pictures has been notable? .

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [10:55 am](#)

12. i don't know that the cross-over between photojournalism and the art world – which in fact is happening more and more – is necessarily a healthy or desirable thing. i think it muddies the water even more for photojournalists (and our perceptions of PJs) by making their motives more unclear.

Comment by [j zorn](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [10:55 am](#)

13. my only complain is that i cannot pay 1500usd for the book History with 13 photographs of Luc Delahaye.

Comment by [jesus](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [10:56 am](#)

14. I second Todd W.'s observation about no lack of people in art photography. Thomas Struth's museum series immediately came to my mind too- since he's German – but also some Yale-reared artists like Justine Kurland. The people depicted are somewhat problematic to me, and not always in the good way that art problematizes things. In the case of Struth, it's hard to shake a sense of condescension towards all those poor tourist schlemiels with their sneakers, shorts, and backpacks. Doesn't every artist need those hordes to some degree? And isn't every artist a member of the horde as often as not? These Struths, while visually captivating, seem self-reflexive without being self-reflective.

In the case of Kurland – and for that matter Catherine Opie, et al – I find myself unable to trust the authenticity of the scene, and then I feel manipulated. Not manipulated in the way that the "Feed the starving third-world orphans" operates really; more like my viewership is being bent towards the self-aggrandizement of the artist. It's the sense that the price tag and the Artforum review has preceeded the shutter click. (I sense I don't get from the Taliban photo above. I mean, artists aren't really that courageous are we?) I'm not against those things as part of the artworld apparatus, but I like to recognize fiction for what it is, and some of these fine art photographers are smearing the line in a not-fun-or-productive way. In the case of Crewdson, making clearly fictional work, I find them just boring and derivative.

I find the photos of Tracey Baran, for example, to reside clearly in the fine art world, and are infused with the interesting type of problematic relationship of the viewer to the depicted person. There's an intelligence informing the work that inspires trust and keeps me on my toes. Roe Ethridge also comes to mind as a favorite in this regard.

I guess that I'm unable to come up with any typology of good vs. bad here. That stinks, because I get the willies around "you know it when you see it." So I'll stop short-

Comment by [Nicholas Knight](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [11:19 am](#)

15. The presence (or absence) of people in an image plays an enormous role in how the photograph defines whatever meaning it's trying to portray- be it political, emotional, or even if only a matter of scale.

Visually, it alters the entire compositional formula. Sometimes, you can't even be sure if you got it right until you see the print itself.

I think the Luc Delahaye death photo is a separate issue- as death is one of the last taboos in modern day (particularly American) society.

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [11:37 am](#)

16. On [his blog](#), Joerg writes:

—In a recent post, Alec Soth discusses why he prefers to see people in photos, instead of looking at deserted land= or cityscapes or architectural interiors (Alec, there are people in Gursky's 99 Cent, though!). The reason why I personally disagree is neatly summarized by Simon Norfolk in the interview that I linked to just a couple of days ago, while discussing photos of radar installations: "I think people kind of gobble up the photograph. They become what the photograph is. For me, people just aren't that important; it's about this panoptic process, it's about this kind of eavesdropping, it's about this ability to look into every aspect of our lives. And I think if you put people into these pictures, I don't know - it would draw viewers away. It would draw viewers into the story of the people." —

Since I can't find a place to respond on his blog, I'll respond here.

First, I know there are people in the Gursky. I even linked to the picture. But, c'mon, they are pretty far away.

The fabulous Norfolk interview is partly what got me thinking about all of this. I think Norfolk is amazing, but my feelings about his work were too complicated to figure into the post. But I do think this comment is important: "It would draw viewers into the story of the people."

That is my point. Certainly some of the pictures of Katrina could be about the story of the people. (I think it is a pretty different story than eavesdropping).

Once more, I don't 'prefer to see people in the photos.' Ironically, I'm currently working on something that has virtually no people. I just think that in the case of something like Katrina, pictures of people should have their place on the museum wall next to all of the pictures physical devastation.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [1:05 pm](#)

17. Alec, perhaps what you are getting at is the space between the conceptual and the real in contemporary photography. For example, Gursky as the idea of consumerism and Ulrich as the reality of consumerism. The idea seems to be the trump card these days, but it can leave you a little dry, and as you say, hungry for something more real. This would be especially true of the Katrina photographs, where shooting it as an elaborate set piece is really missing the important part of the tragedy.

To bring it back to the Art world. I might offer DiCorcia as an example of someone blending the two worlds. I always thought his street pictures were quite real, and beautifully conceptual at the same time.

Comment by [Dylan](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [1:43 pm](#)

18. normally, i would be quick to point out the photojournalist's tendency to capitalize on and further their career by way of explicit disaster photos, but in the case of katrina, i have to admit that i'm anxious to see some good journalistic images of what things actually looked like during the flooding, but am left mainly with overstylized wall art like that of polidori. is it possible that the fine-artists are as exploitative as the photojournalists? i think that in each area there are the honorable and the ambitious, but let the art photographers take their lumps and get knocked off the high moral ground they like to stand on - pictures of katrina are pictures of katrina, and they are pictures of tragedy, suffering, and death.

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [1:44 pm](#)

19. I wish that Boris Mikhailov had done some work in NO after Katrina. Imagine how he would have made our very own "bomzhes" look.

Comment by [Russ McClintock](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [2:50 pm](#)

20. Julius is a wonderful guy.

I assisted him for his last commercial shoot for Italian Doumo. If memory serves me right it was the Neutra house in LA , After the shoot he was so taken by my Ford Mustang that he shot a Type 52 polaroid of it. Signed it with an inscription to me.

His studio was like Josef Sudeks in a way.....very old school.

Comment by [Michael Lardizabal](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [3:22 pm](#)

21. I guess, also, that the bulk of the photographers arrived mainly during the aftermath, when the subject matter which was overwhelmingly at hand was Polidori's. There's also a book by Larry Towell, someone one would not expect to shy away from people. But his pictures also happen to be basically devoid of human beings. Very good book, by the way.

Comment by [Federico R.](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [3:22 pm](#)

22. What Joe says above has a lot of resonance for me – I've been wrestling with the "How will this look above the sofa?" question for some time now. I'm gradually coming to accept that my most worthwhile photos, certainly the ones which mean the most to me, are those which feature other human beings. But I would like to sell some of my work, and it strikes me that potential buyers may not want pictures of some unknown stranger hanging on their living room wall.

I imagine that at a certain level in the fine-art photography market, this becomes less of an issue, and I also feel strongly that I should plough ahead and do what feels right rather than worrying too much about immediate sales, but still for me starting out and trying to make my way in some small way, it does play on my mind more than I would like it to.

Comment by [Dan Sumption](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [5:21 pm](#)

23. I can recall way back when working at a certain gallery this discussion of the work of Gilles Peress that his work was profound, amazing and in some cases beautiful but no one would want such a thing 'above the sofa'. I too wonder about this all the time but the images that really haunt me from history are portraits, Evans, Arbus, Sander, even of Eggleston's work the ones that really seem to have an edge and power are predominately of people.

I do agree that overall there seems to be a movement away from making portraits and I can see why, they seem to be the hardest kinds of pictures to make (for some of the reasons cited above). Often I get asked about model releases, permissions and the candid nature of many of my pictures. What surprises me is that many are afraid to go and make the pictures they'd really like to out of fear. Artists today are expected to justify everything they make and i've been at lectures and heard criticism that portraits are exploitive and that if the artist is from one class they can't comment on another. Finally the above mentioned price tag associated with ones likeness becomes issue.

It's easy to see why Arbus' prints were spit on during her first show at Moma and not Friedlanders, portraits can be too close to home.

Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [6:30 pm](#)

24. Yes, well I'll come at it from a slightly different direction. Though one would not notice it from the fine-art photographic galleries, there has been a nice little comeback of street photography lately, fueled I suspect a little by the new digital technology that freed people up from spending \$100 in film and developing for a day's shooting, and (my theory) by a reaction to the sterility and (my words) anti-humanity of so much of what gallery owners choose to display. Yes, yes, there are sophisticated collectors who enjoy some of these big, clinical C41 prints, but I think there are quite a few people who

still like some unstaged people pics. Not to say that the galleries aren't fiscally correct; unless you are dead and buried or soon to be, with little hope of ever cranking out another picture, street photography even by "approved" names does not fetch much on the open market. Unknowns? Forget it. But still, but still, with a little gallery push a new generation of viewers could discover the sheer joy of the random.

Comment by [Andy Kochanowski](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [6:44 pm](#)

25. I note my comment crossed with Brian's (whose work I found a while back and greatly enjoy, BTW). Let me add here what Alex Webb told me at a workshop a while back, that, judging from his book sales, there are about 3,000 people in the world who like street-type photography. That put things in perspective.

Comment by [Andy Kochanowski](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [6:49 pm](#)

26. In the Bomb Interview with Tod Papageorge that was linked here or elsewhere a little while ago Papageorge says:

RW: Are the mistakes that your students are prone to now the same mistakes that students were prone to when you were teaching back in the late '60s??TP: No. I think now that, in general—and this includes a lot of what I see in Chelsea even more than what I see from students at Yale—there's a failure to understand how much richer in surprise and creative possibility the world is for photographers in comparison to their imagination. This is an understanding that an earlier generation of students, and photographers, accepted as a first principle. Now ideas are paramount, and the computer and Photoshop are seen as the engines to stage and digitally coax those ideas into a physical form—typically a very large form. This process is synthetic, and the results, for me, are often emotionally synthetic too. Sure, things have to change, but photography-as-illustration, even sublime illustration, seems to me an uninteresting direction for the medium to be tracking now, particularly at such a difficult time in the general American culture....

I think this is part of it, artists today are looking for a great deal of control, also they are looking for things that attend to their conceptual framework of what the project should be. And I think like the Simon Norfolk pictures, there is the risk that it gets kind of dry. Like Philip Toledano gets sometimes. A little airless. And ironically in that case, it's not the people sucking the air out of the picture, it's the concept. But then he was an art director for ten years. So it is always the idea first for him.

later on Tod Papageorge says

...The process, if anything, is intuitive rather than the product of planning—although the fact that very few people have been able to produce this kind of work (street) at a high level also suggests how difficult it is. In other words, intuitive may not be an adequate word for describing the stew of wildness, dogged work and hard thought that goes into producing the best of this kind of photography....

you can see where my sympathies lie like a rug...one down, 2,999 to go?

Comment by [Robert Wright](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [8:30 pm](#)

27. 2,998.

Comment by [john kerren](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [9:13 pm](#)

28. I keep thinking of the scene in Woody Allen's film where he walks into his kitchen and there is a wall-sized reproduction of Eddie Adams' photo of the Vietnamese police sergeant executing a VC prisoner in the streets of Saigon. That photo had immediate, terrific impact when it appeared in the press, but Allen I think recognized that very quickly it became wall decoration and that the decoration included the emotional charge of the image as well as the charge from the lack thereof. Or as Susan Sontag said, "There is the satisfaction at being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching."

I don't begrudge photographers like Nachtwey, Delahaye, Haviv, Kratochvil, and others the right to make a living through their work. But I wonder if the presentation of these works in galleries and museums where only a small percentage of the public goes does not merely assuage the angst of inactivity in the face of tragedy among a group of people by offering them a view of the tragedy as a surrogate for solving or rectifying the contributing factors of that tragedy. What, for example, are people to say or do upon seeing Polidori's photographs? Buy one? Make a donation? Vote for officials who will never allow this to happen again? Or as I overheard more than a few people say in the Met where several of his New Orleans series are/were hanging, comment upon the opulently rotten beauty of the photographs and head for the Picassos.

I think we can all understand the motivation of these photographers for selling their work – most have worked for relatively low pay in exceptionally dangerous, life threatening conditions. Haviv even had a contract on his life taken out by the infamous Arkan of the Serbian paramilitary group, Arkan's Tigers. His photo of one of Arkan's men kicking a dead or dying woman lying on the ground is a tremendously "impactful" image. Sontag has already commented on the graceful pose of the soldier as he delivers the blow. But this image is also for sale at the Museum of War Photography in Dubrovnik. If not to hang this over their couch, what then would be the motivation of the collector who would buy this? An investment?

I don't know. Why would you buy Luc Delahaye's photo for \$15,000 and not send \$15,000 to help build a school in Afghanistan? I can only guess that the surrogacy of these images is profound – that it represents a tremendous need to do something that grows out of the activating energy of the image itself. But even then – even if it comes from the need to do something, what is being done by buying an image such as this seems profoundly impotent. Perhaps that is our current condition – that we are condemned to an explicit awareness of tragedy around us and yet continually lack what is actually required to effect change through accurately directed action.

No answers here then. Just an open and ongoing struggle to understand...

Comment by [Jorn Ake](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [11:03 pm](#)

29. Jorn, Your post is so well written and brings up many good points. One thing I don't think people often think is, if you can make a large print of a dead taliban soldier 'art' (by placing it in a museum either now or in 20 years), that it then asks for a more serious contemplation than perhaps the cover of a newspaper which has a very short lifespan.

I actually wrote a thesis paper on this idea that photography does not indeed elicit change. Images offer themselves up as propaganda. If there is a strong enough movement or sentiment in the public then, hopefully, the image can be used as propaganda for social change. Lewis Hines pictures themselves did not make any change but did when used as propaganda for the National Child Labor Committee. If images were simply powerful enough to elicit change by their very own mute and contextless self then perhaps the recent Abu Ghraib pictures would've actually had a direct effect on voters. In this sense, the Eddie Adams photograph did indeed have a direct effect on the sentiment at the time, and thusly is celebrated since for it's power as an image, much like many images from history. Without the context, the Adams picture is only image. I imagine the opposite may happen for Delahaye, that in time the image will gain power much in the same way images by Gardner and O'Sullivan did.

Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — December 5, 2006 @ [12:48 am](#)

30. I totally agree with Mr. Soth about which Katrina photographs are getting the most attention, mostly ones void of people. I went to a lecture where Katherine Wolkoff was waxing poetic about the trees in the Ninth Ward while I sat next to my friend, who's family lost everything in the aftermath of the hurricane. Ms. Wolkoff's focused concern about the trees made me rather uncomfortable. Sure, the altered landscape of New Orleans is important but it's only half of the story. Anyone who has been to New Orleans knows it's the people who make the city. If I see one more photograph of a moldy destroyed house bathed in golden light of a setting sun, I'm going to be sick.

Comment by [Amber Shields](#) — December 5, 2006 @ [2:54 pm](#)

31. Parr has a gift for making people look neither posed or static, passive or active. They seem entirely absorbed in their world.

Katrina does seem like a Polidori photo-op on the making, much as I like his work. No doubt many would prefer to see Katrina portrayed as an empty victimless aestheticised act of god.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — December 5, 2006 @ [4:02 pm](#)

32. What a great train of thoughts Alec! This is one of your best blog entries ever. Keep up the good work.

Comment by [Svein-Frode](#) — December 6, 2006 @ [9:00 am](#)

33. Very interesting thread. Among photojournalists the motivation to do the work is usually very personal, and has very little to do with making money. Take for instance war coverage. Young photographers often do it for recognition, and to test themselves. Most of them find out that it is more than they bargained for, and quit. A relatively small group are able to earn a living at it, developing survival and other skills out of necessity that most people never will. Among this group are some thrill seekers, who often quit after a while when they are burned out or the rush of getting shot at gets old. Then there are those like Nachtwey, Haviv and Anderson, to name some current luminaries in the field, dedicated to what they are doing. The packs of photographers roaming in search of fresh misery to record is a cliché that is gleefully embraced by many who know nothing about what true photojournalism is, and use it as a way to try and disparage what can be an honorable profession.

In most cases images of war or suffering changes nothing. On the other hand, if the photographers were not there to record it then it would be as if nothing happened. One can intellectualize about this forever, but in a free society, where information is power, all members of our society are empowered when they are able to have access to information. What one hears argued in opposition is that this all depends on who is presenting the information, and the motivations of the ones who recorded it as there is no such thing as objectivity. That is true, too, but there are honest people out there documenting reality, and as long as what they record and present is factually accurate and not a manipulation, then we are better for it.

The late Susan Sontag in her landmark book 'On Photography' was very uncomfortable with the photography of war. A few years ago she had a change of heart, due to experiences she had during the war in Bosnia. In a conversation she expressed how as a peaceful person she found herself wishing that the F18 Hornets on combat air patrol around Sarajevo would bomb the Serb gunners in the hills. Her wish came true two years later.

I am viscerally uncomfortable with depicting disasters such as Katrina in a beautiful, aesthetically pleasing image. Perhaps if there was a Photoshop plug-in that allowed one to attach a smell layer, so that the death and corruption of reality could be experienced, then as a depiction of the disaster it could be effective. On the other hand, many people are weary of the carnage they see in the news media every day, and have tuned it out. It has become sensory overload in many respects. These images reach people on another level, but it is usually intellectual rather than emotional as there is no human connection.

Comment by [Roger Richards](#) — December 6, 2006 @ [11:29 am](#)

34. Hi Alec,

I think an interesting take on Shulman's comment is to define why we can look at certain bodies in a highly abstracted way (ie, dying rwandans, dead taliban soldiers, etc.) but don't look at certain privileged bodies (the ban on photographing the bodies of american soldiers returning from iraq.) Many poststructuralist and feminist scholars have talked about the degraded body in reference to certain imperialist and colonialist tendencies that we have in the act of looking. So I'm not sure its that we have a discomfort with seeing people, i think it's a discomfort with seeing certain kinds of people....

Comment by [Song Chong](#) — December 6, 2006 @ [1:50 pm](#)

35. I read this post as a nice strong critique of photography's stylistic approach to the people articulated in the examples. The images are all a styled presentation of a human condition – All within the genera of documentary work – from the idealized home product – to the any-day home life struggle.

But it makes me think just what kind of person is an acceptable artifact in an "idealized" architectural product? And what sort of image becomes all cliché – OR at the opposite end what becomes just the image of suffering and nothing more.

Intention – behind the camera – makes me think about the author and knowing where the work will have an audience – must be and probably is the influential current that deeply effects work. I guess the good ones now how to work within this constraint!

Thanks for pointing that out so clearly...!

Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) — December 8, 2006 @ [8:03 pm](#)

36. This really is a fascinating topic and a set of nice comments. I don't have much to add but would recommend a very short essay by Suzie Linfield from Dissent last spring – <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=436>. She articulates some of the qualms that Alec discusses here, Her criticism is not that photographers like Delahaye (she uses other examples) make a living selling photos like the one Alec uses, but wonders instead about what motivates people to purchase the pictures.

Comment by [Jiim Johnson](#) — December 10, 2006 @ [1:23 am](#)

37. OK, so I fibbed and I do have something substantive to say on this. I will set the issue of commercialism aside. But the Delahaye image raises the question of "picturing atrocity" about which critics (e.g., Sontag) get quite worked up and moralistic. Their challenge always seems to be a variation on this question: "By what right do you photograph such suffering?". My question is different. By what right can denizens of affluent countries expect to be spared seeing scenes of suffering and deprivation and conflict in which they or their proxies and representatives are often complicit? I saw the Delahaye picture Alec posts here in a NYC gallery and, while the context was a bit disconcerting, the image was very powerful as the corpse was nearly life sized. So, to the point of the original post, it is difficult to show suffering without including people.

Comment by [Jiim Johnson](#) — December 10, 2006 @ [1:33 am](#)

38. Although I am unqualified to speak for Susan Sontag, I can personally attest that she had somewhat modified her opinions on war photography after experiencing the siege of Sarajevo. She saw firsthand what the reality was and the important role of the witnesses who were conveying this to the world. Her adamant stance on conflict photography in her book 'On Photography', was later much more nuanced and can be read in her follow up 'Regarding the Pain of Others'. I think this is part of what made her great, her integrity. Perhaps it is the fact that most critics of this type of photography form their theories without much experience of that which they expound on, makes them so little worth taking note of.

As for the Luc Delahaye image of the dead Taliban, which is 4x8 feet, a museum in my hometown has a print in its permanent collection. I agree, it is quite overwhelming when viewed firsthand.

Comment by [Roger Richards](#) — December 11, 2006 @ [10:52 am](#)

39. Fascinating observation about the absence of people. Obviously, we can make historical comparisons to the empty streetscapes of Atget and Walker Evans. But portraits are in something of an eclipse these days, eh? Unless, of course, their pomo exercises like Sherman's, or overtly fictionalized images like Mann's or Tina Barney's.

Maybe it has something to do with the contemporary art scene's love of the cool, the conceptual, the ironically-distanced?

Oh, and as owner of a Thomas Struth portrait, gotta have his back re the harsh comments above. His portrait work is nothing if not respectful– an egalitarian, common enterprise with his subjects. The Sander of the fin-de-siecle, he's as good at portraits as.... well,,,, that Soth character. How's that's?

Comment by Tom Morrissey — December 16, 2006 @ [2:33 pm](#)

40. (Apologies for my poor proofreading!)

Comment by Tom Morrissey — December 16, 2006 @ [2:35 pm](#)

41. I arrived 19 days after the storm hit.

The time when the flood waters were just beginning to recede.

There were no people in these neighborhoods.

The place was empty.

I happen to have a press pass.

That was the only way to get in unless you were police, army, FEMA, or some other government entity.

The city was evacuated.

What am I suppose to do?

Track down some owner and fly him or her in and pose them like stick figure props in front of their house?

By this method maybe I would of taken 10 photos in the cummulative 3 months I spent there.

And besides, and more to the point, that is not my intention.

What more are you really going to learn from having a person there?

My belief is that you should take stills of what doesn't seem to move, and take movies or videos of does.

It's my opinion that people come off better in movies.

It is my belief that you have a lot more indices of personal values by looking at what individuals place in their living interiors than by looking at their face.

That is why I photograph interiors.

It's their self-intented super-go that interests me.

It's a look at their soul life.

Like I've been saying for 33 years rooms are both metaphors and catalysts for states of being.

The pictures I took in New Orleans are looking at discarded exoskeletons.

The great majority of these residents who left those homes are now somewhere else living an interrupted life.

That was and still is the point for me.

So go ahead- go to Houston or Atlanta and take a portrait of someone who evacuated NOLA, and see if you get a meaningful image of New Orleans.

Like - I don't think so.

I've always been accused by my detractors of some sort of moral failure, cowardice, or even lack of humanity by not portraying the human form.

I respond that I do better by portraying traces of character and intentions of human volition that no mug or body shot can ever exude.

Another persistent criticism concerns a sense of "Beauty", like it's sinful.

Hey- If I made them ugly would you look at them more?

Would you find them more meaningful?

Or just morally more acceptable?

When I was shooting in Beyrouth in the mid 90's, many residents wanted to preserve their war-ruined neighborhoods as they were so they could remember what happened and "because they look so beautiful this way" they said.

I lost my hang-ups about death being beautiful then.

And besides, I suspect it's not so much "Beauty" these detractors object to in my work, but something far worse for the contemporary politically-correct Anglo-Saxon aesthetic conscience, namely a sense of "Sentimentality".

This is the taboo.

In relation to this concern of beauty I've come to think that there are 2 main artistic tendencies in the USA.

The New York school, that believes that if it ugly it must mean that it is intelligent, if it is beautiful it

must mean that it is stupid.

The L.A. school, that believes that if it is beautiful it must be good, if it is ugly then it must be bad.

This reminds me of a Texas Country star's album, "Too Stupid for New York, Too Ugly For L.A."

Hard to tell where that leaves those Mid-Western artists.

Furthermore these comments about museums and galleries underrepresenting photos populated by the human figure are ridiculous and sound as if the Great Lakes had become a Sour Milk Sea.

The great number of photo exhibitions I have had to suffer through (in the US and Europe) since the 70's that posit as supposed great aesthetic and philosophical statements the musings of photographers in disguising in various declinations their physical appearance or perhaps even worse just simply cataloging their autoportraits are too numerous for my patience (and yours as a reader) to even enumerate here.

Are you requesting some sort of "Equal Time-Equal Space" provisions for every exhibition that doesn't suit your fancy?

Look I'm just like you.

I like all my pictures better than everyone else's.

But having to re-do everyone else's picture done your way would take more than all your time and you would no longer have time to be you.

Sincerely Yours,

Robert Polidori

Jan 7 2007, New Delhi

Comment by Robert Polidori — January 7, 2007 @ [3:12 pm](#)

42. Surely this debate is not happening? If Soth likes his images with people, that's what Soth likes. If Polidori chooses to work in a different way because of his own creative needs, then he needs to do that. What's to argue?. To be an interesting artist, you have to follow your own muse down whatever alleys it takes you. If there is a Dummy's Guide to Making Great Photographs, its only for dummies! But surely you both know that?

Robert:

"Look I'm just like you.

I like all my pictures better than everyone else's."

I love it. Has a Bob Dylan ring to it.

It's certainly true for me

Comment by [Eric Perlberg](#) — January 8, 2007 @ [6:19 am](#)

43. Two words to think about if not already mentioned:

"Esko Mannikko"

Comment by Sam Logan — January 8, 2007 @ [4:57 pm](#)

44. I wanted to respond to this both as photographer and a resident of New Orleans.

Robert Polidori Says:

January 7th, 2007 at 3:12 pm

I arrived 19 days after the storm hit.

The time when the flood waters were just beginning to recede. There were no people in these

neighborhoods.

The place was empty.

I happen to have a press pass.

That was the only way to get in unless you were police, army, FEMA, or some other government entity.

The city was evacuated.

What am I suppose to do?

++Why be defensive about it? There was (and still is) a strange beauty to the destruction and certainly those of us who live are appreciative of that, even in the midst of the horror. And I agree the absence of people is part of the meaning of the picture. I have photographed in a house yesterday that is exactly as it was 19 days after the storm--totally valid I have no issues with that at all. Similar images were included in the Katrina exposed show at the New Orleans Museum of Art, many taken by New Orleanians. We appreciate art, even if it shows the destruction of our own homes.++

Track down some owner and fly him or her in and pose them

like stick figure props in front of their house?

By this method maybe I would of taken 10 photos in the cummulative 3 months I spent there.

++Certainly an interesting idea, doesn't the New Yorker have the budget for that? It takes a certain sensibility to do that--maybe Mary Ellen Mark? ++

And besides, and more to the point, that is not my intention.

What more are you really going to learn from having a person there?

++No way to know unless one does that, but my instinct is that it could be very interesting, although a bit expensive.++

My belief is that you should take stills of what doesn't seem to move, and take movies or videos of does.

It's my opinion that people come off better in movies.

++You might want to rephrase this-- it comes across as a bit arrogant and pedantic. You meant to say "I" instead of "you." As photographers we need to distinguish between what we do and what can or might be done by others. ++

It is my belief that you have a lot more indices of personal values by looking at what individuals place in their living interiors than by looking at their face.

That is why I photograph interiors.

It's their self-intented super-go that interests me.

It's a look at their soul life.

Like I've been saying for 33 years rooms are both metaphors and catalyts for states of being.

The pictures I tookin New Orleans are looking at discarded exoskeletons.

The great majority of these residents who left those homes are now somewhere else living an interrupted life.

That was and still is the point for me.

So go ahead- go to Houston or Atlanta and take a portrait of someone who evacuated NOLA, and see if you get a meaningful image of New Orleans.

Like - I don't think so.

++Since you haven't met them I suggest that you know next to nothing about them. I am perfectly willing to accept the validity of photographs of these rooms as a testimony to the power of nature, but to make conclusions about the inhabitants based on what kind furniture may have floated to the ceiling in the waters and remained there for a week, and then fell to the floor is unfortunate. ++

I've always been accused by my detractors of some sort of moral failure, cowardice, or even lack of humanity by not portraying the human form.

I respond that I do better by portraying traces of character and intentions of human volition that no mug or body shot can ever exude.

++Lets just say that you haven't got a feeling for people. Its OK, I like photographing furniture every now and then. Whatever works for you,++

Another persistent criticism concerns a sense of "Beauty", like it's sinful.

Hey- If I made them ugly would you look at them more?

Would you find them more meaningful?

Or just morally more acceptable?

When I was shooting in Beyrouth in the mid 90's, many residents wanted to preserve their war-ruined neighborhoods as they were so they could remember what happened and "because they look so beautiful this way" they said.

I lost my hang-ups about death being beautiful then.

++Why even use the word beauty? It means nothing. I prefer "compelling."++

And besides, I suspect it's not so much "Beauty" these detractors object to in my work, but something far worse for the contemporary politically-correct Anglo-Saxon aesthetic conscience, namely a sense of "Sentimentality".

This is the taboo.

In relation to this concern of beauty I've come to think that there are 2 main artistic tendencies in the USA.

The New York school, that believes that if it ugly it must mean that it is intelligent, if it is beautiful it must mean that it is stupid.

The L.A. school, that believes that if it is beautiful it must be good, if it is ugly then it must be bad.

++Both the New York and Los Angeles school believe that if its huge print, by someone famous and costs a lot of it must be good. ++

This reminds me of a Texas Country star's album, "Too Stupid for New York, Too Ugly For L.A."

Hard to tell where that leaves those Mid-Western artists.

++Ask Alec Soth, isn't he from there.++

Furthermore these comments about museums and galleries underrepresenting photos populated by the human figure are ridiculous and sound as if the Great Lakes had become a Sour Milk Sea.

The great number of photo exhibitions I have had to suffer through (in the US and Europe) since the 70's that posit as supposed great aesthetic and philosophical statements the musings of photographers in disguising in various declinations their physical appearance or perhaps even worse just simply cataloging their autoportraits are too numerous for my patience (and yours as a reader) to even enumerate here.

Are you requesting some sort of "Equal Time-Equal Space" provisions for every exhibition that doesn't suit your fancy?

Look I'm just like you.

I like all my pictures better than everyone else's.

++I think that statement speaks for itself.++

But having to re-do everyone else's picture done your way would take more than all your time and you would no longer have time to be you.

Sincerely Yours,
Robert Polidori
Jan 7 2007, New Delhi

Comment by [Andy Levin](#) — January 9, 2007 @ [1:44 pm](#)

45. All photographers have a limited view of the world. (Me, too.) We tend to see what interests us. (It's another, kinder, way of saying we are somewhat visually crippled.) That's one of the things we like about photographers: they pick out interesting pieces and make them into interesting images that speak to us. But for one photographer to argue that his or her pieces are inherently more interesting than another photographer's pieces is naive (and ultimately perilous.)

Art photography tends to just these sorts of self-serving orthodoxies, but so does photojournalism.

Comment by [Jim T.](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [11:58 am](#)

46. Lee Friedlander once said a long time ago - 'I'm interested in people and people things.' That says it for me and covers both what Alec and Polidori do. Though if pressed I like to see people in photographs. Meaningful portraiture is probably the hardest thing any photographer can attempt, and pictures of people bring out the medium's inherent melancholy to the full. That portrait of the Comtesse Castiglione, by Louis Pearson, in the MET, taken in the early 1860s, is one of the most amazing in the medium's history and says a million things about the power of photographic portraiture.

Comment by [Gerry Badger](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [1:40 pm](#)

47. what a fascinating string.. and it just keeps going. Polidori does pose perhaps in this context, THE most interesting point: During the days after the storm there were vast tracts which had virtually no people there, save for the odd cop or visitor driving through for a look. As in many situations where people are thus victimized, there is an accompanying emotion which borders, I think, on voyeurism, in walking through ruined, deserted neighborhoods. The destruction and mayhem, and loss of life created what amounts to a kind of hallowed ground. I don't think you can walk through the remains of someone ELSE's house without feeling some level of invasion or trespass. It's not that your visit really adds to their misery, but I think in your own head, you feel a desire to be excused to the trespass. Respect is demanded. In most cases, certainly in NOLA, there just wasn't anyone around to take note. But that feeling of uneasiness doesn't go away so easily. Why do we do it? Well, the most obvious reasons: whether it is art, documentation or journalism, we do it to tell the story, to inform, to make people think, to raise questions. Andy Levin makes a good point about the beauty of the ruins. It often is incredibly beautiful. Many places have an almost Jackson Pollack like random quality, and I think there is something in that which itself drives us to try and record that reaction for others - what we feel when we see it live. Through all this discussion, I was reminded of a quote from a Magnum photographer (to be unnamed) who in 1979, at a show of work by several Magnum photographers at the ICP spoke about their exhibit of the Cambodian refugees in Thai camps, after the Cambodian holocaust. He said something like "no one could have REALLY covered this except Magnum..." Buried in that remark was an intimation that implied to me that the horrors of the refugees were something which had to happen just so a bunch of Magnum photographers would have something interesting to photograph. I was quite repelled by it, and have since always reminded myself that when I'm in the middle of a shit-storm somewhere trying to take pictures, that those folks were not put there FOR me, just so I could take their pictures. In the end it still requires a spark of humanity from behind the camera to carry an image which gives the respect to the subject, be it place or person, that it deserves.

Comment by [David Burnett](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [7:59 pm](#)

48. everybody has put forward great points but at the end of the day they are just opinions, and everybody has one of those. If you make work and put it in the public arena i dont understand defensive attitudes towards the critical evaluation that will surely come. Just remember that no one has the right to say how you should make an image. But hey thats just my opinion

Comment by [lee clackson](#) — January 14, 2007 @ [3:12 pm](#)

49. A great thread here, so many opinions...they are as plentiful as...

Simply put, compelling images have a place in the world(s) almost no matter what the subject.

Robert Polidori's images very much have people in them, just not in their physical form. Interiors aren't just places for furniture. Aren't clothes, books, photographs, electronics, curtains and shades just the rudimentary, universal things that we choose to surround ourselves with so we are free to dream and hide secrets and churn with anguish or project visions in those sealed boxes? What mirrors of humanity they can become in a gifted artist's view.

Not to be trite but aren't the photographs of people we see on gallery and museum walls equally powerful mirrors? Needless to say, from well before Sander took on the self-imposed, almost inhuman task of cataloguing the German people, through myriad others, and up to and including Struth, Dykstra, Soth, Hirshfeld, Chao et.al, the admirable and difficult task of a documentary style of portraiture is indeed alive and (hopefully) well.

Comment by [Max Hirshfeld](#) — January 20, 2007 @ [5:28 pm](#)

50. people? no people? ... i would like a serious discussion on the motive involved, people or no people...

a letter i sent, registered, to use chernobil photographs for 20th anniversary edition of greenpeace magazine spain, oh, we didn't get a reply:

Madrid, 21st of July 2005

Robert Polidori/Bill Charles
116 Elizabeth Street, Penthouse
New York, NY 10013. EEUU

Dear Bill Charles,

I'm enclosing number zero and the first issue of the Greenpeace magazine Spain which I completely re-designed as a freelance (and free) project and which I art direct for a symbolic fee. I would be very grateful if you could look over the material with Robert Polidori. We are planing to do a special number dedicated to Energy and I would like you to consider the possibility of including a spread of Roberts' photographs from Chernobil:

(...) The area around Chernobil was once known not for the partial mealtdown of its nuclear power plant but for its beautiful forests and mountains. For centuries the people living there walked in the mountains, picnicked, gathered mushrooms, fished, hunted and cut firewood. Now, at home and at work, their windows and doors are sealed with tape, and they could not go outside or they would risk radiation poisoning. All they had left were pictures of the forest on the wall.

In a meeting with community leaders Joanna pointedly asked how long it would be before they could return to their forests. One of the men answered: "Not in my great-grandchildren's lifetime, and not in their great-grandchildren's lifetime!" It would be centuries. There was silence.

Then a woman stood up and angrily demanded to know why Joanna and her team were rubbing their faces in this sorrow. Joanna sat quietly. Finally one old man spoke: "At least we can say to our children that we told the truth." After a further silence another woman said, "These visitors come and join together with us for a purpose: to bear witness to our suffering. Now they will return to their own communities and tell our story. They can go out in the world and let others know what happened. They must never let this poisoning of the earth happen in any other place, to anyone else's children." (...) p. 274, Bearing Witness for Justice, After the Ecstasy, the Laundry, Jack Kornfield, Bantam 2002

I am sure that I don't need to state who Greenpeace are, Greenpeace Magazine (Spain) is a non-profit publication and has a run of 85,000 which goes out to 81,000 members and also to national media, press, political and other relevant contacts.

Thanks for your time and sorry for such a brazen request.

Adrian Tyler

Comment by [adrian tyler](#) — January 24, 2007 @ [4:29 am](#)

51. [...] 1. Alec Soth asks Where are the people? in architectural photography, a response to the profile of Julius Shulman in last week's New Yorker where he is quoted as rhetorically asking "Why not?" [use people in pictures of houses] "It makes it interesting to connect it with the life." [...]

Pingback by [» Blog Archive » This Week in Photography](#) — January 26, 2007 @ [12:00 pm](#)

52. As someone who has been photographing the human subject for some thirty odd years now, I feel compelled to weigh in briefly on Robert Polidori's preposterous and inane statement to the effect that still photographs are for things that don't move and things that move (such as people) are best left to filmic rendering. Geez, where does this level of intellectual vacuity come from? August Sander's pictures are tepid because they contain "unmoving" human subjects in still photographs, along with Walker Evans, and numerous photographers et al who have worked with the human subject, and conveyed something of our common and compelling emotional, psychological, and behavioral nuances to each other?

What more are you going to learn by having a person there you ask, Mr. Polidori? Duh! Perhaps we'd get an empathetic dose of our common humanity, engagingly rendered through the camera, and have a human face to put with the physical devastation. I'm certainly would hope that any and every artist is clear and forthright about their intentions, but to wander so clumsily yet forcefully into this idea about what medium is appropriate for what type of subject seems a bit sophomoric as far as opinions go.

Polidori has long been an interesting and engaging photographer, but his unnecessarily defensive and soft boiled ideas make me glad that he is not regularly turned lose in an academic environment to engage future generations of young photographers with his rather straightjacketed thinking.

Comment by [Dawoud Bey](#) — January 27, 2007 @ [1:54 am](#)

53. This is slightly off the topic of the thread, but I believe its relevant. I happened to talk to a friend of mine whose house was flooded after Katrina and who happened to see Robert Polidori's show in New York. She asked me if it was legal to take these pictures, and after immediately saying "yes, of course," I thought about it further.

I think the answer is maybe.

I have no idea if Robert Polidori is intending to sell his prints but here is my take on the possibility of any photographers, including myself, selling images of the interiors of homes flooded after Katrina.

I believe that anyone who entered a residence, myself included, after the flood to take photographs was technically trespassing . One could make an argument that for news or informational purposes it was appropriate to enter a flooded home and photograph it without permission of the owner, but this might not be the case if prints were offered for sale in an art gallery, and certainly would be illegal for any commercial purposes like advertising.

Although our rights as photographers are protected under free speech, etc, that may not apply to pictures taken inside a residence entered without permission, under a state of emergency, where only people working for new organizations were even permitted to enter the area the houses were in, before the residents were even permitted entry.

If images of the interior of Katrina ravaged homes are sold for \$15,000 a pop, there is going to be some backlash against that here in New Orleans. I would hate for that too happen as it is going to put all of us in a bad light, including me,

Of course if you like publicity, be my guest. But be forewarned.

Cheers.

Comment by [Andy Levin](#) — February 6, 2007 @ [11:16 pm](#)

54. Though I have found much of this argument of “where are the people” almost as outdated as the argument of whether photography is art or not; one thing I would like to comment on is Mr. Bey’s feeling of gratitude that Mr. Polidori is not “regularly turned lose in an academic environment to engage future generations of young photographers. . .”

Frankly, I find this statement closed minded and void of the true definition of engagement. We all can learn from varying forms of communications that come in many different formats of two-dimensional representation, and furthermore, one need not have an ivy education to engage in an academic environment. There is plenty to learn from “straightjacketed” thinking.

Comment by [J. Gotti](#) — February 11, 2007 @ [10:23 am](#)

55. Check out David Company’s Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on the Problems with “Late” Photography. He outlines all the reasons for the development and application of “late” photography but still seems skeptical about the its long term viability. The problem with the empty image is its ambivalence, in a sense it is too democratic as the viewer can either see the social, political significance or just see a pretty picture.

I had a student comment last week that Robert Polidori was shooting the New Orleans images just to make a book not as a document of a tragedy. I think that is totally missing the point. The issue of access, solemnity (as in Joel Meyerowitz’s Aftermath) all come into play. When making a series, most photographers have images devoid of figures. These spaces give breathing room allowing the viewer to imagine themselves in the space. I think that there is room for both empty and populated images.

Comment by [Paula](#) — May 28, 2007 @ [6:18 am](#)

56. Polidori’s right.

Comment by [Roy Belmont](#) — June 3, 2007 @ [1:24 am](#)