

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 20, 2006

## Photography critics on photography critics

Filed under: [critics & curators](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:27 am

A couple of people have asked me to respond to Susie Linfield's essay, [The Treacherous Medium, Why Photography Critics Hate Photographs](#). While the title is provocative and the essay is well written, I've had a hard time mustering up much of a reaction. Linfield's essay is talking about (and for) the world of academic critics: Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Victor Burgin, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, John Tagg, Martha Rosler. While I brushed up against this world in college, it is pretty remote from the material I read now. (I subscribe to Entertainment Weekly, not [October](#)).

Where Linfield's essay falls short is in her comparison to critics of other media. After a paragraph describing Victor Burgin's condemnation of the activity of looking (ah, postmoderism), Linfield writes, "Compare all this – this obsession with victimization and predetermination, this utter refusal of freedom, this insistent moroseness – to the opening pages of Pauline Kael's essay "Trash, Art, and the Movies."

But it seems to me that Linfield has an apple/orange problem. Kael wrote for the New Yorker, not for the Yale Journal of Criticism. Linfield doesn't mention the New Yorker's current photography writer, Vince Aletti. Nobody loves the 'trash' art of fashion photography more than Aletti. And where are the other non-academic photography critics in Linfield's essay: [A.D. Coleman](#), Jean Dykstra, [Vicki Goldberg](#), Andy Grundberg, [Bill Jay](#), Max Kozloff, Richard B. Woodward. Certainly these writers don't hate photography (a couple of them are even practicing photographers). Perhaps Linfield should explore another topic: Why Academic Photography Critics Ignore Popular Photography Critics.

**Note:** Forgive my quickie list of popular photography critics. I could use help coming up with more names & links.

## 6 Comments

1. i lazily posted a link to that article without comment, but had similar thoughts to yours. In my mind, the alternate title would be "Why do academic critics hate everything?"

*Comment by [Todd W.](#) — November 20, 2006 @ [6:40 am](#)*

2. Another good title might be, why do essays on photography always start with a Baudelaire quote?

A very good read. That final paragraph is particularly resonant.

*Comment by [Mark A. Sperry](#) — November 20, 2006 @ [11:37 am](#)*

3. Thanks for taking this up (I was one of the people who asked you to comment). My own feeling was that Linfield was reaching pretty badly to shore up her provocative title/theme, but I also thought you might like the piece as you've mentioned that you like critics to "shake things up".

*Comment by [Bill](#) — November 20, 2006 @ [7:13 pm](#)*

4. Alec, thanks for the good thoughts on Susie Linfield's essay. Yes, her conclusion—not to mention her title—are skewed by her focus on Sontag, Barthes, Burgin et al. The story would be different if she had taken account of the kinds of working critics you name. To your list I would add the folks who have probably been the most influential and committed critics of photography: the curators, whose essays frame the catalogs they edit. I'm thinking of curators like Maria Morris Hamburg and Sandra Phillips, who are brilliant writers on photography, and of course the granddaddy of them all, John Szarkowski. But Susie Linfield has a point, and her emphasis is understandable. It wouldn't be fair to dismiss the critics she's dealing with as merely "academic." Sure, they have huge prestige in the universities, but they're also guiding lights for a lot of influential photographers. There's also other great stuff in her essay: some keen insights about photographs of the Iraq war and a surprising section on the influence of Brecht on photography criticism. (For anyone interested, Linfield had a terrific, admiring essay on Robert Capa in the Boston Review earlier this year.)

*Comment by [Alan Thomas](#) — November 20, 2006 @ [7:32 pm](#)*

5. I normally like Susie Linfield's essay but this one is less interesting for some reason. I guess I am a bit confused though. Sontag was never an academic and Bill Jay (with whom I am unfamiliar) spent most of his working life at Universities. – at least according to the bio on the web page to which Alec links. So the distinction here seems a bit miscast to me. Linfield herself, by the way teaches in the journalism school at NYU and, as far as I can tell writes for "alternative" outlets like Dissent & Boston Review, but not really for anything like October. That all speaks in her favor as far as I'm concerned.

*Comment by [Jim Johnson](#) — December 3, 2006 @ [12:11 am](#)*

6. By 'academic' I don't necessarily mean 'university professor'. I'm distinguishing between critics writing for a scholarly audience versus a popular audience. Kael clearly wrote for a popular audience (for all I know she was a teacher too). I thought it was peculiar that Linfield didn't cite any of the numerous photography critics that also write for a popular audience. Along with his academic career, Bill Jay was an editor and writer for a popular photography magazine called Creative Camera and currently writes for another popular magazine called Lens Work. See an interview with Jay [here](#)

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 3, 2006 @ [1:12 am](#)*