

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 14, 2007

Friday Poem

Filed under: poetry — alecsothblog @ 1:31 am

I'm currently in Germany working on a book. Next door to Steid's press he has several apartments (aka *The Halftone Hotel*) for visiting artists.

Today in my room I read an essay by C.K. Williams called 'A Letter to a Workshop'. Williams says that poets should grant themselves "the right to vacillate, to wobble, to shillyshally, be indecisive in one's labors, and still not suffer from a sense of being irresponsible, indolent, or weak."

"Another, related, right," he says, "is to be wrong, about anything and everything, and to know that even when your line of reflection or imagining might be viewed as absurdly illogical, you should be able to go on to its however provisional conclusion."

Staying in the adjoining room is Jock Sturges (info, images). Only two weeks ago I had a lengthy discussion with a friend about my problems with Sturges' work. After a couple days sharing meals (and a bathroom) with Jock, I'm not sure what to think anymore. But I paid close attention when Williams discussed another right:

We should be able to regard our inner existence, the part anyway that's raw material for poetry, as a laboratory, in which mental and emotional phenomena are valued according to their potential usefulness, and considered harmless unless they demand to be concretized in malignant actions. (It should probably be kept in mind that the ultimate purpose of this sort of reflection isn't action, but self-knowledge. Action—creation—comes later.)

From this follows the right of the mind to be able to remark in itself and not repress, or at least not too quickly, anything that comes to it, even such ostensibly inadmissible emotions as, to mention just a few, lust, greed, envy, anger, even rancor, even genres of otherwise unutterable prejudice. We should be able to entertain anything the mind casts up as potentially useful for a poem, while at the same time forgiving ourselves for such after all private matters, and this should be a forgiveness that arrives in a short enough time so that any shame or guilt arising from such scary glimpses within will be productive rather than debilitating for the germination of poems. We have, for poetry, to have as accurate an awareness as we can of the quality of our ethical consciousness, but we also need a firm sense of the difference between sins of the heart and sins of the hand: the mind has a life of its own which cares little for the parameters culture and society propose for it, and it is often this inner awareness which is most potentially interesting as aspects of a poem.

Should photographers be as free as poets? Or is photography itself a "sin of the hand." I'm not sure. But I'm pretty sure Jock would appreciate this poem:

On the Metro

by C. K. Williams

On the metro, I have to ask a young woman to move the packages beside her to make room for me; she's reading, her foot propped on the seat in front of her, and barely looks up as she pulls them to her. I sit, take out my own book—Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*—and notice her glancing up from hers to take in the title of mine, and then, as Gombrowicz puts it, she "affirms herself physically," that is, becomes present in a way she hadn't been before: though she hasn't moved, she's allowed herself to come more sharply into focus, be more accessible to my sensual perception, so I can't help but remark her strong figure and very tan skin—(how literally golden young women can look at the end of summer.) She leans back now, and as the train rocks and her arm brushes mine she doesn't pull it away; she seems to be allowing our surfaces to unite: the fine hairs on both our forearms, sensitive, alive, achingly alive, bring news of someone touched, someone sensed, and thus acknowledged, known.

I understand that in no way is she offering more than this, and in truth I have no desire for more, but it's still enough for me to be taken by a surge, first of warmth then of something like its opposite: a memory—a girl I'd mooned for from afar, across the table from me in the library in school now, our feet I thought touching, touching even again, and then, with all I craved that touch to mean, my having to realize it wasn't her flesh my flesh for that gleaming time had pressed, but a table leg. The young woman today removes her arm now, stands, swaying against the lurch of the slowing train, and crossing before me brushes my knee and does that thing again, asserts her bodily being again, (Gombrowicz again), then quickly moves to the door of the car and descends, not once looking back, (to my relief not looking back), and I allow myself the thought that though I must be to her again as senseless as that table of my youth, as wooden, as unfeeling, perhaps there was a moment I was not.

13 Comments

1. Good morning Alec,

until today I didn't know Sturges at all, so I had a look at the links you suggested and at the other Wikipedia links with interviews etc., and I hope you will appreciate a fresh comment of mine.

I don't know exactly what your problems were with him and how did they evolve so far, but from my point of view – which is quite European, as I am Italian – his work and the following reactions sound pretty crazy. He can say what he wants, but nude children are nude children, and I don't even think that the children status could be set by the law, like saying that at 18 -1 day one is child (so the photographer indictable by the law) while at 18 +1 day one is no more, then allowed to show his body in the most provocative way (letting the photographer to be adored, he/she to be longed by the public, and the Catholic parties left with no hope). For me that I'm 30, a 18sthg girl is nearly a child, and I don't think that for the Heaven's sake I'd ever like to enjoy watching nude pictures of so young girls, above all for a matter of integrity. I might honestly find them quite attractive, of course, but there is also an ethic component that distinguishes between men and beasts, don't you agree?

I think that above all, as we are speaking of arts and human being, we shouldn't forget the good taste, the sensitivity, the introspection, and that artists should understand that their prospects expect to be surprised, questioned, pleased, but not at all disgusted and morally offended, and to do this there are infinite ways. Even if we want to speak of young children and their sexuality. Then of course, it's plenty of people who don't even know what morality and ethics are, and simply hope to f**k Britney, but I don't think that smart photographers should think of them as their main prospects.

This makes me remind that nice essay about fame and being famous.

Have a nice day,

Nicola

Comment by Nicola Principato — September 14, 2007 @ 4:10 am

2. [...] The latter sort of jives with Alec Soth's post on poet C.K. Williams. Soth quotes Williams "Another, related, right, is to be wrong, about anything and everything, and to know that even when your line of reflection or imagining might be viewed as absurdly illogical, you should be able to go on to its however provisional conclusion." [...]

*Pingback by charlotte, north carolina photographer * editorial, advertising, commercial, and lifestyle photography * ARMANDO BELLMAS — September 14, 2007 @ 6:34 am*

3. Grüß meine Heimat bitte ganz lieb von mir! Ich vermisse Sie.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,
Nicola Kast

Comment by Nicola Kast — September 14, 2007 @ 10:05 am

4. I think that Williams, from a creator's perspective, is absolutely right. We are after truth, not varnish. Photographers too need the absolute freedom to view their consciousness, warts and all, as a "laboratory," in Williams's word. This view permits JS's work, clearly. But is JS's work interesting? Not if you agree with Williams that it's an "inner awareness" of one's "ethical consciousness" that makes the revealing of base emotions interesting.

Comment by Pelle Cass — September 14, 2007 @ 11:24 am

5. Beautiful poem.....wouldn't have meant much to me (or would have meant something different) twenty years ago. Now I know. As far as Sturge's work goes, yes, beautiful, but perhaps we share the same reticent thing about his work. Maybe it's too easy. Certainly insanely well-crafted, but I'm not sure I learn anything from it, either about the subject, the photographer, or myself. And photography that straight-forward (both formally and conceptually) closes the door to enchantment for me. And enchantment (at least for me) is of primary importance in art.

Comment by m_napper — September 14, 2007 @ 1:38 pm

6. I recently bought a DVD of the wonderful French film *Diabolo Menthe* on Ebay, not really noticing its prominent description as a "coming of age" film (sure enough, that's what it is, and a small masterpiece of its kind). "Imagine my horror", as they say, when I received the film and read the enclosed catalogue of other "coming of age" films available from the same supplier. Basically, underage/teen sex of a fairly grubby kind.

That Diane Kurys' film might be pigeonholed and marketed alongside films of near-paedophile interest seemed ironic, until (scarily) I considered how closely the police monitor the supply and purchase of child pornography via the Web... In UK courts a distinction between "sins of the heart and sins of the hand" may be hard to maintain as Pete Townsend and, today, the actor Chris Langham have discovered.

Comment by Vinegar Tom — September 14, 2007 @ 2:35 pm

7. Sturges pictures aren't pictures about childhood, they are not pictures about nakedness in childhood, they are pictures about children with some sexual attraction. There is a taboo in society about children being objects of sexual desire, and I am happy about this taboo. It is not about morals, but about protecting children. Probably Sturges pictures don't do any harm, for the children agreed to take part in this project, and whoever is watching these photographs never will touch the photographed children. There are not many known photographers whose work I simply don't like, but Jock Sturges work I simply don't like.

Comment by Zoltán — September 14, 2007 @ 4:09 pm

8. I don't know...for me, Williams in that passage seems to be saying that the poet (or "artist" in the broader sense) should allow himself to think or feel anything, regardless of ethical considerations, but also to subject those thoughts to the judgment of his own conscience, which prevents sins of the heart from becoming sins of the hand. He does give the caveat that conscience comes into play.

Is photographing a nubile young girl (or looking at that photograph) the same as desiring her sexually, or even acting on that desire? Are technically good photographs of attractive people necessarily good art? Is controversial art necessarily good art? Are morals simply consensus? Who's to judge?

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Comment by Ian — September 14, 2007 @ 9:29 pm

9. [...] alec soth - blog photographica, miscellanea, etcetera « Friday Poem [...]

Pingback by alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Documenta, children, sexuality, Barnes & Noble — September 15, 2007 @ 12:40 am

10. [...] This weekend I went to the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin to see a show that included the work of Larry Clark. After recent discussions on this blog (here and here) it was interesting to see Clark's pictures from *Teenage Lust*. He shows a girl who is tripping on acid being raped, male hustlers, a brother with an erection tying up his sister in bed. Clark was in his thirties and early forties when he produced this work. In several pictures we see him naked with the teens. It is

disturbing stuff. But seeing it in the safe confines of a museum, I somehow find all of this 'acceptable.' Again, it comes down to context. If I saw Teenage Lust in the waiting room of my kid's doctor, yeah, I'd have a big problem. I'd also be troubled if Clark's pictures were turned into ads. Remember those banned Calvin Klein spots from the 90's. (Watch them here). Yeesh. [...]

Pingback by alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Teenage Lust — September 17, 2007 @ 4:33 am

11. Hey Alec – Thinking of photography and poetry reminded me of a blurb I read about Paul Graham's new book series "A Shimmer of Possibility". The writer used the words "filmic haikus" to describe his new books. I'm sure you have probably seen the book(s) there at Steidl. His approach to this series, being influenced by the short stories of Chekov, makes me very curious to see how these images work within their multiple book structure. Have you seen them?

Comment by chuck shacochis — September 17, 2007 @ 11:28 am

12. Chuck, I'm as excited as you are to see 'A Shimmer of Possibility.' Paul is one of my heroes and I was fortunate enough to have dinner with him the other day. His book hasn't been printed yet, but he is on deck. I'm sure it will be one of the best publications of the year.

Tim Atherton has some good info on Graham here.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 17, 2007 @ 12:11 pm

13. Alec, Thanks for the info. Good luck with your book printing by the way, I can't wait to see it.

Comment by chuck shacochis — September 17, 2007 @ 1:18 pm