

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

February 27, 2007

'art perseveres, wherever it may be found'

Filed under: [editorial photo](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:33 am



If you haven't noticed, I spend a lot of time on this blog talking about fine-art photographers who dirty themselves in editorial waters. (Examples [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). [Yesterday](#) I asked, "Why do they bother?"

Several people responded with knee-jerk cynicism: "money, money, money."

Is everyone aware that the day rate for the New York Times Magazine is \$400? (Half of that if you are using an agent). I don't know Justine Kurland's art prices, but I'd guess they are somewhere around \$15,000. If she is hurting for cash, I'm sure she could change the price to \$15,400. What about Rineke Dijkstra? \$50,400.

Set aside your cynicism for a second and consider this – a lot of photographers actually like taking pictures for publication.

A couple of examples:

- In 1998, Larry Sultan took an assignment from Maxim Magazine. Yes, [Maxim](#). The story was called "A Day in the Life of a Porn Set." Six years later, Sultan debuted *The Valley* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
- In 2003, Mitch Epstein photographed the dying power-plant town of [Cheshire, Ohio](#) for the New York Times. Next month Epstein will be debuting his latest project, *American Power* at [Sikkema Jenkins & Co.](#)

Sultan and Epstein are two of the best photographers working today. Both have had long careers. Both continue to surprise. I'd argue that their participation in the world of editorial photography has made them better.

I'd never suggest that editorial photography is the right choice for most photographers. But I hate to see it dismissed as mere money-grubbing. Some of the greatest photographers of all time rarely did anything else.

One of my favorites is Evelyn Hofer. I've only purchased a few photographs in my life and two of them are by Hofer. Both were made on assignment. In the current issue of Aperture, Vicki Goldberg reviews Evelyn Hofer's [recent retrospective](#):

Hofer's pictures were generally taken on assignment, which she never looked on as a lesser task. So much for the disdain of commercial work that art photographers used to express. Art perseveres, wherever it may be found.

19 Comments

1. During the recent Brighton Photo-Bienale I had a conversation with a editorial photographer who said that most classic 'art' photographers of the 60's made a living doing editorial work and that todays young photographers didn't have what it takes to cut it in the business.

There seems to be a growing bitterness (in the UK) between those who are described as Art photographers and those who consider themselves as editorial photographers.

I told the guy I thought photography was a big enough beast to handle it all. Personally I think the most interesting work comes from a cross over of the two (if either of them exist in any pure sense).

Comment by Chris King — February 27, 2007 @ [2:54 am](#)

2. it's a little more than 'knee-jerk cynicism' alec, how many of Sultan's Maxim photos ended up in 'The Valley'? there are always exceptions to the rule, and you found a few exceptions, but don't be naive or blind. ask a hundred assignment photographers why they do editorial work, and then ask them what they'd rather be doing.

the day rate for the NYT may be \$400, but how about the day rate for shooting CEO's? how much a day to shoot a fashion layout for Vogue?

Comment by john k. — February 27, 2007 @ [4:44 am](#)

3. As the first to mention the M word yesterday (though I hope not in a knee-jerk cynical way), I'd say your main points (i.e. that photographers like to work, like to see their work in print, and that "editorial" work may be the seed of further work) are beyond dispute. However, the economics of artistic production are intriguing, and a subject over which a veil is too often drawn.

In the 1990s I heard Duane Michals give a very impassioned defence at the RPS of his advertising work as the way the work for which he is known gets funded. I don't think it's cynical to wonder how people make a living (run a studio, employ assistants, pay bills, etc.). The advent of Big Money for some art photographers is surely quite a recent phenomenon — how did that happen? Who buys photographic work at \$15K, and why? Is this driven by galleries? Or hedge fund managers? Interestingly, you can buy a Keith Carter or Raymond Meeks print for \$1.5K or less at Photo-Eye. Perhaps they sell ten times as many ... What effect does this have on those asking \$150? Only asking ...

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [7:01 am](#)

4. I've always loved that Hofer photo.

Comment by [Christian](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [8:59 am](#)

5. There seems to be a lot of confusion about the difference between editorial and advertising photography. Where Larry Fink might get paid \$400 to shoot [these pictures](#) for the NYTimes, he probably got paid two-hundred times as much to shoot [these pictures](#) for Chivas. Obviously the ad work isn't about the art. It is about paying the bills.

Just don't throw out the editorial baby with the advertising bathwater.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [10:51 am](#)

6. Hofer's photo, which predates the "color revolution" by leaps and bounds, is one of those iconic images in the history of (color) photography.

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [10:55 am](#)

7. it seems to me that shooting for magazines and/or newspapers (other publications) is the quickest and most mobile way to get your name and art out there. i think young photographers are incredibly lucky that a number of talented fine art photographers bridged that gap by shooting amazing work for different mags and newspapers. sure, you are charged with shooting something specific, but the challenge of the photographer is to put your stamp on an image that is inherently not your own to begin with.

Comment by [davin](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [11:06 am](#)

8. The boundaries are increasingly fluid, especially when there are pubs like the NYT and say, W or Paper commissioning fine art photogs to do editorial and giving them enormous creative freedom when they do it. The same is true for advertising, and there it gets weirder – I confess to feeling uneasy when I saw the stuff that Laura Letinsky shot for Waterworks. It was her work, and not markedly different in quality or tenor from her fine art stuff, but in this case it was done in service to selling the sinks that she so artfully arranged her objects upon. And of course there are many luxury brands who commission fine art peeps for campaigns – kate space, marc jacobs, gucci, etc and so on.

From the photographers perspective, or rather from my perspective as a galleriest watching photographers make these decisions, it all depends on temperament and style.

Some photogs can compartmentalize and do food or fashion or corporate CEO headshots and then turn around and produce fine art stuff.

Some can somehow balance between the two and infuse their wedding photography with just enough of their fine art-yness to distinguish themselves in the field.

Some can get tripped up – I've seen some emerging photogs lose their way because the editorial/assignment work they were doing exerted too much of an influence over their fine art stuff.

And some want not a thing to do with it – I know more than a few photographers who do entirely different things to pay the bills – web design, teaching, food service – because they find that conflating their fine art stuff with moneymaking has a negative impact on their work.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [11:17 am](#)

9. Yeah, editorial is not done for money.

Recognition, flexing some creative muscle in a mass forum, ego, b/c your rep wants the tears, simply b/c it's work and most photographers love to be working...these are maybe reasons, but certainly not money.

I loose money whenever I shoot editorial.

Comment by [GM](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [12:23 pm](#)

10. It might be interesting to think of this question in terms other than photographic. How often is there an interesting non-fiction piece written by Philip Roth or John Updike? What about the poet Robert Penn Warren writing a book review? Consider also the tradition of painting portraits (arguably editorial work in a pre-editorial era.) Ingres loathed doing portraits, but they ended up being perhaps his finest accomplishment.

Comment by [Dylan](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [12:42 pm](#)

11. "There seems to be a lot of confusion about the difference between editorial and advertising photography."

i agree, and i have a difficult time telling the two apart. is the new york times magazine not selling something? with so much money to be made (earned?), being thrown at so few artists, wouldn't it be those that make the most that are at the top of a food chain? is ANY picture really worth a one-and-a-half million dollars? or even twenty thousand? i guess my point is, what is the nature of the business of photography?

Comment by john k. — February 27, 2007 @ [2:03 pm](#)

12. Yes-ego, recognition, tear sheets are all factors for doing editorial, its true. But does anyone else still believe in the power of telling a story through pictures? In particular, a story you may not have known about or thought about had you not been hired to shoot it? Am I the only one who still finds that aspect exciting and interesting?

Comment by [Annabel](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [2:39 pm](#)

13. I read all of Alex Soth's comments on editorial photographs done by artists and I believe...that we respond to each photographer's actual pictures and then decide. PL can seemingly do a W spread effortlessly and it frankly creeps me out because the images are all too familiar but are of no consequence....and so seem ultimately synical....whereas I totally agree that the image of KiKi done by Nan is graceful and amazing...most likely having to do with something in the air between those two women that no amount of \$\$\$\$ or art direction or any other distraction could dilute. When an artist is on.....she's on.

Comment by Peggy N — February 27, 2007 @ [5:41 pm](#)

14. Peggy, c'mon, you're throwing fashion, advertising, and editorial work into one big ol' pile when in fact there are clear distinctions between them. It's not just work that ends up between the pages of a magazine. I just don't really think it makes much sense to compare P.L.D's fashion spread for W and Nan Goldin's work for The New York Times, it's two totally different things, at least to me it is, but, maybe I'm wrong.

Oh yea, and just for future reference, it's Alec.

See ya at the lab!

Comment by Danny G — February 28, 2007 @ [12:14 am](#)

15. Now – we are getting to the meat of the matter! If I step away from your blog for a second you once again give me something to think about – while I drive a-lot and make very little doing what I enjoy. Seems to me – getting the work that makes A photographer involved and thinking is the real key. The fun of this whole thing is if it is Editorial, Art or what eeva you want to put on the pile-o-photography crap has to make a little sence when it comes to the Gallery or Page; While paying the bills at home and keeping the family happy too-boot is the challenge.

Comment by [David Wilson Burnham](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [12:47 am](#)

16. I think Dylan is on to something. The difference I see between the photographers who do shoot editorial and then ones who don't is a question of themes in their work. Jeff Wall's work is highly fictional therefor shooting a truthful editorial shot doesn't make sense. Maybe he would try his

hand in fashion but fashion can't be mounted in a light box in a magazine. Seriously though, Alec your personal work is in the tradition of a grand photo essay while Wall is more in the tradition of Renaissance painting. It would be interesting to see Wall do editorial work but I can understand why we don't see him doing it. The same way I could understand why Alec Soth might not work in shooting product photography.

Nan Goldin's work fits into editorial and once in awhile we see her do it (obviously not for the money). PLD's work is not entirely fiction but thematically and stylistically I think it makes more sense for him to shoot fashion. Of course fashion and editorial have a big pay gap so I have no idea if he was or was not motivated by the money.

One think I was also thinking about is the Civas ad work that you pointed to by Larry Fink. It is interesting that a lot of photographers/artists will hide the fact that they work in advertising maybe they think that it doesn't fit into their style or maybe they think the collectors might get turned off by this kind of work? Either-way I admire the the rare photographers (avardon?) that can work in all media and still have a distinct enough style that when you put them all next to each other they still look the the same set of eyes made the images.

Comment by [Harlan Erskine](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [1:21 pm](#)

17. Alec and all. I worked as an assistant for the photographer Richard Barnes for a number of years. He had his own successful artwork, did commercial architectural work and editorial. While magazines such as NY Times Mag or Nest didn't pay much at all, more often than not the jobs were interesting and allowed him an opportunity to photograph what he might not have had permission to otherwise. The projects were always strange and interesting, the Unabomber's cabin, a digital slot machine factory in Reno, a Joseph Eichler housing development in L.A.

Having started to make a living as an artist and teacher myself, I have tried to continue to do editorial work on the side. The reason being...it's interesting! Alec's right, it don't pay much, but it get's you into the strangest of places.

for what it's worth. -EJ

Comment by [Eirik Johnson](#) — March 1, 2007 @ [7:47 pm](#)

18. I think that everyone would like to have their work sell for 15k but that is not reality. Unfortunately a lot of 'artists' whose work sells for large sums no longer have to live in the real world

Comment by [leo](#) — March 2, 2007 @ [11:24 am](#)

19. It seems obvious and entirely right to me that independent photographers would accept commissions from the NYT or comparable publications. It's a showcase for their work, it gets them into places where they might not get on their own, and it's an artistic and intellectual challenge. Why shouldn't they grab those opportunities, even if the pay is derisory?

And why are we still debating the whole issue, which has been around for nearly a century? Stieglitz dumped on Steichen when Steichen started doing high-paid magazine work, but some of that work of Steichen's is among his best. Editorial commissions are bad only when they get a photographer to do bad work. An artist with integrity will do good work whoever's paying for it.

Comment by [Richard Ehrlich](#) — March 13, 2007 @ [7:49 pm](#)