

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 28, 2006

After Arbus

Filed under: [critics & curators](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:28 pm

I like when artists or critics make grandiose and provocative declarations on art. It is usually rubbish, but at least gets you thinking. In her review of the Wolfgang Tillmans show, LA Weekly writer Holly Myers stirred the pot:

In thinking about Diane Arbus, as one does from time to time, I came to a distressing realization: that I couldn't name a single photographer subsequent to Arbus (and Frank and Winogrand and Friedlander and Eggleston and the other greats of her generation) who ranked on anywhere near the same level, which is to say, who thrilled me near as broadly, deeply or consistently.

The distinction is more romantic than intellectual, I'll admit — and therein lies the problem. Photography obviously didn't disappear after 1971 (the year of Arbus' death), but, like art generally, went the way of the intellect, exalting concept over impression, thinking over looking.

Read the full article [here](#).

30 Comments

1. i get that feeling often...

Comment by [j zorn](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [1:39 am](#)

2. Arbus was unique, as much for how she lived, as for her subject matter. She was female in a male dominated field; she photographed society's fringes in a no frills style she made her own; and she died the tragic artist's death that raised her to art world cultdom. Fortunately, her art survives and overshadows that status, as it certainly deserves.

For all the above, she was as close to a 20th century Van Gogh as you can get. And you only get one of those a century...

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [2:01 am](#)

3. Ah. Quite a statement indeed. That's probably the thing I like most about good photography. It asks questions and does not give answers, at least it doesn't pretend to know them but merely to try and find them.

When someone gives a very personal meaning and presents it as fact, I kin da stop listening..

Comment by [Lodewijk](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [6:42 am](#)

4. i have tried over and over to talk with curators and critics during my postgraduate in photography about this.
They do not understand that i am "only" a collector off images.
that is a shame, i believe in it

Comment by [kris](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [8:04 am](#)

5. Huh.... I always got the opposite feeling , I always have the feeling that photography did not really begin until after 1971, with the emergence of color photography. Kind of like tennis before the open era – when professionals finally merged with amateurs , all the records before 1968, like Rod Laver's et al, being kinda suspect. I like Arbus . I think she is really neat. But I can never shake the fact that she feels to be paraphrasing August Sander when I look at her pictures. I think if she were alive she would probably admit as much.

Comment by [Bill Sullivan](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [10:28 am](#)

6. I'm sure photography died each time Daguerre, Talbot, Nadar, Stieglitz, Weston, Lange, Smith, Weegee, Strand, Cartier-Bresson, or Arbus died. But hindsight is 20/20; when I look at literature, and compare this week's favorite with the best of the 3,000 years of recorded history, they surely don't stand a chance. Nor will they ever.

It takes a lot of time to make a masterpiece, and if photography is not as exciting as it was in 1971, then maybe we're just in a boring stretch. I'm sure a lot of people will disagree about this latter statement, but it's a hypothesis, not a thesis. The point is just that blaming the last thirty years for not giving us a work of literature of the magnitude of Ulysses (OK, there's maybe Gravity's Rainbow...) would be preposterous, and I think the same can be said to this statement in the context of photography.

Comment by [Michel](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [10:29 am](#)

7. I like that she says the distinction is more emotional than intellectual-pointing to nostalgia and what would now be considered a kind of conservatism in photographic taste. I can sympathize from the point of view that much of art-world photography became "muscular" or "ambitious" you could say, here I am thinking of Crewdson and the influence of advertising and fashion in art

photography, and it also trended with the rest of culture towards the pornographic, Tillmans, Richardson, etc. But I think there is a pendulum reversal going on where some of the values of that group—Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand—are returning, in the form of non-hurculean print sizes, an emphasis on vision, black and white, etc, and I think blogs have helped in this regard, there is more conversation and sharing going on. I would also like to see a return to the small book format, the chapbook, all these monster-tomes really bore me, it's that muscular thing again, as if it's not good if it's not 500 pictures.

Alec, you did not share your feelings exactly on this, what did the essay inspire in you?

Comment by [Robert Wright](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [10:57 am](#)

8. Arbus paraphrasing August Sander? Not quite. Sander was so universalizing of humanity ("People of the Twentieth Century" and all that) — and Arbus's eye seems deeply minoritizing. Some of the images of people might look similar, but the spirit seems almost opposite?

Comment by [lexi](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [11:25 am](#)

9. I do have a proposal, we should count the number of art critics who at one point of art history wrote in a way or in another about the end of art. Even a great thinker like Hegel has been able to write bullshits about that.

So Holly Myers should keep her considerations about contemporary photography for herself.

Should we take her lack of contemporary photographic culture for a sign of decreasing quality of a so called "emotional photography"? Should we advise her some basic philosophic courses for her to understand that emotion is not the contrary of intellect and that an intellectual conception of photography does not kill the emotion? Does she know about Jeff Wall? I was yesterday at the opening of his show at Marian Goodman in Paris and I can tell her that you can look at his pictures without any knowledge in art history and feel great emotions. And she could eventually even experience how the intellectual comprehension of the work of this huge photographer increase the basic emotion of the first glance!

You could answer me and you would be right that it is hard to compare Arbus and Wall. But take photographer who are working on the experience of taking the picture... a bit like Arbus or Egglestone in a way. Go and have a look on the work of two fellows of Alec at MAgnum Antoine D'Agata and Trent Parke.

For me I really like the idea to be able nowadays to look at a great variety of works. To open a book of d'Agata in the morning (ok in the morning it is a taff experience) and at night to see the 6 new pictures of Wall (don't worry the pictures will be presented at the MOMA soon). It is great to have Natchwey in one hand and Orosco or Moulene in the other.

In a book of talking with the great photographic critic Jean-François Chevrier, Jeff Wall tells his story. He says that he started by doing photography against photography and that at one point in the mid of the eighties he had to admit his defeat. Photography won and he was happy about that.

For the defence of Holly Myers I do not like very much the work of Tillmans apart of his abstract photography. For her defence again, we never saw so much photographic production and it is hard to distinguish emerging "great" photographer. It is far more simple to look after the filter of history...

Comment by [Alexandre Guiringer](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [1:07 pm](#)

10. It's funny, I almost linked to this article a few days ago, and then I decided against it, because I thought it wasn't really worth it. To claim that after Diane Arbus no more interesting photography has happened erases more or less 99% of my own blog – how absurd! But then as is always the case when dealing with critics, it's really just Mrs Myers' opinion, unfortunately nothing that made me think about it.

Comment by [Joerg Colberg](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [2:55 pm](#)

11. "Alec, you did not share your feelings exactly on this, what did the essay inspire in you?" I thought that Myers' logic was profoundly flawed. In her essay, she lumps Nan Goldin in with conceptual photography and seems to think that everyone who lifted a camera before 1971 did so with a pure heart and empty brain. Her argument comes off as a massive overstatement. But it did get me thinking about the tug o' war between thinking vs. looking.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [2:57 pm](#)

12. I think some critics prefer older/dead photographer's work because they see it as a closed and hence safe/controlable narrative.

Living /ongoing work is more troublesome because it's alive, fugitive and mutable, and harder to force into a curatorial box.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [3:47 pm](#)

13. This article reminded me of an essay which I have been meaning to post about for several weeks:

Why photography critics hate photographs

<http://bostonreview.net/BR31.5/linfield.html>

Comment by [Todd W.](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [4:06 pm](#)

14. Can anyone name a photog that has genuinely thrilled them lately? Or, more importantly to me, one who might thrill non-photogs? (I am thinking f*cking hell, that blew me away, not oh, yeah, interesting:))

Comment by [burke](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [4:36 pm](#)

15. guy, isn't it easier to relate to contemporary work?

Comment by [aizan](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [8:41 pm](#)

16. One reason Myers' logic is profoundly flawed (or narrow-sighted) is because it overlooks the variety of ways in which photographers always have and are finding different ways to effect thought and feeling in different contexts. Looking at Katy Grannan's photos (who may be one line descending from Arbus), I feel a little dirty. But it wouldn't work (I mean the lighting, color scheme, detailed patterns, and subject matter) if it didn't borrow and play on certain visual tropes from 70's porn, white trash culture, and so on. We can't keep using the same tropes that Winogrand and Arbus did in their time. Those visual tropes and how photographer's use them would provide more interesting conversation on the difference in photographic eras or photographers than that age-old distinction between thought and feeling imo.

Comment by [lavell](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [12:52 am](#)

17. Aizan – yes, I think it is often easier (and absolutely vital) to relate to contemporary work.

But I was thinking more the almost colonialist attitude of some critics/curators, who like to control and plant their flag on a particularly body of work. A closed finite body of work is easier to brand and claim curatorial ownership of.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [2:22 am](#)

18. Guy, I agree with you. You can't go back and shoot the 60s again. Nostalgia is a real killer of photography. I think this is inherent in photography, because it is a populist medium. Who does not

have a photo album of fading color pictures of their childhood? It is wonderful to look at them and think warmly of those bygone years, but there is something wrong if you believe the present or future holds no great things.

There is something terribly wrong when critics are unable to delight in the now, because there is always something amazing to be seen.

"Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer obtainable." – Christopher Lasch

Comment by [William K.](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [10:36 am](#)

19. I agree her argument is flawed but I do think she is on to something. (discloser here, Tillmas was one of my tutors in grad school in London). I think without really articulating the differences she asking questions about changes from the modern to post modern, photographers seeing the flattening of culture and creating the subsequent the image. Maybe Tillmans is a reaction to that.

He has his own process and sticks to it. It may seem romantic or nostalgic – he sees, reacts and shoots (maybe not all the time but I have seen him work like this) – he shoots quickly with a 35mm camera. Not to mention the varying presnetations of new and old work, a constant chnaging event, from exhibition to exhibition.

I believe Myers, although with flawed logic, does see a difference but explains her ideas poorly, choosing words like "heroism", "unique", "poetic" all tropes of the modern. As an artist I can't say I see Tillmans as modern...dunno, instead somehow his works seems more in line to the paintings of Luc Tuymans, than photographs of Arbus or Eggleston.

He's a "post modern anthropological data collector" (my term) like I would call most these days except he doesn't flatten the image, there exists a hierarchy in the image, there are threads not themes making it messy and harder to pin down, the seemingly radomness being the system....and becuae of those choices he stands out. Maybe he is an anomaly or maybe his work and process are something to keep and eye on as the work and he age.

Beyond Myers nostalgia, I think the article raises some curious questions that maybe she wasn't considering.

Comment by [stewart](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [11:41 am](#)

20. Alec: For all her wrongheadedness, Myers is not all wrong. Photography today is burdened by a weight of conceptual self-consciousness with which neither Atget nor Evans nor, for that matter, Arbus, had to cope. Of course, photography is not alone in being asked to carry that burden; it weighs on all the arts. Nevertheless, photography seems particularly ill-suited to carry it successfully; concept turns too quickly to cuteness (or worse) in photography. It is to that, I think, that Myers is reacting. As hurtful as her reaction must be to everyone trying to make his or her way today, it is not entirely without basis. G

Comment by [George LeChat](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [7:09 pm](#)

21. Can anyone post a new link to the article? All links to the LA Weekly seem to be dead.

Tillmans seems to be a reaction against both concept and typology – sometimes it works (his 2000 Turner Prize show at the Tate), sometimes it seems just a random assemblage (this years show at Interim Art).

Comment by [guybatey](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [3:31 am](#)

22. Alec, your post about underrated photographers is interesting... but there is also the category overrated photographers...and I think Tilmans is the number one in this category...his work is poor in ideas and also poor technically...IMHO

Comment by pablo — October 31, 2006 @ [10:19 am](#)

23. (I may be joining this discussion a little late, however...)

While I think Myers simplifies an awful lot, I don't think she's totally off base with her "thinking over looking" idea.

I don't know if anyone's been to the photography permanent collection at MoMA recently – I walked away from it extremely frustrated. The older stuff is divided into simple categories, like Things, Individuals, People, as if photography was simply a matter of categorizing things, rather than something much more complicated. It's the MoMA's collection, so there were masterpieces all over the place, from all eras, but the way it was arranged – as if to say "These photographers took pictures of People, of Things, etc..." – seemed incredibly dumbed down and ultimately weakened the work on the walls. Once the categories are figured out, the viewer can move on without giving the photographs much more thought.

The new photographers room features three artists who, to my mind, also value "thinking" over "looking" – Jonathan Monk, Barbara Probst, and Jules Spinatsch. With the partial exception of Spinatsch, I think each of them create work that have more value as ideas than as things to look at. As artists I think each of them has value, but once you "get" them, their pieces become less interesting as photographs.

Comment by [nicholas](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [12:52 pm](#)

24. Yes, I recently took a workshop with Chris Boot down here in Mexico and he said that he hasn't seen any worthwhile "street photography" in twenty five years. I thought it was a bit of an exaggeration, but also got me thinking.

Comment by [mark alor](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [2:03 pm](#)

25. She does say that "the distinction is more romantic than intellectual", and I think that says a lot. Perhaps the photographers who thrill her were all photographing at a time when she was falling in love with photography. Then she got jaded. Perhaps it's time she got a new lover?

Comment by [Dan Sumption](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [5:12 am](#)

26. Alec,
I took issue with reviewer's claims because I just came from the NY Street photo show in D.C. Arbus just didn't appear on the scene.
Looking at her work next to Lisette Modell, early Avedon, and (forgotten great) Louis Faurer, it becomes clear where Arbus got her inspiration stylistically.
The same can be said for any era in photography. Look how many Katy Grannan-style rip-offs there are out there.
I agree with Joerg, to say that there was no photography post Arbus (a self-serving blanket statement which the reviewer knows will generate "buzz" like this blog) is absurd. It's constantly mutating and evolving.

Comment by [imgiordano](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [10:23 am](#)

27. Well, if she's making a personal aesthetic judgment that no one rocks her boat like Arbus, there's really no response to that (apart, perhaps, from pity).

But the scene surely is more diverse than she claims. You can do anything today, right?
Landscape (a la Robert Adams), portraiture (Goldin), set-up stuff (Casebere, Crewdson)– pomo

work, straight work, whathaveyou. It's not like there's some photo version of Clement Greenberg out there, enforcing orthodoxy and keeping work from the public.

And jmgjordano's right: it ain't like Arbus came out of nowhere. She was a Lisette Model pupil, no?

Comment by Tom Morrissey — November 1, 2006 @ [4:06 pm](#)

28. Has there really been a decline in the quality of "street photography"? I don't know; I thought it was just a bit out of fashion with the art world.

There seems to be some good work being done, but galleries and magazines prefer to show the high concept, "thinking" stuff.

If HCB was starting out today, would he get shown? Just a bunch of pics taken in Paris? Not high concept enough... How about a series of abandoned shopping trolleys instead, Mr CB?

"Yes, I recently took I workshop with Chris Boot down here in Mexico and he said that he hasn't seen any worthwhile "street photography" in twenty five years. I thought it was a bit of an exaggeration, but also got me thinking."

Comment by [Paul Russell](#) — November 2, 2006 @ [7:53 am](#)

29. "Can anyone name a photog that has genuinely thrilled them lately?"

There's no static point on the line of assimilation of art.

You start with whatever you got coming out of the womb, take it in as it comes to you, as you find it, as you seek it out, and then, after a lifetime of doing that, you die.

Nowhere in there do you hit some platform from which to view the artistic object impartially, without the bias of your experience – and your experience never stops.

Get a job at a photography magazine vetting submissions and see how long your current photographic aesthetic stands unaltered.

Check your criteria after a year and see how they've changed.

Arbus made her bones uncovering the hidden grotesques of everyday reality. Once uncovered it never goes back, not without cultural upheaval large enough to render the whole discussion moot.

The critic's experience and Arbus' coincide, but the critic assumes something universal out of her particular trajectory. It's megalomania with a professional bio.

The trajectory's real arc is the human.

Cave paintings to Monet to Warhol to Banksy.

It doesn't stop, and neither does your model of it, the internal personal art history that you're writing with your eyes and your judgment.

It's profane, a critic's chauvinist arrogance, to pretend to the assumption there ever was or ever will be a universal aesthetic contract against which any object can be held to agreement.

By us.

There should have been established long ago a parallel occupation to the critic, an appreciator, with all the difference the names imply.

I never read stuff like Myers' article, unless someone like Joerg calls my attention to it, because I don't have time.

Too busy looking for good photographs.

Comment by [Roy Belmont](#) — November 6, 2006 @ [4:42 am](#)

30. Just found this amazing blog (9/07) and am starting at the beginning.

Arbus is an icon but her work doesn't wear too well for me these days. She dipped pretty deeply into the social margins, but then everybody was doing that in the 60's and early 70's. Thinking out of the box wasn't a cliché. But she had talent, no doubt. And a zero sense of humor. That probably tripped her up.

These days I rather spend my time enjoying Strand, Kertez, Steiglitz, Frank, Freidlander, Koudelka, Sudek, Cartier-Bresson, and Smith, even Steichen, and some of Evans. For the most part I can't get into color, except for Haas and of course Nan Goldin.

Goldin seems to be the only one still shooting on a Mission from God. Too bad she only shoots her friends—she could do a great book on the porno industry. And of course James Natchwey is in a class by himself, but his images are almost too intense.

Our good host has an excellent eye and the knack to find the interesting detail. But I'm afraid I just can't get into Atget, Sanders, and Shore. A little too static for me.

Photography gets at something in the human experience that no other art form can. But now we seem to be too taken with technique and bad surrealism. And all this money is sometimes a mixed blessing.

Comment by Merritt Hewitt — September 5, 2007 @ [6:07 pm](#)