

No Future For You?

Speculations on the Next Decade in Photography Education

In the past decade, the membership of the Society for Photographic Education has increased dramatically: from a small handful to a list of hundreds, enough to fill a sizeable directory. No doubt this organization will continue to grow, that being in the nature of such bodies. Paralleling this numerical growth is the expansion of this organization's sphere of influence: it is safe to say that much of what we loosely refer to as "photographic education" is promulgated by members of this society, and will be increasingly so transmitted as time goes on.

Collectively, then, we form the main channel through which many of the photographers-to-be of the near future — and most of the best-educated ones — will have to pass. Channel, of course, is only one of several possible metaphors describing our functioning. Funnel is another; so is filter; so is bottleneck. Our shaping of the future will determine which of these possible self-descriptions is most appropriate.

A look at that future seems a fitting way to open this conference, particularly since it may provide some contrast to the lap of luxury in which we're sitting at the moment. Let us consider the ten years ahead of us and what they are likely to bring. After all, at the end of that decade we will be four years past 1984, and only twelve years from the millennium. What we achieve between now and then, therefore, will be our groundwork for the year 2000.

At present we are witnessing a unique confluence of events in the evolution of photography. The medium has won a number of its battles along various fronts simultaneously. It has pervaded the field of visual communication so thoroughly that its elimination is unthinkable. It has proved itself, on a virtually global level, to be the most democratically accessible tool for personal expression of all the visual media. And, in less than a century and a half, it has effectively achieved the status of a "high" art while forcing all the other visual arts to redefine themselves radically. Indeed, it is even engendering a fundamental re-examination of the prevalent aesthetic hierarchy itself.

These are not overnight developments; they are the cumulative result of the medium's maturing and the consequent manifestation of its inherent nature. What is

significantly new is not the existence of these phenomena per se, but the comparatively sudden, concurrent, and widespread recognition of them.

To a considerable extent, that recognition can be traced to the efforts of the members of the Society for Photographic Education. Certainly, in the past decade, we have done much to develop public awareness of the medium's history and its influence on our culture. Photography teachers across the country have also successfully established and elevated those standards of craft which are the gauges for all who work in the medium. Nor have those been our only accomplishments. We have entrenched ourselves firmly — perhaps irrevocably — in the groves of academe. And we have, in record time, glutted the market for career art photographers and for teachers of art photography.

This suggests, to me at least, that we have been a mixed blessing in relation to our medium and our culture. Is this the true flowering of photography education? Is this where all our efforts were leading? To the establishment of photography as yet another academic discipline? To the self-perpetuation of art photography? To the creation of a caste of visual idiot-savants monitored by a professional elite tightly controlling the outlets and the sinecures? To an ever more massive annual rendezvous at some posh hotel or chic spa?

Is this where we were heading all along? If so, why? And if not, what are we doing here?

Let us consider the next decade through a series of speculations. These projections are based on actual events and current data, not on extra-sensory perception. They are not prophecies; they are safe predictions.

The medium of photography is in the midst of a technological upheaval unmatched since the fruits of World War Two military research were declassified and made available to the post-war public.

We are witnessing the rapid disappearance of silver as the primary vehicle for photographic imagery. The current generation of students is probably the last which will take the availability of silver-based materials for granted. Since much of the tradition of

photography — in educational, historical, and critical terms — is based upon the silver negative and the silver print, extensive revision of our premises in these regards will be necessary, as will the development of comparable understandings of such likely replacements as magnetic and/or electronic films and papers.

Such a change will leave those involved with two-dimensional non-electronic or non-magnetic imagery even more at the mercy of the major photographic manufacturing corporations, which already are far too influential in determining which materials shall be made available to photographers. Thus it might be advisable for us to take steps towards creating a generation of students educated to be alert consumers of photographic materials, trained to make active and effective demands on the suppliers of those materials.

We are also on the verge of major breakthroughs in three-dimensional imagery, with holography by far the most likely candidate for the dominant process in that area. The introduction of holographic equipment and materials which are economically and technically accessible to the popular market may well take place during this coming decade. I see no reason not to believe that such a process will replace two-dimensional imagery as the primary vernacular photographic medium as surely as color replaced black and white in that same field.

This will have the inevitable result of rapidly rendering two-dimensional imagery — especially in black and white, and most particularly in silver — obsolescent and archaic. In the minds of many, that will automatically make such imagery more "artistic" by rendering it non-functional in the everyday traffic of visual communication. It will certainly create a schism among photography students in their attempts to determine which of these major branchings merits their personal and/or professional commitment. It will probably create a similar schism among photography educators, and even those who manage to develop an educational methodology encompassing both forms had best be prepared for the divisiveness this evolution will generate.

There is another aspect of this technological upheaval which merits our serious attention. As I have noted previously, we have already entered an era in which the forgery of photographically credible imagery is eminently feasible. I am not speaking

here of the expressively-oriented work of such image-makers as Jerry Uelsmann or Clarence John Laughlin, though their techniques are readily adaptable to the production of imagery with other intentions. Rather, I am speaking of recent developments in the technology of image generation.

It is now possible, by a computerized process developed for police use, to reconstruct from even the blurriest film or still photograph a sharper, more focused image of anything depicted therein. This is achieved by the application of statistical probability factors to the various possible resolutions of such out-of-focus images. It is also possible, by another computerized technique, to take a still image of anything — including such an artificially resolved photograph as described above — and from it generate still or kinetic video images in which the subject of the original image can be made to perform any desired action realistically in convincingly dimensional space. What this means is that our visual communications hardware has reached the point where photographically credible imagery, both still and motion, can be manufactured with little or no recourse to actual photographs.

The existence of such technology within a culture which has been convinced for almost one hundred and fifty years of the scientific accuracy and evidentiary unimpeachability of photographs as documents should be cause for alarm. The visual technology for population surveillance and for the manipulation of news, fact, and history which buttresses the totalitarian futures projected in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and George Orwell's *1984* are all in existence at this moment. Certainly as photography educators we must begin to work towards increasing the sophistication of the citizenry at large in the interpretation of photographic imagery and its manipulative potential; we must also work towards the establishment of professional codes of ethics, effective detection methods and legislative controls to counteract that potential.

Let us now turn our attention to "the academy," that hypothetical construct within one or another of whose physical manifestations most of us transmit such knowledge and (o vanitas!) wisdom as we have managed to acquire.

I think it not unreasonable to assume that for most of those in this organization — except for the present student membership — the coming of age of their relationship to photography and photography education occurred during the moneyed 1960s and early 1970s. That was a time of wondrous — or, from another standpoint, ghastly — innocence for all those involved in so-called creative photography. At least for a time, it was possible to believe that colleges, universities and art institutes would never cease to open and expand departments of photography, thus providing an endless source of teaching positions to degreed young photographers trained only in personal self-expression. It was possible to believe that the government-run and privately-subsidized foundations would continue to pump ever-increasing numbers of grants into the veins of art photography, that we could nurse at that teat forever without fear of it drying up and without preparing to be weaned. It was possible to believe that museum and gallery exhibition spaces would continue to open up, that more and more photography books would be published and photography magazines founded — that, in short, it would be possible for a virtually infinite number of career art photographers to live reasonably well merely by "doing their own work" and, if absolutely necessary, supplementing that by teaching others to do the same.

In the past few years we have learned — to the dismay of many though hardly unpredictably — that our culture's need for career art photographers is limited and that we may well have oversupplied the demand for the remainder of this century. As the population of career art photographers swells, the ratio of available grants, teaching positions, traditional exhibition spaces and publishing outlets necessarily diminishes. This basic mathematical formulation is a piece of hard news which it is our task to break to the current generation of photography students. It is also our responsibility to make ourselves accountable to their immediate predecessors, those whom — in our foolishness and naïveté — we deluded into thinking otherwise. I am speaking of those lost souls one encounters in increasing numbers, wandering the corridors of such meat markets as the College Art Association and SPE gatherings, desperate for someone, anyone, to look at their portfolios and take their resumé's. They are competing frantically for a pitiful handful of jobs teaching others to make art photographs — since, at best,

that is all they have been trained to teach — and the ratio of these applicants to available positions is unspeakable. Those educators who brought them to this pass owe them much, much more than an apology.

Declining enrollments in many degree-granting photography programs whose emphasis is entirely on self-expressive imagery bear out the suspicion that fewer and fewer students are willing to commit themselves to being career artists in photography. We have seen the end of the era of the open pocketbook among the institutions housing photography departments; I believe we are now seeing the end of that era among the students who enter such departments. More and more, we will be facing a demand for the economic self-justification of all courses of study, photography among them. Profiles of the current generation of college students show them to be far more conservative in choosing their field of specialization, and more deeply concerned with the relationship between their education and their future in the job market, than were the students of ten years ago — among whom many of those present could no doubt number themselves. We must confront in ourselves that clash of attitudes. We will do these students a profound disservice by failing to alert them to the imperatives of their times and instead substituting our charming but outdated assumptions for the realistic assessments they require of us.

Such realistic assessments, even when we learn to make and provide them for our students, will hardly serve as adequate alternatives to meaningful goals within the medium. Nor will it be anything more than a stopgap measure to divert the energies of the more practical among them to such related areas as curatorship, historiography, criticism, and conservation, since those are ultimately no less self-limiting as employable skills than the professional exploration of one's own visual psyche.

I would suggest that we can direct these students along either of two broad courses. Those who wish to photograph along purely self-expressive lines should be clearly informed of the severe limitations of career options in that field, and should be urged to develop other means of economic self-support. They should also receive extensive instruction in those skills which are essential to professional art photography — exhibition design, book layout and production, and teaching. And they should be

prodded into the exploration of alternatives to the museum/gallery/monograph circuit in which so much art photography is presently trapped.

Those who wish to earn their living through their craft should be urged to develop an involvement with and expertise in one or more other fields of study in which photography plays a significant role. I am speaking here — as I have elsewhere — of the concept of interdisciplinary studies. It is a concept that appears to threaten many of those involved in photography education. I say this because I have seen precious little dialogue on this subject over the past ten years despite the fact that an increasing number of other disciplines — sociology, anthropology, psychology, and history among them — are becoming increasingly aware of their involvement with and frequent dependence on photography.

I presume the resistance to this concept arises because it undermines the widely-held and much-cherished assumption that elevation to the rank of Art Photographer relieves one of any obligation to develop and broaden one's world view, renders unnecessary any demonstrable connection between one's images and other modes of understanding or communicating, and entirely eliminates the tedious necessity of reading. I assume further that the concept is maligned because fewer and fewer of those in photography seem to know much about anything other than photography, yet take it for granted that that is all they need to know. When such conceptual blinders are added to an already monocular vision, the doors of perception begin to close.

Facing up to the challenge of interdisciplinary studies in photography will require much painstaking reassessment of our educational assumptions, priorities, and methodologies. It will also require drastic, even brutal, upgrading of the minimal and mediocre standards of research, preparation, thinking and articulation to which students of photography are presently held. No part of that process will make anyone involved in it happy. But there is no way of avoiding that challenge without becoming irrelevant to the medium's future.

Concurrently, an increase in what is called "leisure time" is beginning to take

place. This is happening partly as the result of a frozen job market in which there is not enough full-time work to go around, and partly as the result of voluntary changes in our national work patterns. The consequence will be that more people than ever before will be turning to the creative/expressive/communicative media as outlets for their energies. Photography will certainly be among these.

A dramatic increase in coherent and effective adult-education programming in photography will be needed to match this surge of interest and its remarkable potential. I see that potential as at least two-fold. It will accelerate the breakdown of the traditional distinction between amateur and serious photographers — a we-they construct which unproductively pits plebes against elitists. The distinction between well-educated amateur photographers and well-educated career photographers will become an increasingly narrow one, probably no wider than the ersatz sheepskin on which the latter's diplomas are printed. This change may also enable us to influence a constantly growing core of people from all walks of life and assist them in becoming active rather than passive in their relation to visual communication. We can do this by teaching them photography as a means of self-expression, as a tool with which to probe into their world and into the nature of vision itself. This, in turn, is likely to lead to an increased interest in integrating photography into the educational process at progressively earlier stages, which will bring with it the need for trained teachers with a solid grounding in visual education from childhood through adolescence.

In such a context, photography education is likely to find itself serving purposes linked quite directly to the medium's inherent nature as a democratic tool for expression and communication. We should keep in mind that any true democratizing of creativity does not necessitate the equalizing of all creative activity and its reduction to the level of mediocrity of the lowest common denominator. It does involve offering each and every individual the opportunity to have his or her creative abilities respected, nourished, and amplified as an ongoing function within the larger structures of life.

That is a difficult path to tread. It involves fundamental reformulations of our concepts of creativity and education, and requires the abandonment of our stereotypes as to what being an artist is all about. So far, we have tended to take the easier road —

and have thereby created an already overcrowded class of specialists in self-expression who feed on sinecures in the profession of teaching, to which they have no commitment and in which they have no training; who feed on patronage from the privileged wealthy with their institutional fronts; who feed on public grant monies extracted from other human beings whom our culture has turned into worker drones.

Are those the unique understandings to be drawn from the medium of photography? Is it possible that we have subverted that medium by ignoring its essences and conforming it to the shape of the "high" arts? What meaningful structures can we truly expect to erect upon such decadent and self-defeating premises? Have we been building towards the future, or away from it?

Finally, let me say — as, again, I have said on many previous occasions — that there is little purpose in encouraging people to express articulately their emotions, perceptions and understandings through photography if their ability to do so is societally and/or governmentally restricted. The right to what I have elsewhere termed "freedom of vision" has never been legally established as an accepted corollary to freedom of speech, and even the latter freedom is all too often embattled. Currently there are a considerable number of lawsuits and other incidents which revolve around the right to make, publish, and disseminate photographic imagery of various kinds.

The issue is censorship, in one form or another. As a rule, these incidents are directly traceable to the Burger Supreme Court's decision which established "local community standards" as the basis for obscenity prosecution. As I predicted on the occasion of that decision, it has begun to have its inhibiting effect not only on literature but on photography as well. I believe that the situation will get worse, not better.

So I suggest that it would be in the best interests of this organization and its constituency to establish a task force centered around the issue of freedom of vision. This task force should be charged with studying existing statutes pertinent to freedom of vision; with compiling a history of censorship cases which bear on photography and the other visual media; with keeping track of present-day incidents and reporting on them regularly to the membership; with recommending appropriate legislation to protect the

right of image-makers to make and present their work without political or legal repression, and legislation to protect the right of the public to freely view and purchase such work; and with recommending specific test cases in which the SPE might take on the role of amicus curiae.

In short, I am proposing that we become the most effective possible lobby for freedom of vision. I suggest further that, as educators in a visual medium, we accept as part of our responsibility to our students and our medium the inculcation of that right. The delusion that photography — or, at least, "pure" photography — was somehow exempt and disconnected from politics should have been cast aside when the Nazis stopped August Sander from completing his life's work and directed him towards landscape photography. Indeed, that delusion should never have arisen. It is time to dispel it, and it is both natural and appropriate that the task falls to us.

Surely these are not the only problems ahead for those involved with education in photography. No doubt there are others already visible, and still more which have yet to surface. But I believe that these will be among the central issues of the next decade for all of us.

I did not come here with ready-made solutions to these problems — this speech is not a test. But the decade ahead certainly is. The answers to it, right or wrong, lie within us and the courses of action we choose. I hope that what I have said here tonight provokes some discussion of these issues among us. And I hope that in 1988 I will be able to read over these words and discover that they were not entirely irrelevant to the decade they anticipate.

Thank you.

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