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**After Critical Mass, What?:
A State-of-the-Craft Report on Photography Criticism**

by A. D. Coleman

I regret that I didn't get to hear Luc Sante's keynote speech two nights ago.¹ Oh, I was in the auditorium, like most of you, but Mr. Sante hasn't yet learned how to speak into a microphone, so I only caught about one word in three. I gather I wasn't alone in that condition — good to know at my age.

From what I could gather in this fashion, it seemed Mr. Sante was reading us a chapter from his book-in-progress about his postcard collection. All very well and good, I suppose, if you have a high tolerance for self-indulgent star turns (which I don't), but in no way a presentation responsible to the fundamental obligations of a keynote address.² So far as I'm concerned, the Society for Photographic Education got rooked yet again in this regard,³ and this conference's keynote has yet to be sounded.

¹ "A Letter from the Past," March 11, 1999.

² I'd consider those obligations effectively summed up in this definition from *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*: "an address designed to present the issues of primary interest to an assembly and often to arouse unity and enthusiasm." To put a finer point on it: speaking to the issue(s) of a conference's theme, establishing a resonant tone for the proceedings, identifying central issues for the conferees to debate, setting an agenda for the organization in regard to the subject of the conference.

³ To my great surprise, but with a certain sad symmetry, the same conference's concluding talk, "Women Writing on Photography from the 19th Century to the Present," organized and sponsored by the Women's Caucus of the S.P.E. and delivered by the U. K.'s Val Williams on March 13, proved equally appalling: brief, shapeless, unconsidered, trivial in content, patronizing to its audience — indeed, the single most inept presentation I've ever witnessed in all my years at S.P.E. conferences.

As it happens, though it wasn't my assignment, or even my intention, I ended up drafting a keynote talk for this event. So, for considerably less than whatever Mr. Sante soaked us for — in fact, for only the S.P.E.'s standard waiver of my conference registration fee — I'm now going to deliver what I think of as this 36th Annual S.P.E. National Conference's alternative keynote address; and I'll leave it up to you to choose whichever you think best suits this auspicious occasion.

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My thanks to Trudy Wilner Stack and the Society for Photographic Education not only for organizing a national conference devoted to a subject very near and dear to me, but also for giving me this opportunity to contribute to the proceedings. I'm particularly pleased to be delivering this lecture in Tucson, a city that has served me well as a writer. I spent three extremely productive months here two years back as a scholar in residence at the Center for Creative Photography — editing two of my new books, doing research toward an essay on William Mortensen for a recent CCP monograph, and working with Nancy Solomon, Amy Rule, and several interns on the 27-year bibliography of my writings that the Center will publish this summer. Beyond that, Tucson has a special place in my heart because my archive is now housed at the CCP, available for others in the field to use.

I'd like to dedicate my talk today to my friends and colleagues Carl Chiarenza, recovering nicely from a mild heart attack, and Donna-Lee Phillips, missing in action.

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History informs me that one gets to say this only once in a lifetime, and then at one's peril. Taking that into account, I say — not with dismay, defeat, and foreboding but with enthusiasm and hope: *Après moi, le déluge*.⁴

⁴ "Attributed variously to Madame de Pompadour and Louis XV, after the crushing defeat of the French at Rossbach, 1757 . . . but the expression itself was proverbial long before 1757." Bergen Evans, ed., *Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Wings Books, 1993), p. 162.

As some of you know, I've addressed the S.P.E. periodically on issues relating to criticism and other forms of writing about photography. You can find the texts of several of those talks in my various books of essays, which I'll be signing at Booth 15 in the Exhibits Fair after this session. For this occasion, I decided to revisit parts of a parallel talk I gave almost exactly twenty years ago. I titled it "Photography Criticism: A State-of-the-Craft Report," and presented it at the Photographers Forum symposium "Contemporary Trends in Photographic Criticism," held at the New School for Social Research in New York on May 18, 1979.⁵ My remarks today will look at some of what I had to say then in the light of the subsequent twenty years' worth of activities — mine, and everyone else's — and reconsider some of what I proposed two decades back. Additionally, Trudy specifically asked me to speak about "what it has meant to be a photography critic, writing about the medium for so long, and in so many contexts." Which I'm glad to do, and will weave into these comments. And I hope to provoke (and will leave time for) a lively question period at the end of my prepared text.

Before I begin, let me reassure or disappoint you by announcing that it's not my purpose here today to either praise or castigate any of my other colleagues, either individually or clustered in their various tendencies — at least not for any positions they've taken on any critical issues concerning photography, photographers, and photographs. As I've said before, many times, better bad writing about photography than no writing at all. Thirty-one years ago, when I began my column for the *Village Voice*, hardly anyone in this country or abroad wrote regularly about photography with a truly critical eye, apart from Minor White and two famous husband-and-wife teams of historians, the Newhalls and the Gernsheims, all of them now dead. A few of you here may recall the woeful paucity of that discourse (though its level was consistently high).

⁵ In *Tarnished Silver: After the Photo Boom, Essays and Lectures 1979-1989* (Midmarch Arts Press, 1996), pp. 69-73.

That problem lies well behind us; indeed, that situation no doubt seems unimaginable to those who've come more recently to the discourse and find themselves swamped with more writing — even with more thoughtful and substantial writing — than they can possibly absorb. We now have a rich, diverse, and polyvocal dialogue going that seems unlikely ever to taper off. And this dialogue has now widened into the art magazines, as well as specialized journals in media studies, communication theory, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, plus other venues. I think that's a change for the better, and encourage anyone and everyone to find the gaps in the literature, the holes in the line, and the unoccupied positions — both intellectual and professional — and fill them. Come one, come all, I say; the more the merrier.

By the way, the historianship of the medium, criticism's counterpart and sibling, has also vastly and comparably expanded and improved, to everyone's benefit. Much of what I have to say today pertains as well to my colleagues on that side of the fence; many of us alternate between those two hats, in fact. I think that area of inquiry has improved itself hugely during these recent years, both here and elsewhere. However, I want to note my concern that continuing evidence of our pernicious inferiority complex in this field remains rampant; we still have a tendency to seek validation of photography by sucking up to any artist in any other medium who ever picked up a camera. The drooling of historians over the minimal, inept and trivial heaps of unredacted imagery left behind by Edgar Degas, René Magritte, and Josef Albers exemplifies this tendency, and the impulse behind such gross exaggeration of truly minor accomplishment — at the cost of resources that would be far better spent on examining substantial bodies of work by the medium's many under-scrutinized major contributors — belongs on the analyst's couch, not in lavishly funded traveling exhibitions on the walls of museums or in the pages of overinflated, oversized and overpriced monographs.

I guess I lied about castigating people, didn't I?

Let me add that much of today's criticism of all media fundamentally misunderstands the relation of theory to praxis. Theory informs praxis; praxis tests theory. If theory is not continually subject to question and testing, because it holds itself above challenge and cannot possibly be wrong, then it has ceased to be theory — if it ever really was such in the first place — and has become dogma. This is not yet the heyday of true critical theorizing about photography, for all the endless dense writing and apparent theory-driven art. It's the heyday of dogmas masquerading as theories. If we hope to ever get to that sunrise of theorizing, we need first to remember and maintain these distinctions.

I also want to urge those of my colleagues who write occasionally but not steadily to write more, to write more frequently, and to learn to listen more closely to their voices on the page. Two or three essays a year don't constitute sufficient exercise to keep those muscles in fit condition. One reason so much critical writing — especially that produced by academics — is so stilted and impenetrable is that its authors simply haven't been writing often enough, and therefore haven't learned to hear and modulate the sound of their own written expression.

As a side effect of this, students come to believe that such strained language is expected of them, and mimic it dutifully, exacerbating the already considerable problems I and others face in teaching them to express their ideas clearly. So please set the example by working more regularly at the craft of prose. One benefit of this — aside from the increased pleasure we'll have in reading you — is that you'll produce more of the essays on topics important to you than you do now, essays that only you would take the time to write, and these will amplify further the literature of this medium and expand its field of ideas.

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I began that 1979 discussion by announcing that a stage of critical mass in photography criticism had been reached. That's still the case, indeed even more so

today than then. So, if we've achieved critical mass, what might we do with it? I want to address my comments to a variety of related issues in those regards.

To begin with, though we're of various gender persuasions and sexual proclivities, live white folks of European descent still constitute the preponderance of those presently writing criticism of this medium. Though I don't think this results from any bias in the field, or any closing of doors to people of other cultural origins, it remains a fact. So we need to recognize that aspect of our condition, and accept its implication that critical mass for some does not automatically mean critical mass for all. I don't know what to do about that situation, except to put on the coffee pot and put out the welcome mat, but I'm certainly open to suggestion and more than willing to help change the complexion of this craft in any way I can.

I think that would be a vitalizing way to enlarge our number. At the same time, I think we still need — today no less than in 1979, and indeed even more so — to also swell the ranks of writers capable of articulating the crucial issues in photography in an accessible, non-jargonized, engaging and unpedantic language, in order to bring them before an intelligent general audience. In that light, I want to welcome to our fold such unexpected new colleagues as former senator Alfonse "Pothole" D'Amato, the can't-be-the-late-too-soon-for-me Sen. Jesse Helms, and the far-right Rev. Donald Wildmon, all of whom (albeit unintentionally) have made public discussion of some key issues relating to photography into matters of political consequence and nation-wide debate. Deeply envious as I am of their ability to prompt a dialogue about photography on that scale, I'm more concerned with the shortage of people both capable of disputing them knowledgeably in regard to photographic issues and positioned to do so in the same media through which they've made their cases to the citizenry. They get to preach to the American people on national TV; we're still stuck, most of us, preaching to the choir in small-circulation art and photography magazines and scholarly journals.

Changing this situation will require the active seeking out of skilled young writers with an interest in photography, and the educating of them as articulate public spokespersons prepared to argue, in the larger agora, the complex issues of lens imagery and its relation to culture. That's never been attempted anywhere, so far as I know — not even in the few doctoral-level programs in photography studies in this country. As a result, truth be told, if I were asked to name someone thoroughly grounded in photography and capable of sustaining a regular column in an influential newspaper, I couldn't think of anyone, aside from the few of us you all know who've already done or are presently doing that. On this score, things are better than they were in 1979, certainly better than they were in '68 — but not by much.

And the sad fact is that neither the schools that offer advanced programs in photography nor the schools with art history or media studies or cultural studies departments devote any attention at all to encouraging such critical writing about photography. If not them, who? If not now, when?

Perhaps doing that will require us to rethink the very ways in which we write. Since I continue to cast most of my professional work therein, I certainly don't assume we've exhausted the usefulness of the form of the traditional ratiocinative essay, any more than I believe we've drained the full potential and utility of traditional documentary strategies. But I do think it's time for at least some of us to make things hot for ourselves, and for our readers, by pushing the envelope of form.

I see evidence of that inclination in myself, particularly in the poetry and creative nonfiction I've come back to writing over the past decade and in some of my introductions, afterwords, and other accompaniments to monographs and artists' books by others: Connie Imboden, Tiziana di Silvestro, Boaz Tal, Robert Stivers, for example. Certainly one can find a prime example of it in one of the best novels ever written about

photography, art critic David Galloway's *A Family Album* from 1978,⁶ which is at once a brilliant fiction and a model of close critical attention to specific photographs. One can see it also in Michael Lesy's various experiments with collage form; in John Berger's collaborations with Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* from 1967⁷ and *A Seventh Man* from 1975,⁸ plus other subsequent projects of his; in Max Kozloff's inventive 1984 imaginary dialogue over the work of Joel-Peter Witkin, "Contention Between Two Critics About a Disagreeable Beauty":⁹ in Bill Jay's recent, delicious parody *Pimlico 61*;¹⁰ and in Eugenia Parry's fascinating suite of texts, "A Hundred Different Stories: The Art of Photography," used as wall labels for the 1998 exhibition "Photography's Multiple Roles: Art, Document, Market, Science" that I saw in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, which originated it; these formally provocative texts are also included in that show's excellent catalogue.¹¹

Looks like I also lied about praising people, eh? Well, as long as I'm at it, let me say a few words about James Hugunin, someone I know only in passing, and with whom I have no professional affiliation whatsoever. He and I haven't seen each other or made contact in years. But I think about Jim a lot lately. Here's why.

I'm at a stage of my own development where I find myself frequently asking how I can make things hot for myself, put the pressure on, find some paths of growth and change. One dependable answer, of course, is simply to think more, study more, enrich and deepen my current set of understandings, sharpen and refine my current approach to praxis, hone my craft. But another is to strike out in some new, unexpected direction. (These aren't necessarily contradictory, by the way; and, as a practicing Buddhist, I tend

⁶ (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.)

⁷ (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967.)

⁸ (New York: The Viking Press, 1975.)

⁹ First published in *Artforum*, February 1984; reprinted in his book *The Privileged Eye: Essays on Photography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), pp. 69-90.

¹⁰ (Tucson, AZ: Nazraeli Press, 1998).

¹¹ (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1998.)

toward a both/and rather than an either/or approach.) The trouble is that one can't usually see that new direction from the path on which one is accustomed to standing.

As I look back over the past few decades, Jim Hugunin has been the one who most consistently proposed alternative stylistic strategies as a way of enlivening and renovating the discourse. He's been the most structurally and stylistically experimental of us all. I think here of those weird scripts he wrote in which Jesus, Marx, and Freud contemplated someone's work, or that odd desktop-published book he did with Robert Fichter, or what he's done in print form with *U-Turn* magazine, which I believe he still publishes irregularly, and with the version thereof that he now produces on the World Wide Web.¹² He hasn't always been successful, in my opinion, but he's never been less than provocative, and innovative. For me, what Jim's experiments represent in toto is the proposition that the ratiocinative argument in traditional essay form may be a cage for criticism, that rethinking the very form and style we take for granted might be a prime strategy for reshaping our critical activity in a productive way.

Fanciful as this may sound (though not meant as self-aggrandizement), I sometimes see myself skilled at yet stuck in a certain mode of performance, much as David Bowie found himself trapped after *Ziggy Stardust*; and recently I've imagined putting myself in Jim's hands for a radical makeover, in the same way that Bowie knocked on Brian Eno's door. He's certainly someone I'd go to hear if he were presenting at this or any other conference I attended, and, if he's not here today, I want to invoke his work's spirit as a useful goad to us all.

This necessarily raises the question of whether criticism can be an art form. Despite what I've just said, I tend to think it's not an art but a craft, and that the works I've just cited function in some curious, exciting middle ground, unabashedly neither fish nor fowl. As a working critic, I believe that the work about which I write is primary and

¹² <http://www.uturn.org/>

my writing secondary; I'm the symbiotic suckerfish on the shark, keeping it healthy by cleaning off the parasitic algae. We can — and for millenia did — have art without art criticism; but there's no art criticism without art, though much of the current generation of critics seems to prefer art that's utterly dispensable and uninteresting to look at, which may not be substantively different from no art at all. At a regional S.P.E. conference in San Francisco back in 1981, Fred Lonidier called me "a nineteenth-century critic" for espousing these views. If that's true, so be it. But Fred could be wrong, of course, as I'm sure he'd be the first to admit.

In any case, because I now write about photographs, photographers, and photography wearing two different hats, I can tell you that when I'm in my critical gear I am absolutely duty-bound to address the specifics of the photograph under consideration faithfully and accurately, whatever I may think of it. And when I'm wearing my poetic cap and carrying my poetic license, writing a poem or a piece of creative nonfiction (or possibly fiction, though I haven't tried that yet) inspired by or otherwise linked to a photograph, such fidelity to the facts of the work is merely an option, not an obligation. If I want to change something in the photograph's description to better suit my story, I do so with no sense of guilt, not even a twinge. And though some autobiography creeps into my critical writing, and though my old friend Michael Martone calls autobiography "the highest form of fiction," I have a clear sense — perhaps too clear, for some purposes — of the boundaries between these forms, and am rigorous about not violating them in my critiques.

Appreciations are another story, incidentally; they're more collaborative with the photographers involved, and — always with their permission, as their monographs are really their solo performances — I sometimes act on the urge to move into right-lobe mode. So, while I readily permit the entry of chance elements into my poetry, I'm not quite ready to apply, say, William Burroughs's cut-up technique to my critical writing;

even if the artists under discussion, and the readers, and my editors, would accept that, I'm not sure it would be right, in the deepest sense.

Which may well just mean *not right for me*; and which certainly doesn't gainsay my ability, or anyone else's, to find both ways and occasions on which to experiment as we see fit, so long as we don't breach some fundamental matters of our contract with our readers (to use a phrase from a poet of my acquaintance, the recently deceased Armand Schwerner). So I encourage both myself and my colleagues to try new forms and styles. Anthologies of photo-related fiction, such as Jane Rabb's,¹³ have appeared in recent years. Trudy Wilner Stack, I understand, is currently assembling a major survey of photo-related poetry. Poets, fictioneers and playwrights feel free to write about this medium, its images and its makers. Why shouldn't we be at liberty to poeticize, fictionalize, dramatize our percepts on appropriate occasions?

If I speak about new strategies for criticism, I must speak not only of new approaches to writing but also about the investigation of new media. Most of us still do most of our work, and in many cases all of our work, in print — while (to name a few) the possibilities of radio, audiocassette, broadcast television, videocassette, CD-ROM and the Internet go begging for our attention. John Berger's "Ways of Seeing" program series for the BBC in 1972 — which preceded the more familiar book version — was the first significant effort by a critic to use television as a critical vehicle, and to both utilize its unique capacities as a medium and at the same time deconstruct it. I know of nothing near comparable to that achievement since, though the book version of Chris Townsend's *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*,¹⁴ a new TV series from the U.K., gives me hope that Berger's project may have found a worthy successor at last. Still, that's a long time between serious explorations. A few of my own essays

¹³ See Rabb's *Literature & Photography: Interactions 1840-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), and her *The Short Story & Photography, 1880's-1980's* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

¹⁴ (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998).

have been included in CD-ROM projects, but I know of no use of CD-ROM for photo-critical purposes, certainly nothing that even uses that technology's capacities in as intelligently analytical a way as Lewis Baltz's *The Deaths in Newport*.¹⁵ Hugunin and I run complex Websites, and Bill Jay has taught "distance learning" courses by email, but I know of no other of my colleagues who's actively involved in cyberspatial projects. These are media used daily and treated as commonplace by a vast and diversified international audience, at least some sizeable segments of which are exactly the people we should be reaching with our ideas. We're less than two years from the 21st century. Do we intend to maintain our print-only tendencies into the next millenium? Do we really mean to define ourselves as irrelevant that way, and to manifest our technophobia to boot?

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This reminds me that Kathleen Campbell, editor of the S.P.E.'s journal, *Exposure*, called me recently to consult with her over a discovery she'd made: that the S.P.E. was accepting payments from an outfit called UnCover for the licensing of rights to distribute electronically some of that journal's content, for profit, without the knowledge and approval of the authors, who of course own their work's copyright. I was pleased that Kathleen caught this, and advised her that S.P.E. was acting illegally by violating copyright in accepting such payments, and should immediately return any such monies and formally terminate any relationship with UnCover, which unscrupulous corporation is presently the subject of massive individual and class-action lawsuits by writers around the country.

I'm familiar with this set of issues because, as a working writer, I have a vested interest in copyright law: the protections it affords make my livelihood and the production of my work possible. I teach seminars on contract negotiation, copyright law,

¹⁵ (Amsterdam: Paradox, 1995).

and the licensing of subsidiary rights to intellectual property for the National Writers Union, of which I'm a founding member. I do all that because I'm a professional writer, and because solidarity on these issues among all who produce original work is essential if we're to survive the onslaught of the multinational conglomerates now gobbling up intellectual property like ravenous raptors. So my actions in these regards are in the best interests of my field, as well as in my own self-interest.

Memorably, I once was roundly attacked by the inimitable Catherine Lord in the pages of *Afterimage* for trying to "professionalize the S.P.E." Well, you'll be relieved to hear that I've long since given up that hopeless effort; though members continue to list it on their vitae as if it were a professional credential, the S.P.E. hasn't been a professional society for close to thirty years. Rather, it's photography's equivalent of the Audubon Society: twenty-five bucks and an interest in birds and they'll make you a member (and they'll waive the interest in birds). Consequently, membership in the S.P.E. carries about as much weight as a credential in photography as membership in the Audubon Society does among ornithologists.

At the risk of finding myself chastised once again for my professionalism, I feel compelled to say that there's such a thing as the business life of the mind, and on that score most of my colleagues — especially the academics, but unfortunately even many of my fellow working critics — have lights on and nobody home. Concerning the state of literary criticism, Saul Bellow back in 1966 wrote, "the salaried professor will supply literary articles cheaply and has all but wiped out his professional competitors."¹⁶ This is now notoriously the case in media other than literature, including the fine arts, and certainly including photography. Which is to say that academics — and any others who disregard contractual issues involving payment, surrender of copyright, transfer of electronic rights, and other bedrock matters — function as scab labor, and are either too

¹⁶ Quoted in McGrath, Charles, ed., *Books of the Century: A Hundred Years of Authors, Ideas, and Literature* (New York: Times Books, 1998), p. 49.

ignorant or too dumb to realize it. (Ignorance is a condition, I remind you, whereas dumbness is a commitment.)

In the past two years I've resigned a column in a New York weekly that I'd built for more than nine years, a platform that gave me a substantial New York readership and brought in about \$6000 annually, because the real-estate magnate who publishes that paper demanded that I donate to him all electronic rights to my column. And during the same two-year period I've turned down well over \$10,000 worth of one-shot assignments because the publishers wanted my copyright or other rights in perpetuity. Did you know that more and more publishers these days, including some museums and university presses, are making demands on authors (and on photographers) that treat them like field hands, demands that are inappropriate, unscrupulous, and abusive — hostile to the very survival of those of us who put ideas into embodied forms? I've told the editors at such publications and publishing houses never to call me again. I will name some of them: the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* from the American Indian Studies Center of UCLA; Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown; Abbeville Press; the National Geographic Society; the *New York Observer*; and *Artforum*. They deserve your censure, and your boycott, as well as mine.

Well, there I go again, castigating. But I find it both shocking and disheartening to watch my colleagues — many of them with leftist pretensions — cave in to management and capital without a fight, even to kowtow to them, snapping up the assignments I've turned down on principle. My sense of kinship with them, and my normal allegiance to them, and my respect for them, have gravely diminished over the past few years. It behooves my colleagues to make themselves aware of the ramifications of these matters, and to see themselves as labor, professional independent workers, in the inevitable contest between labor and management. It behooves them to stop blindly feeding the appetites of management for free-lance fee slaves, thereby undercutting the efforts of those of us who pursue this profession full-time to assure ourselves a decent

living. And it behooves you to inform yourselves on these matters — for your own sakes, for the sakes of your fellow toilers in the vineyards, and for the sakes of your students. Mistakes like the S.P.E.'s brief fling with UnCover should not happen in the first place, and could not if my colleagues in writing, and all of you, were keeping abreast of these issues. Here is where the true professional societies — the American Society of Media Photographers, the Authors Guild, PEN American Center — can be of service to you. They're all interested in working with you. They're all in the phone book. They're all on the Web. I've now put you on notice. You've run out of excuses.

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Moving to a quite different subject: As I noted earlier, this now polyvocal critical dialogue has turned international. Yet that has not resulted in much intercultural exchange of critical opinion, and here those of us stateside strike me as more at fault in some ways than our counterparts north and south of our borders or across the great waters.

Most educated Europeans and people from other foreign cultures speak and read at least two languages, often more, with English among the more common of their second languages. They can usually read us, therefore, at least when they can find our work. And those I've met who are involved in photography do read critics and historians from the U.S. regularly; they're familiar with our version of the discourse.

Embarrassingly, the reverse is not the case. Few of my colleagues here in the States speak or read a second language fluently; and, of those who do, few take the trouble to read the work of their foreign colleagues who write in that language, or correspond or otherwise make collegial contact with them. Indeed, few of them regularly read the steadily growing number of journals from elsewhere that publish either in English only or bilingually in English — *Imago*, *Katalog*, *European Photography*, *Luna Cornea*, *Creative Camera*, and *Portfolio*, to name a few.

At lunch in New York last week, the French critic, historian, and curator Gilles Mora asked me to explain this. "It's not xenophobia," I told him, "it's just laziness." I hope I was being accurate rather than charitable. Whatever the case, it's mortifying, and I urge my colleagues to take this hint and shape themselves up.

Long ago — back around 1980 — I decided to recover my my own childhood fluency in French, brush up my halting college German, try my hand at Spanish and Italian, and begin to familiarize myself with as much writing from elsewhere as I could. I also started actively contacting my colleagues from abroad by mail, meeting with them when they came to the States, and getting myself to their countries whenever such opportunity presented itself. As a result, my writing and thinking — and, I believe, my usefulness to my readers — have been deeply nourished and enriched. (Also as a result, I've been widely translated and published outside the States. So if my colleagues need any persuasion as to the purely selfish benefits of such efforts, they can consider that.)

Even so, of course, I have a problem — and it's not restricted to me, or even to my U.S. colleagues; it's endemic to the field. The literature of our medium is now created in dozens of languages. None of us speak more than a handful of those. And very little of that literature gets translated. This is problematic for scholars, and also for teachers and students. You cannot go to a bookstore and find an anthology in English of even the most important French and German criticism of photography, for example; and the French and Germans can't buy a parallel anthology of writings from this country rendered into their native tongues.

To rectify this, we need some far more extensive and systematic program of translation and publication of key writings on photography and related matters than we presently have in operation. The piecemeal way through which this now happens, when it happens at all, cannot suffice. It's the prime obstacle in the path toward a truly international dialogue on this medium.

This problem can't be solved unilaterally by any single country, though one country can establish an experimental model and lead the way. I've no vested interest in that country being the United States, but here's where I live and work, so here's where I've decided to start the ball rolling.

What we need is a genuinely international translation and publication program that involves every nation in which photography criticism, historianship, and theory are being generated. This will call for some umbrella organization (of which I do not want to be the director). I believe we can best get this going by calling an open convention of writers on photography, from every discipline, of every persuasion and of all nationalities — and of their counterparts, those who edit and publish photo-related periodicals and books and CD-ROMS and videotapes and other media.

Such a gathering has never happened in the history of the medium. The only precedent for it I know of is the 1949 founding convention of the International Association of Critics of Art (A.I.C.A.), shortly after the end of World War II. I could talk to you at length about how such an event could be constructed and what it might accomplish. I prefer to just plant the seed now, and announce that I'm willing to work on this with anyone who's interested.

What would I myself hope to see eventuate from such a convocation? Beyond the fruitfulness of the resulting contact, and the sense of the actual size of the field that we'd all gain, I think such a group could profitably contemplate putting into place, country by country, an interlocking cluster of variant versions of the following project, whose crude outline I've just begun to propose to various potential sponsors. What interests me here is furthering this project, not necessarily leading it.

Photography's "little" magazines — of which there have been quite a few since 1968 — have served all of us well. Certainly they've served me well as vehicles for some of my work, and during one difficult phase of my professional life served as my primary outlets. I've tried to serve them well in turn, by founding one of them, by working

on their boards, and by providing them with essays for little or no compensation. But this project goes well beyond that. Let me simply read to you the working draft of the idea that I've now floated informally past one highly-placed executive at a photo-industry giant that will remain nameless, and that I plan to refine, elaborate, and keep floating — past corporations and foundations — until I get a bite.

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**A proposal for a support project for
the “little” magazines of photography**

As in literature and the visual arts, photography has long had its “little” magazines; Stieglitz’s *Camera Work* and Minor White’s *aperture* are the best-known examples. Many of these have come and gone since Stieglitz founded his in the early years of this century. Only one of those founded between then and the late 1960s, *aperture*, still survives. Yet a number of such publications born circa 1970 and thereafter continue to publish; half a dozen have celebrated their 20th anniversaries in recent years.

These publications serve as the heart of the literature of this medium, steadily pumping its lifeblood, our writings. Few researchers ever look back at past issues of the photo-specific newsstand glossies — *Popular Photography*, *Petersen’s PhotoGraphic*, et al. The quality of their editorial content was always negligible, excepting a few aimed at the high end of the market (*Camera Arts*, *Camera 35*, *Camera & Darkroom*). And most of those, in any case, can be accessed readily through the library system, as they received wide distribution and were subscribed to by many libraries.

The “little” magazines were more ephemeral; smaller in circulation base, shorter-lived for the most part. Yet it’s to these that researchers, scholars, students turn to learn about photography’s history, to read serious commentary about photographs and photography. It’s these that track the medium’s creative developments, the work of

emerging artists, the field of ideas around photography. They're essential contributors to the literature of photography.

Those of them now defunct are hard to find. There's no central repository for material relevant to them.¹⁷ (Canada, by contrast, has already archived the materials pertinent to one of its most important such journals, *Ovo Photo*.¹⁸) The existing ones receive erratic distribution; it's rare that one can find a complete run of any of them in a library. And they scrape by financially, always on the brink of collapse.

This project aims at making a substantial contribution to the field by subsidizing several coordinated projects in support of these "little" magazines, past and present. Among the efforts it would undertake:

1. Fund the creation of an archive devoted to this material at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, AZ, or elsewhere.
2. Fund the seeking out and acquisition for that archive of relevant material from now-defunct periodicals 1955-present: *Contemporary Photographer*, *Fox*, *Images*, *Ink*, *Boston Review of Photography*, *Photograph*, *New York Photographer*, *Camera Lucida*, *Views: A New England Journal of Photography*, *Picture*, *Camera & Darkroom*, *Lens' On Campus*, etc.
3. Fund a research and oral-history project to gather as much information about these publications as possible from those still living who were involved in their production.
4. Subsidize the following projects in relation to the existing U.S. "little" magazines: the *Center Quarterly*, *The Photo Review*, *San Francisco CameraWork*,

¹⁷ There are, of course, libraries whose holdings include complete or extended runs of issues of these journals; the CCP in Tucson, the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, the George Eastman House in the same city, and the International Center of Photography in New York, to name a few. My concern is preserving the material beyond what made it into print.

¹⁸ See my report, "The OVO Archives: A "little" magazine in a larger context," in *Camera & Darkroom Photography*, Vol. 15, no.12 (December 1993), page 67.

Photo Metro, *Nueva Luz*, *Frame/Work*, *Fotophile*, *Spot*, possibly *Afterimage* (the last-named may already be taken care of in most of these regards), and several others:

- A. Fund the purchase, collation, binding, and shipping to select libraries and art/photo institutions of complete sets of back issues, to be donated thereto in your corporation's or foundation's name.
- B. Fund the donation of 250-500 1-year trial subscriptions to each of these journals to select libraries and art/photo institutions, to be donated thereto in your corporation's or foundation's name.
- C. Fund the editing, design, and production of paperback collections of the "Best of" the writing that appeared in these journals (e.g., "The Best of the Photo Review, 1978-1998") for bookstore sale, classroom use, subscription bonuses and other purposes.
- D. Advance-purchase, at cost, copies of those books in bulk as corporate or foundation giveaways and for donation in your name to various institutions.
- E. Fund the translation of those books into some key languages: Spanish, French, German, Japanese. And fund their publication in those languages, in print and on the Internet, with a particular eye on the educational and research markets.¹⁹

I have no idea where this will go, if indeed it goes anywhere. But I think it's another idea whose time has come, and I plan to pursue it, and I can use all the help I can get in actualizing it.

Any volunteers?

Thank you.

¹⁹ At the suggestion of Nathan Lyons, who was in attendance at the lecture, I plan to add the comprehensive indexing of these publications to this proposal.

(This is the complete text of an address delivered at the 1999 National Conference of the Society for Photography Education in Tucson, AZ, on March 13, 1999.)