

for LONDON INDEPENDENT PHOTOGRAPHY

FLIP INSIGHTS



ISSUE 1 : DAVID BATE

Welcome to the first issue of fLIP INSIGHTS.

fLIP INSIGHTS is produced as an on-line supplement to the fLIP magazine published by London Independent Photography. Here we present in-depth interviews and feature articles that have appeared in previous editions of fLIP that, due to extra content, require more space than we have in our print magazine.

In this first issue we are delighted to present the full text of the discussions with David Bate from the University of Westminster, London and Arun Misra editor of fLIP magazine.

The interview first appeared in fLIP 46, Summer 2020.

Where is Photography Headed?



A Decisive Gesture
© David Bate

'Sometimes it is an important role to re-imagine our experience, not just of reality but our dreams and existence. There is a politics of the imagination here, to wonder how it could be otherwise....'

The fLIP interview: David Bate

Arun Misra, Editor



*Professor David Bate
through cyberspace*
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At the time of this interview the United Kingdom was in full lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic. The country was gripped with fear, anxiety and grief. By 30th June there were over 44,000 deaths. Social distancing was the norm and social contact was limited. With severe restriction on mobility and meetings we agreed to have our discussion via cyberspace.

David is a pre-eminent critical thinker. He is Professor of Photography at the University of Westminster, the author of several highly acclaimed books on photography and art, and an educator and practitioner with an international reputation. We spoke about David's formative experiences, photography education, and his views on current issues and challenges.

Arun Misra *How did you first become interested in photography?*

David Bate I started photography as a teenager. Probably like many other people I bought a camera when I started to travel and wanted to take pictures of things. It was a SLR film camera. You have to imagine or remember a period with no digital cameras or mobile phones and film was itself not cheap. The only access to representation, aside from picture postcards, magazines and books, was do-it-yourself photography. The first roll of film I shot was mostly of my place of work - at that time in a garage. I recall people finding it strange I took photographs at a work place, rather than on holiday, at family rituals or of friends, etc.

AM *Who were the early influences on your photography? Why?*

DB There was not really much interest in art (or photography) in my family, so I was more or less self-taught. My sources were probably quite diverse, from record covers to magazine and TV, then more central and important than today. I really had no idea what I was doing, or why but I liked it. I made slide shows accompanied by music, sort of 'son et lumiere' as the French call them, often entertaining friends with these projections. I had been interested in story-telling, but I'd call these pieces 'non-narrative sequences' an attempt to develop some kind of coherent visual aesthetic experience, which was not defined by the usual conventions of TV or cinema formats, yet not like a magazine or photography book either. I used colour film, which in those days meant it was not 'fine art' photography, since colour was linked to 'commercial' photography rather than art. So I was a bit out of joint with everything. I later learnt that 'serious' photography was monochrome, no doubt partly because you could more easily process and print yourself.

I say all this with hindsight of course. I had no idea at the time what I was doing. Even to think that it was important was probably something that had not occurred to me, except I enjoyed it all. When I went to local evening classes I was introduced to British photographers, like Bill Brandt and Julia Margaret Cameron, then later the usual American modernist tradition: Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, etc. I suppose the work of Brassai stood out for me, and some Henri Cartier-Bresson. I could relate to these, somehow I was drawn to their anecdotal scenes of 'everyday life', although I do not recall having much desire to imitate them directly, which is often how we learn. I loved the images of Paris at night by Brassai, the enigma in them,

and perhaps the latent sensuality. As you might expect from all that, I gravitated towards street photography as a space to work.

AM *What are your personal photographic passions at the moment?*

DB I am just proofing a monograph book called *Photography as Critical Practice*, which is a collection of some of my own photographic works, projects that toured in galleries internationally or were published at the time, but not currently available. They appear sequentially alongside and interspersed with essays written at about the same time. So it has been an interesting process to put these together. I'd like to select another set of works for another book. Working with commercial galleries, as I did from 1990s until about 2009, meant working on something 'new' (like fashion, art always wants the 'latest'), so spending a little time on the past work has been interesting. The book has a lot of experimental works, for example I had started working on computers with photographs in the early 1990s, but went back to film later on. I am now back working with digital materials, although differently. As always my interest is in images and their relation to subjectivity and social processes, the way that social and private 'psychical' worlds collide or are intertwined through photographic images and language.

AM *Can you talk a bit about your approach to looking at photographic works? What do you look for when looking?*

DB There are probably three modes of looking. One is like everyone else: a transient casual everyday looking, that is, browsing across screens of one sort or another, the images that are part of something, a magazine, advertising billboard, gallery wall, etc. A second is that of a 'concerned viewer', someone who looks in a bit more detail because something about an image interests, fascinates and causes you to look twice. Then a third mode, which comes from art and art history, looking at an image more intently as a mode of analysis, following the way your own eyes and mind drift around it and, at the same time, thinking about what it is that you are looking at, how it is organised, what the eye is drawn to in the different aspects of the picture. There are all kinds of different techniques around this, but it is basically an 'analytic' vision. Some artists or photographers squint at a picture to increase its contrast and look at it for longer, art historians will look at the structure of an image, scrutinize the details and bring all these back together to the gestalt or whole meaning of the image. This last 'analytic' vision ought to be used in post-production



A Badly Handled Thought © David Bate

work too.

Each of these three 'visions' have their own merits and uses, and none are probably only rarely ever completely separated in practice.

AM *In 2018 you were awarded the Royal Photographic Society Education Award for your contribution to education. Can you tell me what you find particularly rewarding about teaching? What transformations do you see in students?*

DB I suppose I still think of myself as a student ... It might sound like a cliché to say that 'I am still

learning', but it is true. And, since higher education is, or should be, a place for the production of knowledge, then it makes sense to be working there. Interaction with students is obviously a crucial part of that, and certainly this has changed over time. The idea that knowledge can be 'bought' like a product is alien to me, it's a struggle and every person has to make it on their own terms. These are highly individual struggles, yet each of these students has something in common as part of a group together. It is often hard to explain how that aspect is important, certainly at MA level. Learning a software or how to print is relatively easy, but knowledge about using these or other techniques intelligently – and this includes what people call being 'creative' with

'We write these trivial events off as accidents, mistakes and silly errors, but Freud recognised a causality to these 'mistakes', of which we are not actually conscious of at the time....'

them – requires a level of work that does not come easily to many. The gratification, if any, comes from the individuals who develop their work into something new and become articulate. So, it is this difficult process of education that is the interesting part, whether it involves practical work, writing and speaking or all of these. It is also wonderful to see so many graduates, like yourself, take up roles not only as photographers, but also contributing to its presence in and as contemporary culture.

Photography is still a minority art in many ways, despite being utterly pervasive as a common social practice. Despite its new popularity in art, education and online, it is still often ignored and marginalized by major institutions.

There has never been such a time with so many possibilities, so many courses on offer, at least in the UK. Yet it is a difficult time too, the obvious mutations of photography into an online data-based industry, the archaic feel of some established rhetorical forms of photography being peddled as new and the waning of any coherent theoretical project to understand these shifts. At the same time, and this may be a contradiction, it feels like there are moments today when everything is very open, that there is a lack of established boundaries and rules, which means new things can happen spontaneously and quickly. These open historical moments come and go, so it is important to grasp them when one can - before they close down again.

AM *Turning to photography as an art form, can you talk about how important it was for photography to rid itself of its 'burden of representation'?*

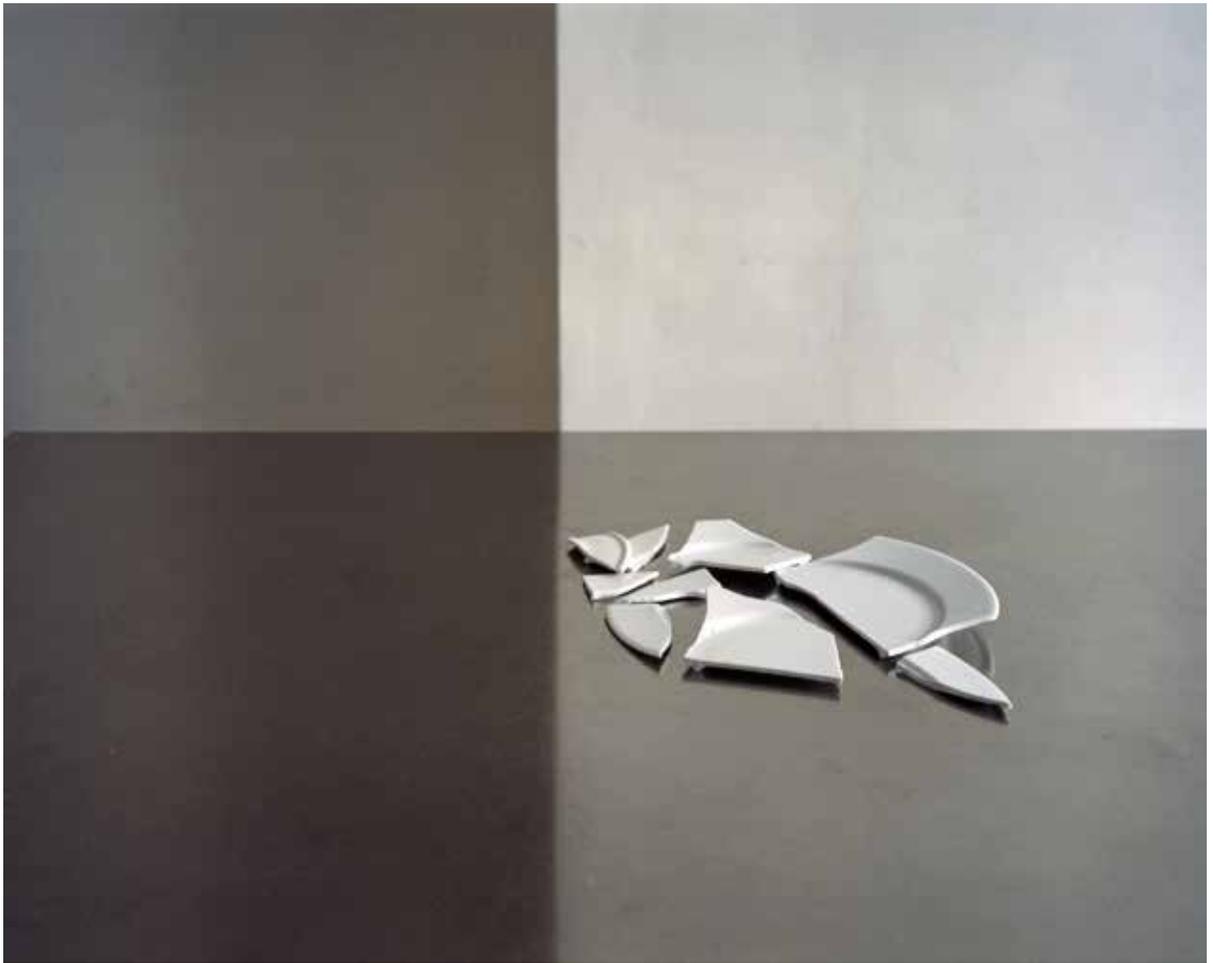
DB You refer to the title and argument, of course, by John Tagg in his 1988 book *The Burden of Representation* on the new craze for portraiture in nineteenth century industrial Britain, France and elsewhere. Tagg argues that photography brought a new era to representation, where having a portrait made (once only the privilege of the bourgeoisie, aristocracy, social and political dignitaries) became for the masses not a privilege, but a 'burden': social regulation by 'visibility' of the population through the use of the face photograph in police archives to identify criminals, 'scientific' colonialism and phrenology, and so on. I am not convinced we have escaped that era. Rather that it

has developed into new forms of 'self-subjectivization', 'self-surveillance' or if you prefer 'self-control', of which the selfie must be the most obvious example. We have seen all manner of new socially problematic uses of the personal image mobilized as revenge porn, etc. This is a new era of self-subjectivization where we present ourselves as avatars of an imaginary public 'self', which the police may or may not be interested in.

However, I realize your question was not about that debate, but the way that art photography in recent years has turned away from its more 'traditional' late twentieth role as a depictive art, one that inherited the mantle of eighteenth century painting, as argued for instance by Michael Fried.

Instead, I suppose you mean the new passion in art for all kind of forms of 'non-representational' photography, whether called 'abstraction', 'cameraless' photography, 'post-photography', 'photo-objects' or 'expanded photography', etc., where the picture is no longer only a representation, the depiction of a thing or object (people, objects, places), but itself an art 'object' made with craft, valued materials, handmade papers, or using new technologies, but rejects the 'dominant' ideology of any camera lens geometry or any traditional category of aesthetics. In this sense, I take these non-representational forms as the giving up of a long tradition, at least five hundred years old, of the aims of geometry and traditional perspectival space to 'represent the world' in and as a pictorial format.

Such photography is partly treading in the path of previous generations, both in photography and art. For example, the avant-garde photography from the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Moholy-Nagy, the Vorticists, the Surrealists, Constructivists and many others) and also the new 'abstract' paintings of the 1950s and 1960s. So it is not surprising if there is some resemblance between these old and new versions, albeit, I hasten to add, all in very different circumstances and conditions. No doubt some reasons are familiar, 'we've had enough of this representational lark, let's do something else now'. Of course, photography is no longer the new kid on the block. When photography came along, eventually some painters said, 'ok, photography can represent the world – technically – more quickly than us, so let's go do something different, find a different way and other things to do'. Now photographers seem to be saying the same



The Wrong Idea © David Bate

things about photography, which makes our current era a very interesting time, and very uncertain, since very clearly all these different ways of doing and thinking unsettles established ways of doing things. While the art market is always looking for something 'new', at the same time it paradoxically also likes some kind of stability as well.

So, just as in those periods there is very much the sense of a 'break' with generations before today. One might also attribute all this to a kind of fatigue with DSLR and cameraphone instant photographs, as a desire to replace it with a 'new' more meaningful and different 'vision'. There are other issues, no doubt a response to the 'de-materialization' of everyday experience onto data screens, the feeling of a loss and the diminishing of tactile relations (this is a pre-Covid-19 virus point!) and a yearning for the renewal of some 'real' emotional experience, one not already 'coded' by a data algorithm

and ready-made perspectival values. Looking at a pure colour, for instance, can have a remarkable affect.

Aside from the obvious rejection of traditional modes of realism and pictorial values, there are some fascinating developments. Certainly, this is an important shift rather than break with tradition and how far it will remain significant – well, I am suggesting it has been present and around a long time, but now has more visibility and acceptability in art photography. Look at any Francis Bacon painting, no matter how painful that might be for some, you cannot deny the effect of smudging a figure's body or smearing across the identity of a face made with colour paint. It has a very powerful affect. The fact that such things are possible in photography today I see as part of an open moment in history, where different things become possible, yet can also close down again unexpectedly because history turns a corner suddenly. Art is a complex practice, often

what becomes possible in the art industry belongs to fashion and marketability, but that is not to say they are empty of cultural value. Far from it, the arts are often symptomatic of changes elsewhere, and can advance themes and issues that society or its sciences has itself not yet really acknowledged or generally accepted. The curatorial rummaging through what is being produced is often a mixture of these issues, sorting out themes, marketability, speak-ability and what seems 'viable' as a way to speak of the historical moment.

AM *The current but temporarily closed (due to Covid-19 lockdown) National Gallery exhibition 'Titian: Love, desire, Death' majestically displays his 16th Century masterpieces of six large scale paintings. In these Titian absorbs the viewer with his skilful use of allegory, metaphor and storytelling. He also appeals to his patron's desires and sensibilities through the choice of subject matter and the male gaze. These devices are cultural and the mythological symbolisms have limited global reach. What would you say to someone experimenting with contemporary art photography wanting to make use of allegory and metaphor to tell stories?*

DB The answer is surely implicit in your question. The very fact that one can understand the historical operations of a form from one period surely means that someone can 'translate' that strategy, or knowledge, into another more recent contemporary culture. In any case, maybe these themes of belief systems, cosmic space or Titian's own obsession with tortured beauty and desire or classic myths are still present today, but just articulated in different appearances.

AM *What would you say are some of the important developments in art photography?*

DB In a way, we have been talking around this question already. So, obviously there is the fascination with archives as new sites for production of work, the new technologies and their uses that are filtering into practices in different ways, and the new self-oriented production systems. I mean the world of photobooks and online platforms that are said to be effectively de-centring or eroding the institutional base of established photography galleries, and even publishers. As to what photography work is interesting as responding to these issues there are probably too many to single out one.

I am also very interested in what is emerging globally, especially from the cultures not yet really represented in the global art market: South and East Asia, South America and Africa, all with strong traditions.

AM *LIP members are increasingly interested in making Photobooks and Zines. Your view has been that the way in which photobooks work is under-theorized, and that we are still thinking about photography in terms of the 20th Century. You have talked about Robert Frank's photo book 'The Americans' as a kind of beat poem where the experience of turning the pages leaves one with an after image, a kind of mental imprint which lingers and works psychologically. How should thinking about photobooks change?*

DB Photobooks have become the lost objects of the history of photography, now increasingly recovered thanks to the work of many people, but notably to Martin Parr for actually collecting them and Gerry Badger working with him on writing up those general compilation histories (the Phaidon published Photobook volumes). It is worth noting that they were not the first or last to compile chronologies of such books, but they did a lot to draw attention to them. More than artist's books, which also obviously intersect with a photobook history (especially in the 1960s and 1970s when conceptual artists starting working with photo series in small books or zines), a visual book based around photographs has become increasingly popular.

While this is all great, there has been little equivalent critical work concerned with how these books 'work' as books. So, if you take one of the most popular selling photobooks today, Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, it is very clearly structured around a landscape/portrait alternation of images. It is like a silent movie, a sequence of images with no soundtrack, but also with no 'plot'. Even very short early cinema movies developed a storyline plot. Visual photobooks often don't have a story or plot, but they do have a structure. It is this structure, the specific sequence of images that enables the viewer to make an imaginary journey through them. These are the structures that need understanding. Gerry Badger has pointed out that photobooks are different, some can appear like a 'stream of consciousness', a diatribe, a literal sequence of movements in pictures, or like a dream sequence - apparently nonsensical but having some more or less obvious manifest and veiled meanings. Some books and zines might work through repetition, or serial mediations on a specific motif, like a house at night, or people reading. The analogy here is with literary theory, which been very interested to study the structures of novels, poetry, prose, fiction and so on. I do not see much or hardly any work on this in photography. You don't need theory to enjoy a book, but to someone like me interested in theory, is it not also possible to make better books by understanding something of how they work? I'd say this



A Political Error © David Bate

analytic work can also a part of the pleasure of looking at them.

AM *What are the big issues, where you think photography has great stories to tell and contributions to make?*

DB Well, in photojournalism, these issues are the passing dramas of social and political history, today it's the environment, tomorrow its political chaos, and so on. I respect those journalist camera workers; I know it's a tough and often dangerous job. Elsewhere, where a photographer can take a longer time to look and think things through, we can find slightly less conventional and more experimental modes of work, and for me that is the field I am more interested in. So the 'issues' raised there are less immediate, but no less (or more) important for it.

It is pretty obvious we are going through a continuous technological and social revolution in ways of interacting with images, and their ever presence as an environment,

ever more embedded as means of communication. There is a great deal to say about all these things, both visually and to develop some kind of theoretical understanding if not a critical analysis of what is happening. The question that interests me right now is the issue of 'attention' and what it is that makes it so important. So, for instance, why a 'like' on Instagram is important, what kind of attention is given to this – an admittedly small gesture or point? This is not just a concern for photography but all those practices we call cinema, television, Netflix, social media generally, the phone screen.

AM *Turning to your own work - Can you talk about 'Bungled memories'? There are images of broken things and text that says: 'Political error'. What inspired this?*

DB I am not sure that saying what 'inspired' me will help anyone with the work, but I suppose you mean: how did it start? Basically, I'd broken a plate and it was on my kitchen table and I was looking at it, and decided to take a picture of it. Since it worked out well I did another

'And, given the current Covid-19 pandemic, we may expect an acceleration of many things, including online art and culture, which will surely come faster now as part of our everyday life....'

one, later on when eventually I broke something else I took another picture and so on, though I hasten to add this was over years rather than weeks. More formally, it is an image-text piece, based as the series title implies, on a 'bungled action' or 'mistakes'. The idea of mistakes is clearly linked (in the Introduction to the work) to the classic proposition of Sigmund Freud: the Freudian slip. In the book where Freud discusses all this as slips-of-the-tongues, saying the wrong word (or 'mis-speaking' as it is sometimes called today), bungled actions or forgetting things like names or appointments, are all forms of psychological 'mistakes' that interested Freud. He called the motivation for these errors 'unconscious' symptoms, because they are all more often than not (in fact always in his argument), symptoms of another thought activity interfering with everyday normal automated actions. We write these trivial events off as accidents, mistakes and silly errors, but Freud recognised a causality to these 'mistakes', of which we are not actually conscious of at the time.

In my work the pictures, made in a quite traditional still life format, show quite un-traditional broken objects in the pictures. In the history of art a broken object was often to show a social or personal catastrophe, for example, a broken mirror as a collapsed vanity or a 'broken' social status. William Hogarth or the then equally popular eighteenth-century French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze for example both used such motifs to signify some kind of family, personal or political catastrophe. I am doing something similar with photography - without explaining it in the work. I use a 'text' or title to suggest a social dimension to the scene of breakage in the image.

So, the word 'A Political Error' and a broken wine glass - what kind of 'political error' might relate to the situation in which a wine glass is broken? Is it so difficult that the work asks the spectator to speculate on that? But a spectator can also ignore the title and just look at the picture and perhaps even enjoy just looking at it. I would say that is also a legitimate right in art. We have enough social situations already which dictate to us what a picture means or what we should do with it in advertising, newspapers, online and so on. It is legitimate to do what you want or like with an image in a gallery. It is also legitimate for me as an artist to add another level to the work for anyone who wants it, not to 'explain'

the image, but to offer another space for reflection, for a social imagining about it. If someone wants to just look at the images, fine, they will see a whole set of broken objects - which is not so common to see in still life photography. They might just think 'this guy breaks a lot of things', or something else, like 'I like that one, but not that one'. I think this process in art of 'not-knowing' what something means, is often used to criticize art, as in 'I don't know what that means', which means either 'it is stupid' because it makes me feel stupid' or elitist because I don't know what it means. Art and the experience of it is really about becoming active as a spectator in relation to a picture, where we have to do the work to think about what it is for, which is something we are not encouraged to do elsewhere.

Of course, anyone is entitled to think or say anything they want; however, this is why art is also so important. Because of the fact that the meaning is not given in art, it is so alien to other areas of social life. We should not lose this possibility to dream, as a political act of reflection.

So, I add the titles for those who do or don't want to read them, because I want the work to have several levels of potential meaning, if anyone wants it. In any case the text-titles do not add or fix the picture's meaning, they offer another space: for a day-dreaming, perhaps outside of capitalism.

AM *Post truth - does it matter? Where does the notion of truth and authenticity fit in contemporary art photography?*

DB Yes, truth matters. Yet, this issue of what is true or real has a long history. Since Plato at least, and it certainly mattered to the Realist movements: all those artists and writers in the nineteenth century and since who disputed what was considered 'realty'. However, I am not sure 'truth' ever mattered that much in art in the popular sense of 'Trump truth' politics today. Whereas, it does matter very much in the social systems of public information, judicial systems, and so on... But in art? Why is truth so important there, unless as a realist? That is not the only goal or aim of art, to be an alternative media outlet. Photography does have that history, of galleries being set up to show pictures that newspapers refused to publish, for example. That was part of the genesis of London's The Photographers Gallery. Yet I

would argue we should not underestimate how important the imagination and 'imagining' is to any society, and if the arts are allocated this role it is because sometimes it is an important role to re-imagine our experience, not just of reality but our dreams and existence. There is a politics of the imagination here, to wonder how could it be otherwise, whether that is some new figuration of 'beauty', or a different narrative, which can have a 'dissensual' effect on the social and aesthetic world we occupy.

Photography has been stuck with an old nineteenth century debate about reality and appearance and depth ever since it was invented. Whether what we see is ever all there to see, is surely ever more obvious today. We 'know' that when we make a camera phone image it

'mediates' between what there is and what we see, and thus 'what is real' depends on where we point it and at what we click the digital shutter. This is what it means to say that taking a picture is a point-of-view, and this is in a soft sense of the term a political choice. We could say this shows 'a' truth, but it is never the whole truth. If the idea of 'post-truth' means that truth does not matter anymore, is this not also symptomatic of the fact that we are more aware that truth and power can be separate things? Trump has tremendous power, designated by his office as President of the USA and the media presence to assert truth, even if trivially: the photographs of his inauguration ceremony do not represent the right number of people. The history of photography's relation to power and truth, through news, advertising, political regimes, and now social media, is littered with examples of the

Mistaken Memory © David Bate



abuses of power and photography used as a truth-effect mechanism.

AM *You realized very early on in life when you were working in a garage for four years that the social and industrial systems and the prevailing culture could enslave one to a life of poverty and subjugation. In these strange times a new normal is being established across all aspects of human activity and organization. This may be temporary and time will tell. At a time of another profound upheaval, - Russian Futurism in the early 20th Century aimed to change the language and culture that bound the population to its habits and expectations. Through art and to some extent photography, it aspired to realize a new order for Russian society. Do you think that a culturally inspired movement such as Russian Futurism could rekindle a desire for change now? What could photography's contribution to this be?*

DB The futurists and Russian formalists were active before the revolution and the revolution gave them legitimacy for a very short time: Stalin soon stopped all this. So, much as I hate to pour water on that flame of optimism – Gramsci's old prison notebook comment comes to mind: 'optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect' – whether images themselves can ever change anything without power to assert their meanings, perhaps the answer is no. Images are, we have realized, primarily 'emotive' and that can only take you so far without being inserted into some sort of social purpose and 'vision' of power.

AM *Why do you think teaching theory is important in art photography? What has been the most influential theory? What is there to theorise now?*

DB If education is a place for knowledge, then the question is what kind of knowledge does a photographer or artist need to know today? One would expect anyone working in a particular field to know something about their field or 'discipline', its history, what its concerns are, even how it works or operates and what it actually does. Back in the early days of photography education in the 1850s, in fact in the predecessor of the place where I teach (then The Royal Polytechnic), theoretical courses were primarily technical. We no longer generally teach students to grind glass to make lenses or mix chemicals to smear on glass plates although that latter practice has made a surprising comeback lately. As photography became more automated over the years, and more socially pervasive, then the idea of what knowledge someone should have has obviously changed. My point is that 'theory' is

constantly changing, it's a way of dealing with the problems that emerge and have currency. The debates of the 1990s for example, over the sudden massive surge of 'private' life scenes in art photography, from Nobuyoshi Araki, Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans who won the Tate Turner Prize with such images invoked questions and debates about what all these images were doing, why are they being produced, what do they say about our private lives with family and friends, our sexualities, and, more importantly perhaps, why are curators advocating these?

So, the role of photography education and theory, if properly developed and taught aims to reflect on all that critically, or equally for example, to consider the kind of photographic 'snapshot style' conventions such artists are using: does that have any relevance to what the images are saying, as a sort of antidote to the clichés of family album photography? Theory means in this sense to understand the mechanisms of representation, that is to say the systems of representation being operated and how or why they work. Such a programme is to argue there are features of photography as an instrument that are systematic and can be identified and taught. These features may be completely separate and separable from what any individual personally uses them for – or is able to. Theory in this particular sense abstracts from the cut and thrust of actual practice and one cannot think consciously about those things while doing something. It is like thinking consciously about how or why you are holding a knife and fork while using them. Thinking about them becomes more difficult to do when you are actually using them.

What is theory for 'contemporary art photography' today? Surely it depends on what you think art photography is doing today? I find some of today's work oddly detached from the world we live in. It is not that art should be full of exhibitions about Brexit or the Covid-19 virus, though one might legitimately expect some kind of reflection on these important political and social issues in our cultural institutions. It is rather that the discourse on 'emotions' and 'personal feelings' seems to have internalized the expressionist world of social media, often reproduced in baroque forms, but emptied of that thing that makes art 'art', that is to have some kind of agency or critical reflection on the 'feeling' itself. In this sense, the emphasis on agonistic emotions seems sometimes like an operation akin to an emoji language, only a bit more complex. Some of these works are genuinely moving, but by what, is opaque... Perhaps in fact, this is the symptom of our time: we have and are aware of having feelings and emotions, but these are increasingly detached from any actual social structures.



Forgetting a Foreign Word © David Bate

AM *You have said that at some level, making photographic works might be a way of constructing knowledge. With reference to the Greek origin of the word 'Theory' meaning to see / knowledge, photographic practice and making images could be seen as a form of 'theorisation'. With this in mind, what do you think are the influential photographic theories taught on photography courses?*

DB If theory is a 'toolkit' then it is useful when you have something to work on, resolve, or sort out. I cannot say there are any 'influential' photography theories today in the sense that they are a coherent project, or clearly taught across many courses, because at present I would say there is a broad amnesia about photography theory. The advances made in the late twentieth century 'towards a photography theory', often erratically and by individuals in disparate places around the world, barely

exists now. Or else it has been reified and has hardly developed. The development of such work requires some kind of common project, in the way that 1970s filmmakers and photographers had a common interest and came together. Some framed through feminism or other social change movements, all inspired a development of theory to deal with accounting for the problems at hand, sexism, racism and the role that things like photography might play in representing or disseminating them. Perhaps today's problems are different, but I don't see any new coherent discourse appearing anywhere.

Yet, there is an endless stream of new books and publications on photography (I am guilty of participating in some of these too), which aim at something called 'photography theory'. Look across those books and none are the same, so it is quite clear that the supposed object under discussion, 'photography', either does not exist, or

‘There is a long history of linking the artist to melancholia and depressive states, or forms of social madness. The idea of art as a kind of cathartic process, either for the producer or the audience is a very powerful idea....’

is so evasive as to mean anything to the particular author or disciplinary frame pronouncing on it, whether it is ‘photography’ according to ... literary theory, philosophy, fiction, media theory, art criticism, visual culture or art history. The list could go on but time and space is limited!

Now, all that said, while I don’t see any coherent ‘program’ being developed, there is a sort of intuitive orientation towards ‘phenomenology’, that is, the role of images in our consciousness. I say ‘sort of’, because it isn’t really formulated clearly, I cannot point you to a coherent contemporary text on this in photography. One has to go back to Jean-Paul Sartre for that, but even there it does not take us further than the photography theory developed by Victor Burgin in the 1980s. Another strand would be the ‘data-image’ question, based on algorithms and metadata, etc. Some of this work is related to speculative philosophy, new materialism and ideas about reformulating the human in relation to the environment. This is all fine too, but it has little to say about the way we use images or why, on social media platforms for instance. While global corporations and the social sciences treat and use the metadata-image as an access point for market research, and remember there are more than two billion people using Facebook globally, ‘data’ is itself collected and compiled for research about the population to produce a representation of them as marketing material. There is a massive gap between this and understanding why and how people use mobile phone cameras, what they photograph, when and where.

How much of this work has any use for those trying to develop an art practice? I mean, the best of these is phenomenology, the idea of a consciousness drawn towards an object. Yet, if you have to read about the image appearing to consciousness, which was a new theory in the 1950s and 1960s (which is incidentally when modern advertising and television was first entering human consciousness on a daily basis), then I wonder how anyone hoping for creative imagination has any hope. Back in the 1960s new books were published with titles like *Civilization of the Image*, the idea that words were becoming less important than images. Today we have the same themes, although written in a less positive light, images demeaning words, and so on. Yet, it is also potentially a really exciting time visually and intellectually. Look at music or filmmaking; there has

never been an easier time for access the means to make these things. The same can be said of photographic images, but what I see is theory lagging behind in addressing these new areas – including of course the energy that has emerged around the practice of self-produced books, zines, and an independent minded photography culture, both on and offline. ‘Theory’ can have something to say, add, clarify and critique where needed about such things, but what I see is an absence.

AM *Can we turn to the works of Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama? Moriyama won the 2019 Hasselblad Foundation Award and is celebrated for his radical approach to both medium and subject. His work is cited as occupying a unique space between the illusory and the real. What makes his work so evocative and lasting?*

DB I’m a fan of his work and pleased he was given that award as recognition. If the normative value of photography is ‘communication’ then the way he uses and introduces the mediation of monochrome grain to interfere with that is one of the striking features which he acknowledges he partially got from William Klein. There is in the tradition of Japanese aesthetics a very different valuation of light, or rather, of darkness. Shadows are not negative spaces in Japanese aesthetics; unlike in Western theory darkness is something to get rid of, as in the ‘Enlightenment’ for example. So there is something of this in his work that speaks, alongside our fascination for the subject-matter and themes he works with. They tend to be quite socially motivated, yet the visual treatment of them involves us in distancing from these ideas too. It is a very seductive technique.

AM *How do you think photography as an art form may develop over the next few years?*

DB The role of archives and photography in memory, both cultural and personal, is already having an increased importance and presence everywhere, because there is so much that has been produced and never seen, that enunciates ‘history’ in a way words do not. This is crucial globally and in particular in areas of the globe where an established history is contested, or simply absent, censored. A recent PhD student, Ana Janeiro, made an important piece of work based on family archives from the fascist and colonial era of Portugal, an

era that only finished in the 1970s. 'The archive' is already an emergent and important practice with significant social consequences.

Other themes have already emerged in our discussion, the importance of the growth of data-image dynamics and their dialogue with the real, sculptural forms of the image, immersive technologies, photo-virtual hybrids, through to what is sometimes seen as a response to that: the passion for old and obsolete photographic techniques, sometimes mixed with new themes about social or private space, and inevitably, an ecological discourse, often framed by more traditional forms of geographical photography across different parts of the world.

And, given the current Covid-19 pandemic, we may expect an acceleration of many things, including online art and culture, which will surely come faster now as part of our everyday life. And who knows what and where new forms and practices might come from, out of that.

AM *It is believed that anxiety can help with creativity and artistic expression. Have you ever experienced this and did this help with your work? What tips can you offer to those photographers exploring methods of creative expression?*

DB If you mean something like art as 'therapy' or having a 'therapeutic' effect? It may possibly help some people, or it may not! There is a long history of linking the artist to melancholia and depressive states, or forms of social madness. The idea of art as a kind of cathartic process, either for the producer or the audience is a very powerful idea. The popular image of artists is that they are often a bit mad. Yet, this is often where confusion arises as the compulsion to make photographs and the drive to show them has a whole complex of motivations. Then it also has to be mediated through technology, whether it's a camera, computer, brush or pencil. How is photography an expressive form? Being creative is not driven by technology, but features as part of it, for

example, when making an image evokes an anxiety it is to do with the question: 'what is it that I am doing here or want to 'say'? This is a question that haunts all creative work, and why some people find solace in it, almost as an existential question about existence. Certainly, most of these ideas or themes and subject-matter are in front of everyone, 'hiding in plain sight' as the expression goes. I don't mean literally in front of you, like a nose, although that is sometimes the case, but as already in your mind but which has just not been recognised as there yet. After that, the 1% inspiration, the process is 99% perspiration, to get the idea to 'work' and find its form to function as image. This process of identifying a thing and making it into a representation may sound simple, but it involves a lot of work, both psychologically and technically, which sometimes even talented people can't be bothered to follow through. And, if it is any comfort, most artists have projects that never worked out, so, yes – anxiety, as fear of something unknown, is definitely a useful part of the production process.

AM *What is your favourite camera?*

DB I do not really have only one camera I use. Like an artist uses different pencils, it depends on what it is for - different cameras, and lenses, for different projects. The important thing is not so much as to the camera, but to decide on all the technical parameters and keep to them for that specific project.

AM *What are some your favourite photographs?*

DB A difficult question... there are so many and depending on when you'd ask me a different answer. Probably any of the classics, from Fox Talbot to Atget and Berenice Abbot to early Cindy Sherman. I have an image on my wall by Paul Nougé the Belgian surrealist from his work the Subversion of the Image.

Thank you, David, for your time and for sharing your insights with us. It was a real pleasure talking to you.



The Wrong Idea © David Bate

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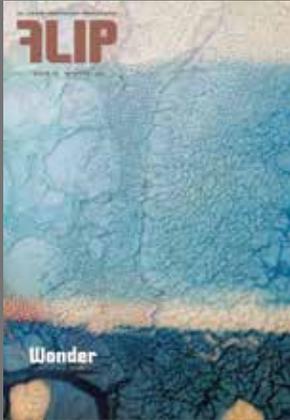
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