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Education – for what ?

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We know of no city where there is as much photographic activity in existence as there is in London. We know of no other country which has, out of a void, created a firmly rooted photographic productivity. Yet all this was done within three years and with modest means.

Printletter, Zurich 1976¹

This is taken from, in my opinion, the most comprehensive survey of British photography undertaken in the 1970s: ‘The British Obsession: About to Pay Off?’ by William Messer in *US Camera Annual 1977*, New York. Bill had rather flatteringly adapted the title of a piece I had written for *The Photographic Journal*²: ‘Photojournalism – The British obsession’. I concluded the article:

Is education the answer? Well, it is probably the only hope. But, as yet, there are only a couple of courses in creative photography in the UK.

Messer devoted a considerable part of this long and extremely thorough investigation to photographic education. When he worked in England in 1971 he found the position of the courses he visited ‘pretty bleak’.

I could not understand how Bill Brandt, probably the singularly most significant British photographer yet (with obvious concessions to Fox-Talbot) and still active in the medium, could be virtually unknown in the schools.³

He cited an article written in 1973, but published eventually in *Creative Camera* the following year, as evidence that others were aware of problems and doing something about it. This was a piece of polemical writing by Thomas Cooper and myself that declared:

¹ Quote from the *British Journal of Photography*, London January 23, 1976

² Royal Photographic Society, London Vol. 113 No. 11, November 1973

³ Page 58 *US Camera Annual 1977*, New York

For the last half a century we seem to have been enduring –with a few notable exceptions – a photographic Dark Age. And, as with most unedifying situations, a large part of the blame must lie with those who are supposed to educate us.⁴

The article that Tom and I wrote was illustrated by our students' work and highlighted the primacy of the image, rather than theory or purely commercial applications, as the underpinning philosophy of our teaching at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham. As well as illustrating the projects we set our students, these published photographs demonstrated the importance we placed on disseminating the work of emerging talents. Our teaching was student-centred and concentrated, in many of the assignments, on self reflection – a novel concept in those days when student assignments were meant to mirror applied practices only.

Courses were then validated by professional bodies, and their appropriateness and structures were policed by government inspectors, known as HMIs, who were very suspicious of self expression, experimentation, and anything that deviated from the functional and utilitarian use of the medium. The curriculum encouraged students to explore the ideas and issues that most directly affected them and to subvert the clichés that inhabit the compartments that custom and practice assumes the medium must conform to. The techniques, equipment and materials of photography were the servants, not the masters. Although I would add here that we placed a great deal of emphasis on good craftsmanship which some observers thought of as almost fetishistic. Students were proud when they produced a fine print, but their concern for quality and tonal aestheticism should never become overly precious or pretentious.

.... if the students is told that a photograph is purely 'a window on the world', he is being sold short, as it is only the beginning.⁵

Taking our lead from what Beaumont Newhall had written in his *History of Photography* (New York 1964) we suggested in our piece that photographic students should be acquainted with four major concerns: *the straight, the formalistic, the documentary, and the equivalent*. We concluded:

To attain any sort of fulfilment or inner growth, teachers and students must together have a passion for photography and an obsessive desire to realise their personal truths. Should photographic education in Britain meet the challenge a renaissance might then be said to be emerging.⁶

⁴ *Creative Camera*, London No. 123, September 1974

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

In 1976 a well-respected, tri-lingual magazine, *Camera*, based in Switzerland, commissioned me to reflect on the state of British photography. My 'hook' was a recent statement (I think it was in a women's magazine) by Lord Snowdon. He remarked in an interview:

*Clicking a shutter doesn't require talent the way holding a brush does. We're not artists. Photography is a job like accountancy. You wouldn't buy an accountant's ledger would you?*⁷

I felt that such ignorant comments from the Queen's brother-in-law could challenge 'a seeming renaissance in the art of photography'⁸ in this country because of his eminence in those days. Education was the focus of my piece.

*Department of Education (officials) – if their past record is anything to go by – have appeared to regard photography as a medium solely to be used in the service of commercial ends.... Photography for its own sake? You must be joking!*⁹

I also went on to state that the history of photography was a neglected subject on courses who were not serving

*the new generation of students....only too aware of the artistic potential of the medium through the pioneering efforts of magazines like 'Creative Camera' and 'Album'(now defunct), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Photographers' Gallery, the Arts Council of Great Britain and so on. Courses have got to cater for these young people*¹⁰

I advocated that we should attempt to:

1. *banish the mystique of photographic mechanics and theories;*
2. *destroy crass commercialism with its transitory fads and fashions;*
3. *eradicate the idea that specialist courses also function as employment bureaux for industry.*¹¹

⁷ 'Apropos Great Britain' *Camera* (Lucerne) 55th year No. 8, August 1976

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

Coming into teaching after 10 years a self-employed and, as is obvious from the above, a self-opinionated photographer, I was dismayed by the

*mock assignments given by play-acting Madison Avenue types and the archaic, unimaginative projects designed by retarded craft guilds*¹²

The only immediate reaction I received came from David Bailey, a man I had (have) never met, but who had felt so affected by my somewhat intemperate article that he had to call and congratulate me ‘on telling it as it really is’. To say I was surprised, even flabbergasted by the call would be an understatement. What happened next was equally surprising and unexpected. One college head of photography was so incensed by what he had read in the Swiss magazine that he wrote a response to it, not in *Camera*, but in the *British Journal of Photography*, which obviously had to print the original offending piece. This guaranteed it a wider audience – and I pocketed an extra repro. fee !

It was written by a supremely accomplished and successful photographer, Walter Nurnberg, who had run the photography department at Guildford School of Art in the 1960s. His predecessor, B.Ifor Thomas, was an inspiring teacher who taught many well-known practitioners of the period and must be mentioned in any forum discussing British photographic education. Nurnberg responded thus:

*I do not believe that one can allow a wholesale slander of British photographic education system and performance to go unchallenged*¹³

As well as castigating me for attacking Lord Snowdon and the various commercial hands that had fed me, he argued that students

*can (now) choose from a fair number of good and valid courses to suit their personalities and aspirations (but Hill's) impassioned clarion call would lead students into the cuckooland of wishful thinking and self delusion*¹⁴

I wrote a defence (BJP 12 November 1976) that led to 10 weeks of articles and letters on photographic education in the Journal. The subject had moved up the agenda and seemed to be the main topic of debate in serious photographic circles for quite a while thereafter. It might be as well to mention here that at that time there were only around six examination-exempt three year long full-time photography courses in England and because they were validated by what is now the Institute of British

¹² *ibid*

¹³ ‘Apropos Great Britain: A response’ *British Journal of Photography*, London 5 November 1976

¹⁴ *ibid*

Photographers they had to have a vocational, industry-biased curriculum. As I recall they were based at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham/Derby College of Art and Technology (where I taught), London College of Printing, Polytechnic of Central London (formerly Regents Street Poly), Harrow College of Technology and Art, West Surrey College of Art, Farnham (successor to the Guildford course already mentioned), and Manchester Polytechnic. By the late 1970s only the Manchester and PCL courses had been awarded degree status.

The Trent/Derby course, which started in 1973, emerged from the well-known Derby School of Photography programme run in the 1960s by Jack Tait, and later by Bill Gaskins. Gaskins moved to Nottingham to take over the joint course that was cobbled together as the only way an advanced programme could be sanctioned in the East Midlands by the DOE. Education was then pretty centralised, which insured that a tight control was kept on regional, as well as national provision, which, of course, was paid for through taxation. But 'approved' photography courses were reasonably well off with no fees to pay, LEA grants, and all materials paid for by the state. The Oil Crisis of the mid 1970s, however, put pay to those fiscally relaxed days.

Bill Gaskins was an important character in the development of vital initiatives at that time, including being chairman of the first Arts Council photography committee. The ACGB's role in art education is another talk, but I will touch on it a bit later. Gaskins was awarded a Kodak Scholarship to fund a study trip to the USA in 1971 and as a result of what he learned, and the contacts he made, a vision of an art-based, academically rigorous course at Trent Polytechnic emerged. Bill Jay became responsible for teaching the history of photography. Bill Jay and I had worked together on the *Telegraph Magazine* in the late 60s and I became slightly involved with the wonderful *Album* magazine and the embryonic Photographers' Gallery (8, Great Newport Street, London) through him. Bill recommended me to Gaskins who took me on to teach social documentation part-time in 1972. I became a full-time lecturer in 1974. Bill G. left for Sheffield Polytechnic that year and I later took over as course leader in 1976.

The Trent/Derby course was always over-subscribed and particularly popular with overseas students, particularly those from Scandinavia, because of its art and experimental bias. The inspiration may have come from certain successful models in the USA, like the University of New Mexico (Trent employed three UNM alumni – John Mulvany, Thomas Joshua Cooper, and Chris Sieberling – in the 70s), because the American education system regarded photography as an important academic subject that was studied in art departments of universities not in glazed brick cellars off graphic design studios or forensic labs. Other courses as well ours were attempting to deal with these new influences and directions and the Society of Photographic Education decided to run a Summer School that addressed 'a great and unprecedented increase in the use of photography within the Fine Art area'. It noted also in its journal *Spectrum* (Summer 1974) that 'teachers of photography should be aware of this and be making adequate preparations for their involvement with such courses'. I had been asked, via Gaskins, to organise this summer school at Trent Polytechnic. The editor of the SPE journal, however, also reported in that issue that although early bookings were good, the response from teachers of photography in further and higher education was poor.

The two-week school was headed by David Hurn of Magnum, who was developing an exciting new course in documentary photography at Newport College of Art in South Wales (I had got to know David through his friendship with Bill Jay and his interest in our new Creative Photography course at Trent) and Peter Schlessinger, the director of Apeiron Workshops, New York and an assistant editor at *Aperture* magazine. There were contributions from Thomas Cooper, Raymond Moore, Gilles Perres and many more. It was a real workshop with a high level of production and feedback that explored different approaches to the creative use of photography and those teachers that did attend went away with new and inspiring ideas to be incorporated into their courses.

Another organisation, Coptic, which sought to represent *independent photographers* also entered the debate that winter as part of their ‘Camera Obscured?’ seminars (January – March 1975) organised jointly with the Half Moon Gallery, London.

It might be useful at this point to try and define ‘independent photography’. For me, it is when the maker controls the production and the ideas without the need for undue compromise, whether the work is self-financed or supported by grants or sponsorship. We are all aware that the outlets are, by and large, controlled by others who may have different, and sometimes conflicting agendas to those of the makers, but it is the practical and conceptual independence that is the key.

The second Coptic seminar was called ‘Photography on the Curriculum – the purpose of Photographic Education’. It was an open forum that discussed photography teachers’ ‘own evaluation of current standards...the paths they would like to see pursued and their role in shaping the future direction of photography’. The most memorable thing I remember about those seminars was the minuteness of the Half Moon Theatre in the East End and that a bucket, placed to collect the drips from a leaking roof, became our major focus.

Through participating in various gatherings – and organising events like the SPE Summer School – it was very obvious to me that there was an emerging, and distinctly British photographic culture. Influenced heavily, of course, by what was happening in America, but nonetheless unique as evidenced by its appreciation of formative traditions, social responsibility, political awareness and, because we are British after all, the importance of humour, irony and cynicism. This culture was not London-centric either. Allan Porter of *Camera* wrote that it was ‘unusual to find such an important new sub-center of the world of photographic education and individual photographers when I visited the Midlands of England’¹⁵.

It was, however, difficult to implement certain ‘alternative’ ideas into the curriculum because of the centralisation of course development that I mentioned earlier. I wanted something more akin to the intense, but extremely productive environment of the workshops we ran at the summer school during my time at Trent Polytechnic. To try and replicate this I took small groups of my students to my home in the Derbyshire Peak District where they ate, slept and drank photography for two or three days. Initiatives like this, together with the commitment of my teaching colleagues and, above all the students, brought recognition to our Creative Photography course. As

¹⁵ ‘Apropos Great Britain’ *Camera* Lucerne August 1976

photographer and critic, Gerry Badger wrote of the Trent/Derby Diploma exhibition in 1976:

The standard of the work is as high as I have seen in a student show the best work showed a maturity which made it difficult to believe that it was the work of students¹⁶.

The informal energy of the workshop teaching I had participated in and the attractive location of my home in the rural village of Bradbourne, which is on the edge of a national park, made me think that it might be worth trying to see if these alternative learning ideas would work with a wider photographic constituency. So in April 1976, my wife, Angela and I organised our first Photographers' Place workshop, which was led by a very experienced and charismatic workshop teacher, Ralph Gibson from America, and my equally charismatic colleague, Tom Cooper. The workshop was a great success, but little did Angela and I think that it would be a major focus of our lives for the next 20 years!

The late Valerie Lloyd attended that first workshop and wrote:

Without exception people left feeling highly charged and with their own vision clarified, directed and strong.¹⁷

Although I taught on the workshops I thought of myself as a ringmaster bringing major figures in the field to a wide range of practitioners from hard-nosed professionals to relative novices just starting their love affair with the medium. In the 70s we invited photographers like Charles Harbutt, Aaron Siskind, Paul Caponigro, Lewis Baltz, Trent/Derby colleagues Raymond Moore and John Blakemore to lead workshops and among those attending as students were Fay Godwin, Paul Graham, Richard Sadler, Roger Taylor, Andy Earl, Debbie Baker, Peter Goldfield, Ken Baird, painters Harold Riley and Brian Clark, and many others who were themselves asked later to run workshops in Bradbourne.

Much later Bill Bishop wrote in the book *Realising Personal Truths*:

The Photographers' Place had a tremendous effect in inspiring and encouraging a large number of photographers pursuing their own personal work.....¹⁸

There was a lot of 'alternative' photographic activity going on in 1976. In London the Half Moon Photography Workshops were set up with an agenda and environment very different to our own. In their excellent magazine *Camera* they laid out their aims, which included:

¹⁶ British Journal of Photography, London 27 August 1976 page 727

¹⁷ 'A Point of Departure' *British Journal of Photography*, London 28 May 1976 Page 458

¹⁸ Inscape, London 1997 Page 66

... using photography to help community activists and to record local history and events with special emphasis on the family album as a valuable social document...to initiate group discussions on the social uses for photography... to convene workshops for the interchange of ideas between photographers¹⁹

Despite its overtly Socialist ethos they did see the merits of teaching:

fine printmaking, archival processing and fine craft practice, particularly in the use of the Zone System²⁰

In the same issue of *Camerawork* there was an important article by Victor Burgin, who was a colleague of mine at Trent Polytechnic earlier in the 70s. He worked in the Fine Art Department - so we rarely saw each other- but was now a senior lecturer at the Polytechnic of Central London. It was entitled 'Art, Common Sense and Photography' and was for many an articulate pointer towards his attitude to photography. His teaching on the photographic course at PCL was underpinned by Marxist theory, semiotics and cultural studies. This programme offered a theoretical and practical alternative to the socially concerned documentary tradition followed at Newport and the largely aesthetically driven, introspective approach at Trent/Derby.

The politically 'Left' photographer wants to help correct society's false picture of its actual conditions of existence, to raise such questions as: Why this practice? What does it mean? What interests does it serve?²¹

He went on to highlight a paradox there was in *seeking to penetrate appearances with an instrument designed specifically to record appearances and appearances alone.²²* My colleagues and I at Trent/Derby felt he may have been gunning for us when he concluded that photographers who pursue the Fine Art route or who thought that *transcendental 'essences' protects the product against practical interrogation* were like *people rowing out to join a sinking ship²³*

It is important to mention the educational role performed earlier by the ICA Photographic Study Centre in London which, through its slide library, library and darkroom, seminars and lecture programme in 1971/72, provided an oasis for photographers hungry for information and inspiration. Started by Bill Jay, it sadly closed within a year and its resources moved down the road to the recently opened Photographers' Gallery, which, under the energetic directorship of Sue Davies, who had also worked at the ICA, was becoming the main focal point of British photography.

¹⁹ *Camerawork* No. 3, July 1976

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

²² *ibid*

²³ *ibid*

Although I have attempted to give some coherence and logic to this overview of the development of photographic education in the 1970s, as I saw it, there does remain a question mark hanging over my research. Why did certain attitudes and directions emerge at that time and what is the period's legacy? It was obvious that photographic practices during this period had become more self-conscious with its practitioners becoming overtly concerned with metaphysics, art theory, community politics, fine art, cultural studies, and alternative life-styles and philosophies. It seemed for many that there was a stark choice: Marxism or Transcendental Meditation, donkey jackets or kaftans, black or saffron.

My own speculative theory is that this period was subconsciously affected by an insidious climate of fear at the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s brought about by the anti-immigration speeches of Enoch Powell and his disciples, the rise of the National Front, increasing industrial anarchy, and the terrorist atrocities in Northern Ireland and here on the mainland. Once informed debate and democracy are replaced by violent force and murder by minorities or the state then I'm off to the woods and hills. Photographers will always identify with particular causes. Some hope their images will affect social and political change whilst others believe that more individual self-reflection could, in the long term, reduce conflict and bring about social harmony.

After the optimism of the 1960s the brutalising environment of the 70s made retreat the preferred option for many. How could a better, less fractured society be created? Many, like me, thought that education was pivotal. That was why I became a teacher – it certainly wasn't for the money! Thankfully British photography and photographic education flowered during the latter half of the decade and established its own eclectic identity and vibrant culture.

A quote from a review in the American magazine *Artscribe* of the exhibition *Three Perspectives on Photography*, which was curated by Angela Kelly, John Tagg and myself – all teachers – and held at the Hayward Gallery, London (June/July 1979) may confirm this. The show was the last hurrah of the Arts Council's photography committee (it was in fact a *sub*-committee of the Art Panel), which had been far too pro-active in the 1970s for the effete of 105, Picadilly²⁴ and was disbanded as a result.

Compared with John Szarkowski's Mirrors and Windows at the Museum of Modern Art, New York last year there was an air of freedom and confidence (in Three Perspectives on Photography) instead of a mere assertion of quality and a few hand-me-down critical terms; this was a sensible attempt at a comprehensive overview of photographic theory²⁵

And to show how seriously we were being taken *Screen Education* (No. 31, Summer 1979) devoted an extensive article that deconstructed the exhibition with long words and even longer footnotes!

²⁴ Then the London HQ of the Arts Council of Great Britain

²⁵ *Artscribe*, New York Summer 1979

The legacy? Well, by the beginning of the 1980s there were six BA degree courses in photography, new courses were emerging, and old ones re-invented themselves to take account of the changed climate. They had taken on board elements from the pioneering trio of trailblazers like Newport, Trent/Derby, and PCL to create innovative and diverse programmes of study. Photography courses became major features within the further and higher education sector – and they remain an expanding area even today.

Photographic teaching via workshops, galleries, art centres, and even distance learning thrived too – and it all really started in the decade we are examining today.