

Welcome to the International Image Community

by A. D. Coleman

I. What Is the International Image Community?

In the late winter of 1994, while in residence at Gothenberg University in Sweden as a Fulbright Senior Scholar, I made an excursion into Finland to teach for ten days at a small art school for Swedish-speaking Finns located in the town of Nykarleby — as close to a working definition of the middle of nowhere as you can imagine, in that season an ice-bound agrarian region half a day's train ride from Helsinki.

Once I got settled in my room, my hosts took me on the mandatory tour of the darkrooms and print-preparation facilities, ending up in the photo department's lounge — where, on the walls, hung three original prints of recent images by Sally Mann that I'd never seen before. Mann is one of a handful of living U.S. photographers whose work I find consistently provocative, so I track it closely; there's not much that she's shown with which I'm unfamiliar. How, I asked my hosts, had these prints come to be there?

It turned out that, the year before, they'd made a class trip to Gothenberg, which hosts the biennial photo expo called Fotomassan — a mix of trade show and photo festival. Sally Mann had been one of the photographers featured, and had flown in for the event; they'd met her, and struck up an

acquaintance — and, a few months later, these prints had shown up in the mail, a surprise gift from this generous artist.

This small and seemingly simple incident exemplifies, for me, the operation of what I've elsewhere defined as the "international image community,"¹ a now-global network of institutions, venues, regular events, distribution systems, and of course individuals involved in the production and dissemination of photographic imagery. As a result of the evolution of this far-flung skein of connections, it's now possible for students in a small Finnish town to be influenced by freshly made work by a photographer based in a small town in the southeastern U.S. — and even to experience that work before their U.S. counterparts come in contact with it.

This would have been impossible 40 years ago. In the West, photography was then a small, neglected corner of culture. Photographs were everywhere, of course. But hardly anyone collected them. Few galleries and museums exhibited them; none specialized in them. Collectors didn't consider them worth buying and preserving. Critics and historians and theorists of art mostly disregarded the medium. Photographers themselves were not treated with respect as creative artists or as social commentators and chroniclers of personal and cultural history. As of the fall of 1967 the photo scene in New York — arguably the international capital of the world of creative photography — consisted of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photographs, Norbert Kleber's Underground Gallery on Manhattan's East 10th Street, the

¹ I began using this term to describe what I observed when, in 1988, after a decade of more scholarly pursuits, I returned to the production of book and exhibition reviews and critical reportage on the newly internationalized context for photography. See my collection *Critical Focus: Photography in the International Image Community* (Munich: Nazraeli Press, 1995), for essays in which I explore this concept.

walls and vitrines of some public libraries, a handful of bank lobbies, and the anterooms of a few custom labs and processing houses.

We have come a long way from those humble beginnings. If anything, this evolution has accelerated in the 13 years since that Finnish experience of mine. There's now a complex, global network through which the traffic in photographs flows. It sustains at least a hundred museums around the world devoted exclusively to photography; additionally, we have thousands of departments with that specialization in art museums. Major and minor publishers with significant lines of photo books combine with hundreds of large- and small-circulation magazines on the subject to provide a permanent record in print of photographs and the discourse around them. There's been a proliferation of annual and biennial photo festivals world-wide (more on which shortly). The booming auction market for photographs now makes international headlines. Countless galleries and private dealers handle photographs, often to the exclusion of other forms of art, serving a related and ever-growing body of photo collectors.

Beyond that, a vast photo-education system has grown (more on that too in a bit). Innumerable organizations — of which Galleri Image is a particularly long-lived example — support one or another photo-related constituency. Photography occupies a hefty chunk of virtual real estate in cyberspace. And we even have such a sufficiency of writers on various aspects of the subject that I can proclaim we've finally achieved critical mass. Not all of these components are in place everywhere, and those that have emerged more recently — in mainland China, for example — are certainly not as fully developed as their western counterparts. But I can see quite a few of them in

place already, at least in rudimentary form, and I feel assured that the rest will come in due time.

This, in a quick-sketch version, is the international image community, in which, to quote John Donne, "no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." In other words, the world of contemporary photography needs to understand that a place like Aarhus is an integral part of it; and Aarhus in turn needs to recognize in turn that it is inextricably linked with that world.

I offer you another example, pertinent though non-photographic, from that same winter residency in Sweden in the mid-'90s. Sponsored by my host, the Department of Photography at Gothenberg University, I offered several workshops for people outside that program. In one of them, a young Swede — blond, blue-eyed, more than six feet tall — excused himself from one afternoon session, on the basis that his African dance group had to rehearse for its upcoming seasonal public performance. I assumed he'd been allowed to apprentice with a visiting African dance troupe, as a sort of a melanin-challenged mascot. No, he explained, everyone in the group was Scandinavian, except for their Nigerian instructor.

The image of several dozen unmistakably Nordic types performing traditional African dances under Nigerian tutelage for a mostly Swedish audience huddling together for warmth in a snowbound Gothenberg theater has its ironic and comical aspects, of course, but also its charm and certainly its provocations. White folks of course can and do take African-dance classes in the United States, where I have spent most of my life. There Africans can also take ballet lessons — and Swedish folk-dancing instruction is available too, for

all and sundry.

In the 1998 Hollywood movie *Bulworth*, Warren Beatty (who wrote, directed, produced, and starred in this satire) offered us as protagonist a contemporary U.S. politician who becomes persuaded that the only solution to our domestic U.S. crises regarding race and ethnicity is miscegenation. Bulworth campaigns on a platform advocating racial mixing — the more the merrier, and the sooner the better. Call this "the Bulworth solution," a fascinating fictional projection. Now here's a true story from a different area of cultural activity, the field that we in the west call "world music," where the ethnic musical traditions of hundreds of cultures mix and mingle and hybridize.

About 25 years ago the late U.S. physicist Richard Feynman was having lunch with a friend of his, a musicologist who had started a small record company to preserve ethnic musics. Feynman, a Nobel prize winner, had been a stamp collector in his youth, and remembered the especially large and colorful stamps that many small countries around the world had issued in order to attract hard currency from western stamp collectors. Feynman asked his friend, "Whatever happened to Tannu Tuva?"

The Republic of Tuva is a small country that lies between Siberia and Outer Mongolia. At the time Feynman asked that question, its main export — aside from those stamps — had been the tumbleweed, that rootless plant you'll see rolling across the plains in many cowboy movies. Feynman's friend followed up on the physicist's question, traveled to Tuva, and discovered there the now-famous Tuvan "throat singers," whom he recorded for his company. The records did very well. The throat signers became international celebrities; they began to travel and perform abroad; they created a throat-singing festival in

Tuva; and foreign capital began to flow into the Tuvan economy as a result of all this. Which explains why this U.S. physicist became a folk hero in the Republic of Tuva, and why many Tuvan boys have Richard Feynman as their first and middle names.

That's part one of the story. Here's part two: back in the U.S., in New England, up in the northeast corner of the country, a blind black African American blues singer named Paul Pena came across this Tuvan throat singing on the radio. Fascinated by it, he bought their albums and, on his own, figured out how to replicate aspects of their method, which he then incorporated into his blues singing. His record company recorded him doing this; he traveled to Tuva and won a special prize at the Tuvan throat-singing festival. The Tuvans adopted him as one of their own. And when Paul Pena was diagnosed with the pancreatitis and diabetes that eventually killed him, the Tuvan throat signers performed fundraising concerts to help pay for his medical expenses.²

In a nutshell, this story encompasses the complexities of what we call "world music." But the fact is, as far as I'm concerned, everyone plays "world music" today, whatever we mean by that term — in the sense that, thanks to modern communications technology, there's hardly a musician alive without access to music from cultures other than his or her own, and contact with those other musics inevitably affects one's own creative production.

And if there's a "world music," then there's a "world photography," an internationally circulating repertory of styles and approaches and ideas. Is that the end of culture, all idiosyncrasy broken down into some tasteless,

²For further information on the relationship between the country of Tuva, scientist Richard Feynman, Tuvan throat-singing, and blues singer/songwriter/guitarist Paul Pena, go to <http://www.huunhuurtu.com>, or seek out the documentary film *Genghis Blues* by Adrian and Roko Belic.

undifferentiated sludge? Not necessarily. As the Transylvanian emigré poet and U.S. radio commentator Andrei Codrescu said after driving cross-country through the United States, "Hugely incompatible ingredients were thrown into the boiling cauldron of this continent — and very little, thank God, has actually melted in this vast melting pot."³ This is no less true of other countries and continents than it is of North America.

At home in New York, and more expansively wherever I go in the U.S., I now eat far more varied food than I've ever had available to me before — both "authentic" traditional foods from other cultures and new flavors, ingredients, and cooking methods adapted from them. I hear a vastly greater diversity of music, see more art from elsewhere, watch more foreign-made movies, read more writings from abroad, than I've ever before had at my disposal. I see the same thing happening wherever I go. The U.S. and western Europe may seem to own the fast lanes on the Infobahn, but these are multi-lane expressways, and they go in both directions.

II. What is photography today?

Some years ago, a young woman sent me a letter in which she wrote, "I believe that I am one of a very few photographers working with combined nineteenth-century processes." I didn't have the heart to break the news to her that, instead, she'd joined the ranks of an international movement that goes back almost 40 years.

As that implies, we habitually date the start of the "alternative

³ Julie Checkoway, "On and Off Communism's Red Train: A Profile of Andrei Codrescu," *Poets & Writers Magazine*, Volume 26, no. 6 (November/December 1998), p. 31.

processes" tendency to the late 1960s and the spread of historical craft-related information resulting from the expansion of the formal photo-education system in the U.S. and elsewhere.⁴ In actual fact, however, all the different methods of light-sensitive and/or lens-derived image-making have always existed as alternatives to each other. Photography, from its inception, functioned as a seedbed of process invention and subsequent experimentation with the possible permutations.

The medium's history, after all, commences with the contest between Daguerre's one-of-a-kind positives on silvered metal plates and Fox Talbot's salted-paper negatives and multiple paper positives. From there, we spill ceaselessly into new physical forms, and the imagistic potentials and presentational options they enable: cyanotype, tintype, ambrotype, wet plate, dry plate, albumen print, sheet film, roll film, lantern slide, stereo card and slide, platinum-palladium, gum bichromate, bromoil, Autochrome, Fresson print, Carbro process, silver-gelatin print, Kodachrome, dye transfer, Polaroid, hologram, digital image; collaged, montaged, assemblaged, photogrammed, multiply exposed, toned, solarized, hand-colored, chemically manipulated, silk-screened, reproduced in ink, hung on walls, bound in books, incorporated into installations, slide-projected, printed on a wide assortment of commercially produced and/or hand-sensitized papers, transferred to fabrics, embedded in ceramic, variously three-dimensionalized, even replicated in chocolate.

There are now so many engaged with all these historic and new hybrid forms, mostly but not exclusively in the west, that no one show or book can encompass that entire territory. Begin to acquaint yourself with the medium in

⁴ See Lyle Rexer, *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

its present state and you'll quickly get introduced to a representative selection of those approaches, and to a cross-section of the visual artists who have revitalized and/or devoted themselves to their practice, ranging from those who rediscovered older processes and reintroduced them into the vocabulary of contemporary practice to those who work with the latest electronic methods, and from those who invent unique new physical forms for the photographic image to those who push the envelope of how it can be presented.

As this makes clear, any informed overview of the evolution of the photograph as an object and image involves the recognition that those who work creatively with photographs — photographers, artists from other media, and the population at large — have generated an enormous range of works that must be considered in any serious discussion of what constitutes *the photographic*. It also becomes obvious that the perception of creative photography as comprising a single type of artifact — the "straight" or unmanipulated black & white silver-gelatin or color print from an unmanipulated negative encoding a single exposure, presented as an autonomous framed and matted artifact under glass — was, no matter how widespread, fundamentally erroneous. In hindsight, that narrow definition must be understood as the result not of the field's voluntary self-delimitations or of anything inherent to the medium but rather of the extreme biases of a small but briefly influential coterie of historians, curators, and photographers at a particular historical moment in the west.

Happily, many picture-makers in the west refused all along to accept those strictures; and, starting in the '60s, they — and a new, more broadminded generation of critics and historians — began the battle to restore

to respectability all those other approaches. That fight is long over, the forces of tolerance have won, and those times are past. We live today in the context of what I call an "open photography," whose hallmarks include the remarkable fact that the entire creative toolkit of the medium — comprising virtually all of its tools, materials, processes, and styles, from the very beginning through the immediate present — has been recuperated and made available as a matter of course to the contemporary practitioner, without prejudice from the medium's critical/historical/curatorial establishment, and certainly without resistance from the market for photographic works.

Notably, most of those nineteenth-century variations, no matter how arcane or tedious, are currently in use; the present generation of photographers includes practicing daguerreotypists, tintypists, cyanotypists, wet-plate collodionists, albumen and platinum printers — along with working holographers and digital-imaging devotees, who can be thought of as their direct or lineal descendants. From what I have seen, this tendency has not yet flourished in what some of my colleagues call the "periphery" (which we used to call the "third world"), but I expect we'll experience it coming from there in the near future, as the necessary tools and materials, instructional information, and craft expertise become available and/or disseminated there.

The field as a whole, unquestionably, has been reinvigorated by the recuperation of the fullness of its rich traditions, including its technical and performative antecedents. Presently one can see the influence of "alternative processes" ways of thought in works by people not normally associated with those ideas: in Robert Frank's collages and mixed-media pieces of the past several decades, in Manuel Alvarez Bravo's late platinum prints, in Mike and

Doug Starn's taped-together celluloid assemblages. And one can of course see those ideas actively and consciously investigated by a far-flung cohort of contemporary image-makers.

Whether you are a member of the medium's ever-widening audience, a student or teacher of photography, or a specialist in the field, I think you will find much in this feast that's spread out before us all nowadays to nourish your interests and deepen your understanding of these interrelated yet very different paths to praxis. And I hope the young woman I mentioned earlier, she who sent me that naive letter assuming that she had invented the wheel, will soon discover the good and sizable company she doesn't yet know she's in.

Beyond that, of course, it's important to note that over the past four decades picture-makers working with photography have made it clear that — like writers, filmmakers, painters, and artists in all media — they claim the fundamental right to address the full range of human experience and to explore whatever subject matter promises to prove helpful in explaining them to themselves and the rest of us to ourselves. Years ago, the literary critic Kenneth Burke proposed, nonjudgmentally, that the two poles of art were, at one end, the *aesthetic* — that which (to go back to the word's origin) shocks, disturbs, and provokes reassessment of established reference points — and, at the other end, the *anaesthetic*: that which soothes, calms, and affirms established reference points. Like their counterparts in other media, those who work with photographs produce both these sorts of images and objects. It's our obligation as audience to grant them the same license we grant our poets, playwrights, and sculptors, and to recognize that provocation and challenge is one legitimate function of art, and to find ways of becoming comfortable with

or at least accepting of the discomfiting effect of much serious art. It's just doing its job — and we need to let it do so unimpeded, and turn our attention to our own task, which is coming to terms with it.

III. The Perils of Pluralism

I want now to turn around and take a contrarian view of the state of photography in the U.S. and abroad. As I've just demonstrated, I see no way to avoid the diagnosis of "pluralism," which begins to strike me as both inarguably true and less than precise and useful. So I'm going to try to work my way past or through that concept, to see if I can find something useful on the other side.

The most useful definition of the U.S. version of pluralism that I've encountered comes from a book by the technoskeptical David Gelernter, who miraculously lived through an attack by the U.S. technophobe known as the Unabomber. In his eloquent autobiographical account of his recovery, Gelernter wrote, ". . . the wonderful thing about America is the chance it offered all comers to build *American* culture, a plywood culture that gained strength from the crosswise grains of many separate, glued-up sheets."⁵

That image of a "plywood culture" delights me, suggesting a material that's ingenious in design, ecologically considerate, structurally even sturdier than its source, cheap, reliable, full of flaws yet constructed to compensate for them, versatile, efficient, handy, readily available for all purposes. There's also something distinctly postmodern about this material — not exactly real wood,

⁵ David Gelernter, *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 145. For Gelernter's opinions on technological matters, see his *Machine Beauty: Elegance and the Heart of Technology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

not exactly fake wood either, a kind of useful and forthright *ersatz*, with the implications of apology and responsibility and making things right that the word's connotations included in the original German.

Is the contemporary photography scene in the U.S. — or on the American continents, or across Europe, or for that matter anywhere in the world — what Gelernter calls "a plywood culture"? I'm not convinced it is. If you'll allow me to continue my carpentry analogy, it may better be described as a form of particle board, that dense but brittle stuff they make with the compressed wood-chip leftovers of the plywood-manufacturing process. Cover it with a unifying veneer and it looks solid enough, but let it get wet or start piling it with books and it sags. And whatever you do, don't stand on it — too much weight or pressure and it shatters, for there's no organic, woven grain to hold it together.

I don't want to stretch this image too far, so let me move to another one. From what I've learned by reading the various histories of western photography, we never had — to use Thomas Kuhn's term — a single dominant paradigm for this medium anywhere. Even during those phases in every culture in which the photograph's main function was evidentiary and documentative, there were always people tampering with the data that the lens collected, fooling around with the anti-realistic options the medium offers, and not infrequently doing both at the same time: think of the African American James Van DerZee simultaneously producing flattering studio portraits, straightforward documentation of public events, and imaginative funerary photomontages.

During the very heyday of formalism in the States, which we might say lasted from 1940-1970, there was no unity. Sure, a certain strict "purism" of

camera usage and printing procedures held sway and affected, even determined the methods of those working in the f/64 mode, in documentary, and in small-camera social commentary. But the repressed didn't ever really have to return; it stayed around all along, bubbling along beneath the surface: Val Telberg, Clarence John Laughlin, Lotte Jacobi, Edmund Teske, Romare Bearden, Barbara Morgan, John Guttman, Carlotta Corpron, Harry Callahan, Frederick Sommer, Ruth Orkin, Henry Holmes Smith, making collages and montages and in-camera multiple exposures and "light drawings," staging events for the camera, and such.

Still, I suppose you could say that while there was no one primary paradigm, there were at least several clearly defined ones during those years: the classical view-camera tradition as defined by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams; a documentary style exemplified by Paul Strand, Walker Evans, and the Farm Security Administration team; a small-camera poetics originating with emigrés like André Kertész and the U.S.-born members of the "New York School" — among them Helen Levitt and Sid Grossman — and then re-distilled by Robert Frank and passed along to Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander; and an investigation of process experimentation conducted by those I mentioned a few sentences back and others.

We can look at the photographers of that time period in the States — and, it seems to me, elsewhere as well — and apportion them with relative ease among these four models of praxis. I'd consider it useful nonetheless to view each of these approaches as a paradigm, a persuasive hypothesis about the nature and function of photography and photographs. And, going back to Thomas Kuhn's idea, I'd propose that the availability to several generations of

practitioners of these four paradigms, and the comparatively clear choice among them that their distinctiveness from each other offered, allowed at least a loose creative-arts version of what Kuhn calls "normal science" — the systematic exploration of a paradigm's implications — to take place for awhile.

I'm not trying to claim credit for U.S. practitioners as the sole sources of those four thought experiments, by the way. Many of their most effective originators and advocates were European expatriates (like Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, for example); others, like Man Ray, were of European descent and were very much Europe-identified. Moreover, those ideas were, so to speak, in the air, available for the plucking: Germany had its "Neue Sachlichkeit" and Bauhaus, all countries had their documentarians and small-camera workers and Dadaist/surrealist anti-"purists." So, when I say that the U.S. once exported those paradigms, I merely mean to indicate that what we offered to the world as prime examples of U.S. photography fell into those four loose categories, with an emphasis on the first three.

However, since the late 1960s the international image community has entered a state that we'd have to describe as a version of what Kuhn calls *paradigm shift*: the collapse of an established model of thought and its inexorable replacement by a new one. But one of the reasons Kuhn disowned the application of his model to a field such as ours is that in art old paradigms never die; instead, they undergo a conversion process that turns them from belief system into style. Once round-earth theory takes hold and is successfully tested, flat-earth theory gets tossed into the dustbin of history. But "purism" or "straight" photography didn't demolish or permanently impeach pictorialism (or, more broadly, process experimentation); it merely marginalized it for a few

decades, and only in a few countries at that.

And one intriguing aspect of process experimentation — the term I'm using here for any and all anti-"purist" tendencies, including pictorialism — is that, by embracing all approaches to praxis, it eventually becomes the repository even for its opposite. Which is to say that, stripped of the certainties that once underpinned them, "purism," traditional documentary and small-camera social-landscape work have devolved into little more than another three choices among the numerous optional styles available to contemporary picture-makers. They continue to have their dedicated practitioners, of course, who will continue to produce images according to the precepts of those modes for the foreseeable future, at least. But the argument that any of those represents some tendency inherently truer to the medium than others, or somehow God-given or right or a cause to advocate, has lost all its drawing power and energy.

⁶ For those of you who know the history of twentieth-century photography in the U.S., this means that Ansel Adams is turning over in his grave, while from his coffin William Mortensen cheers and waves.⁷

The innumerable variations now being practiced — from daguerreotypy to holography, and from digital imaging to a revival of the wet-plate collodion process⁸ — and the freedom practitioners feel to move at will between them from project to project without apology or explanation are the distinguishing

⁶ For more on this, see Gretchen Garner, *Disappearing Witness: Change in Twentieth-Century American Photography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁷ If this reference seems obscure, see the essay "Conspicuous by His Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen" in my book *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media and Lens Culture* (University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 91-112, and my subsequent essay "Beyond Recall: In the William Mortensen Archive." in *William Mortensen: A Revival/The Archive* 33 (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, 1998), pp. 80-95.

⁸ Sally Mann numbers among those who have participated in the renovation of this set of practices.

mark of contemporary photographic praxis world-wide. I spoke of this cross-pollination just a few paragraphs earlier as an "open photography," and I think there are many good reasons to celebrate it; when beliefs and inclinations turn into dogmas and dictates, everyone's in danger. But there's a down-side to that disintegration of fixities. The spur to action, usually, is belief; chronic disbelief leads to cynicism, which eventually yields passivity and paralysis. So, instead of healthy and vital pluralism, we could also call this a condition of perpetual pre-paradigm stasis. And whereas we in the U.S. once exported our paradigms, what I see happening now is the exportation of that pre-paradigm condition.

I find evidence of this state of affairs everywhere I travel: across the U.S., of course, but also all over Canada, throughout Latin America, pervading eastern, western and northern Europe. What I've seen from Africa and the far east suggests more of the same. I do not yet have sufficient experience with the situation in China to speak knowledgeably about it, except to say that social realism sometimes masquerades as indigenous style. I suspect that modernization — and perhaps especially post-modernization — brings this emulsifying pluralism to photography everywhere, and would be extremely surprised to find any country henceforth producing a coherent photographic output with a distinguishable flavor based on unique and discernible national or cultural characteristics.

Nowhere do I see anything like a new paradigm — in the Kuhnian sense of a magnetically charged new model of thought — emerging. The closest thing to a genuine paradigm shift that recent decades have birthed is the advent of digital imaging. This began to affect the field in the mid-1980s and, with the emergence of the Internet and, especially, the creation of the World Wide Web

in 1994, promises to transform thoroughly and permanently the presentation and distribution of images, texts, and the other raw materials that make up documentary work, and has already radically reshaped the toolkit -- if not the thinking -- of those who opt to work in this mode.

Yet I now anticipate that once the shake-down cruise is done we'll find that the digital evolution will prove less separatist than most people (including myself) predicted at the outset,⁹ just another tool in the toolkit, another franchise at the image-makers' shopping mall. Though it clearly favors those who can afford the tools involved, digital imaging favors no ethnicity or nationality. To the contrary, it enables picture-makers from the periphery to enter the cyberspace mainstream. In any case, nowadays, for better or worse, aside from region- or culture-specific data (such as skin color, physiognomy, topography, signage, and costume), photographs — including digital images — from anywhere look like photographs from everywhere. I can't say I expect that to change.

If this diagnosis holds up — and there's certainly much to substantiate it — I don't think the U.S. is to blame for this condition, at least not entirely. We didn't impose it on other cultures by deliberately dominating the trade routes. During the years 1940-1970, with the exceptions of "The Family of Man" exhibition and book and *Life* magazine (neither of which fit readily into any of the paradigms I named, nor advocated them per se), photography of the types I'm considering here had little economic value and less cultural status, and did not circulate very widely or effectively internationally. To the extent that those

⁹ See the various early predictions in my book *The Digital Evolution: Visual Communication in the Electronic Age, Essays, Lectures and Interviews 1967-1998* (Tucson: Nazraeli Press, 1998).

previously mentioned paradigms proved seductive, then, it was because they arose out of praxis, not theory, and practitioners everywhere took them up because they found it stimulating to work in those ways, not because some influential folks from the States demanded and enforced it. (I note with interest, in this regard, that a current major international traveling survey of 20th-century documentary and photojournalism from mainland China explicitly cites "The Family of Man" as an influence and model.¹⁰)

IV. Springboards for Transformation

The shift from 1970 through the present moment centered in large part around the transformation of the photo-education system. By the 1960s, the seeds of what came to be known as the "photo boom" were planted — most fruitfully in the rapid expansion of the photo-education system within colleges, universities, and art institutes as a recognized component of liberal arts and fine-arts programs across the U.S. and, not long thereafter, in other countries as well.

This meant that, by the early 1970s, the education and training of young photographers had expanded far beyond the previous parameters of apprenticeship, vocational training in polytechnic institutes, and creative-photo instruction in private workshops and camera clubs. Those coming into the

¹⁰See the show and catalogue *Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography*, organized by the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, and first shown there in 2003, then in the Shanghai Art Museum in 2004. It made its debut in the west at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, May 20th – August 27th 2006. This is a 50-year survey including 590 images by more than 100 photographers; it explicitly "takes as its inspiration Edward Steichen's landmark show."

medium found themselves engaging with it either in the interdisciplinary environment of colleges and universities¹¹ or in the intermedia milieu of art schools — and sometimes both, in the cases of those who enrolled in fine-arts programs within the university system.

Inevitably, this generated an unprecedented cohort of formally educated, academically certified photographers exposed to and influenced by ideas from other areas of inquiry, and familiar with production and presentation techniques drawn from other media. They learned of the varied available venues for the presentation of such work — and also of the strategies artists had invented from the 1960s onward to reach new audiences and stretch the confines of conventional gallery/museum/art monograph presentation. And they engaged with the ideational environment of the first serious critical dialogue about photography ever initiated, a discourse that began in the late 1960s and was itself a subset of an increasingly polyvocal, contentious debate over art in general, as the art world exploded and diversified and began at last to accept photography as a legitimate medium and incorporate it into art-world activity on all levels. And that debate, in turn, proved itself a subset of a yet broader discussion: about the sociology of knowledge, the determining effect of communication systems, the politics of representation, culture's shaping of individual consciousness, gender and difference, and a whole flock of other matters.

We now have some four decades' worth of graduates of such programs,

¹¹ This worked both ways. Carl Chiarenza, now a noted creative photographer, historian, and theorist, began his education in photography as a photojournalism student at Boston University, and in that context found himself drawn more and more to the fine-arts end of the spectrum. (Chiarenza, comments at a panel on photography in the Boston area, DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA, November 4, 2000.)

who have become not only photographers but curators, conservators, historians, critics, theorists, educators, publishers, editors, gallerists and private dealers, collectors, and members of the first genuinely educated audience that photography has ever enjoyed.¹² Their influence on the medium's current situation cannot be overemphasized.

While the U.S. could be said to have led the way in creating that condition, the plain fact is that the model driving it there was of European origin — specifically, Laszlo Moholy Nagy's Bauhaus photo program, which had by then been transplanted lock, stock, and barrel from the Weimar Republic in Germany to the Institute of Design in Chicago just before the outbreak of World War II.

This program, which encouraged students and teachers to explore all the different approaches to the medium, had become the infrastructure of college-level photo-education across the country, and had seeped into and saturated the emergent pedagogy of U.S. education in photography. Only a few programs in the States — usually one- or two-person operations run by staunch devotees of purism, documentary, or small-camera gestural drawing — did not follow the Moholian guidelines and encourage their students' exploration of the entire toolkit. If I had to lay the praise and/or the blame for the condition I'm identifying anywhere, it would be at the doorstep of a generation of U. S. teachers who bought into a European model and thought that, in a formal educational environment, their charges should have all the technical, stylistic, and performative options of their medium laid out for them to study and choose from.¹³

¹²Certainly they were as well-prepared as any cohort could have been to confront the technological paradigm shift that I call "the digital evolution."

While I'm speaking of embracing a European model, let me add that I consider the photo festival phenomenon to constitute a second crucial stimulant to these developments. The photo festival is a distinctly western European invention. Its lineage runs clearly from the major exhibitions that the late Fritz Gruber organized for Photokina, the photo-industry expo in Cologne, Germany that began post-World War II, directly to the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles, France, the inspired concept of Lucien Clergue and several colleagues who decided to retain Photokina's exhibitions and encounters among photo-world professionals and drop the hardware displays and manufacturers' hype. In short, they created the first meeting place for photographers, picture editors, curators, and others in the field that was entirely separate from the photo industry's frenetic marketing of equipment and supplies.¹⁴

Sounds like a simple, even simplistic notion, no doubt. But many acts of genius seem elementary in retrospect. In numerous variations, that model established by Clergue and company has spread worldwide over the past three decades. It has resulted in a dissemination of images and information and ideas about photography on an unprecedented scale, opening up new venues and new audiences for a staggering diversity of visual culture.

For obvious reasons, the 150th anniversary of the medium's invention in 1989 served as the occasion for the initiating of numerous new photocentric festivals, and the consolidation and enlargement of existing ones. New ones

¹³The "alternative processes" movement, previously mentioned, was to a considerable extent driven by and supported by this photo-education system, though its recovery of outmoded techniques and tools does not conform to the Bauhaus/Moholy model.

¹⁴The R.I.P., commonly referred to simply as "Arles," began in 1969 and had its 38th session in July 2007. Clergue, a native son of Arles, worked with Jean-Maurice Rouquette and Michel Tournier in creating the original sessions.

continue to emerge. Though they take various forms, each one with its emphases and omissions, these rapidly multiplying festival ventures for the most part select from a fairly standard set of basic ingredients and offer up a usually predictable menu: some large-scale, fixed-site mix of public exhibitions, book displays, lectures, panels, workshops, film/video/CD-ROM screenings, awards ceremonies, portfolio-review situations and informal collegial networking. Because they serve as venues for the presentation of exhibits of imagery from around the world, and — in addition to drawing a diversified general audience — bring together photographers, publishers, editors, curators, gallery owners, critics, historians and other specialists from the international art/photo scene for formal and informal exchange, these events serve a diversity of purposes, among those functioning as marketplaces and showcases for a wide span of photographic imagery and related activity.

The trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, asked in the 1940s about his predecessor Louis Armstrong at the height of the controversy over bebop versus dixieland jazz and swing, said simply, "No him, no me." By the same token, no Arles festival, no Houston Fotofest, no Mois de la Photo à Paris, no Lianzhou International Photo Festival in China — and, I venture to say, a much less rich global photography scene than we have today. The international festival network that has emerged since the late 1960s has become an essential part of the infrastructure of this international image community I'm describing.

Not coincidentally, this is also the period in which the chronological historianship of photography evolved into the morphological, which led to the revisionist phase we've undergone for several decades now, which in turn led to cross-cultural studies, an ever-widening circulation of work from other

countries, the rehinging of the doors of influence so that they swung both ways, and so on. In fact, the U.S. has become far less parochial in its relation to photography from elsewhere (and from its own huge array of microcultures) than ever before. Work of all kinds from everywhere — including Denmark — now travels throughout the States on a regular basis. If our students seem often to be ignorant of much of it, I think it's because the sheer volume of what they encounter overwhelms them; nowadays, in any case, Stateside they're as likely not to recognize the names of famous American photographers like Harry Callahan or Frederick Sommer or Susan Meiselas or Gordon Parks as they are those of Josef Sudek or Eikoh Hosoe or Mario Giacomelli. This is not something to celebrate, but it doesn't point to jingoism or some U.S. drive to dominate the international photo scene either.

We are all, I think, swamped with endless quantities of relevant material, far more than we can possibly absorb. This is a far cry from the situation in 1970, when a good-sized bookcase six feet square could hold just about all the significant in- and out-of-print literature of photography in English from the twentieth century. Struggling constantly to keep one's chin above water is hardly an ideal position from which to develop an overview of anything.

V. Where We Are Now

Is floating in this swelling sea of images and words better than the Renaissance-man phase of pre-1970, when you could feel yourself genuinely abreast of everything that was going on in photography? As one who's

experienced both conditions I'd say yes, while acknowledging that I can no longer read or look at all the work — even all the work, visual and written, to which I have ready access — that's pertinent to my major areas of interest. Practically speaking, what this means is that my colleagues and I no longer share as many automatic reference points as we once did, and our areas of expertise become ever more subdivided and balkanized. Consequently, most of us find ourselves in a situation not unlike that which I've identified for today's practitioners: an amok scholarly/critical pluralism that breeds like rabbits, or a quivering pre-paradigm stasis.

Predictably, this situation foregrounds questions of what we might call "identity politics": What is Canadian photography — or, inevitably, what is British Canadian photography and what is French-Canadian photography? What is Latin American photography — or, again inevitably, what is Brazilian photography, what is Bolivian photography, what is Mexican photography, and so on? And of course this question will get asked about Danish photography eventually, if it's not already a subject of debate. Since such questions operate from an essentialist premise, antithetical to one (like mine) that assumes a "plywood culture," the search for answers in those nations may obscure for generations and decades the shift from paradigm to style that has enveloped them as well.

On the one hand, I envy my colleagues from north and south of the U.S. borders their opportunity for this inquiry, and their enthusiasm for the hunt for, say, what makes photography from Canada or Cuba different from all other photographs. But we should remember that, as Marshall McLuhan was fond of saying, "Whoever discovered water, it wasn't a fish" — meaning that we're

unlikely to notice the elements in which we swim every day. Perhaps it'll take an outside observer to spot what's significantly different about Cuban or Canadian photography, which the Cubans and Canadians may well take for granted.

It stands to reason that I'm most familiar with the photography of my own country, so you'd think I'd have some sense of what distinguishes us from the rest. I must confess that I don't. The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright coined the term "Usonian" for citizens of the U.S. I've given up asking what's Usonian about U.S. photography. Its character from 1970 on may be a lack of all distinguishing characteristics save for its absorptive inclination, its spongelike quality, its willingness to be permeated and colored by any liquid within osmotic reach.

My lingering suspicion is that once we get all of those multiple histories of photography — one from each country, one from each culture, one from each microculture, one from each race or ethnic group or gender persuasion — and extract from them whatever the native historians consider to be the unique characteristics of that particular slice of the pie, and put those out on the table for comparative purposes, we'll find that they resemble each other at least as much as, and probably much more than, they differ.

Does this mean I'm committed to some Edward Steichen-like "universal-language" vision of photography? Hardly. Photographs of course encode enormous amounts of culture-specific data and information that's read automatically by members of the culture in which they're made and is not easily available even to attentive viewers from outside that culture. Both consciously and inadvertently, photographers embed their own culturally shaped assumptions and percepts in their work. How could it be otherwise?

Reading photographs, especially from other cultures, remains, as it always has been but as we've just recently begun to recognize, a challenge of translation, in the most problematic and complex sense of that term, and our readings need to be understood as necessarily tentative, and rightly so.

So of course not everyone today "speaks" the same visual "language." And each of us misinterprets images on a regular basis. But who today is not a world citizen, *de facto* and to a considerable extent *de jure*? What photographer in the act of making a picture, what looker at photographs, is culturally "pure" in that activity? What Hungarian looks at a Cuban photograph who's never read a British writer in translation or looked at a Cubist painting by a Frenchman? What Usonian makes a photograph who's never seen a Hungarian photograph — or an African sculpture? Can only a Hungarian truly understand a Brassai image, or a Kertész? There's no returning to some condition of visual innocence, no "noble savages" of the imagistic world. We're all contaminated by inevitable contact with other cultures. Like it or not, we're all coming to speak a type of Esperanto — not the "official" version, which never took hold, but an *ad hoc*, bricolaged, ever-changing hybrid — visually as well as verbally.

Linguistic scholars speak of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which proposes that language shapes and to a considerable extent determines the thoughts you think. In most of the cultures with which I'm familiar, the everyday language of the native population is a patois, a miscegenated lingo. As a translator told me decades ago, I write and speak in American, not English — here a Latinate word, there a Saxon one, a Yiddishism now and an African-derived term right after. I relish that fact, because it reminds me that I'm part of a much larger picture, just one a bunch of mixed breeds, mongrels, determinedly impure and

proud of it.

VI. Toward the Future

Am I digressing? I don't think so. In fact, I think I've led myself right to my concluding point. Which is this: Much current analysis of the state of photography today proposes that it can usefully be understood in terms of national or geographic differences, and that those national or geographic differences will be most astutely noted by observers from within those territories. I'm afraid I disagree. Remember McLuhan's fish. Remember also what the German emigré Albert Einstein told us about nationalism: "It's an infantile disease — the measles of mankind."

I've devoted a long stretch of my life as a working critic and historian and theorist to scrutinies and analyses of particular images and specific bodies of work. Individual cases have their own fascination, undeniably, and our field is still young, so I can't say that we already have enough of them, or even that I'm completely finished providing my own. But I find I'm more and more inclined to look for the theories and insights that move us across geographic lines and cultural boundaries, to an understanding of photographic activity as a crucial stage in the evolution of humankind's innate, hard-wired tendency toward visual communication.

So, while I've tried here to convey something about trends in contemporary photography and the origins thereof, and to speak about this widespread condition of pre-paradigm stasis that I observe in photography from

everywhere, I've also tried to indicate that I think it's time for some of those of us involved in the observation and criticism of photography to shift paradigms. Perhaps, if we did so, we might even discover a new way of looking at the data I've laid out in these pages and informing it — converting it into information — differently.

In any case, I think that if we have any chance of turning the international image community into a genuine "plywood culture," strengthened by its opposed layers, rather than a weak repository made, like particle board, of fragmented leftovers, we will need to ask a different and more probing set of questions, teasing out the "deep structures" of lens-based communication. I don't intend to discourage anyone devoted to individual case studies, national overviews, and such, from pursuing those projects. I simply invite those for whom the pleasures and rewards of those activities have exhausted themselves to join in helping to formulate some new, more challenging hypotheses.