

**Dinosaur Bones:  
The End (and Ends) of Photo Criticism**

**by A. D. Coleman**

Thank you for coming out for this event tonight.

Before I begin, let me also thank Colin Finley, Melissa DeWitt, and Miranda Gavin of Hotshoe International and Rui Cepeda of Viewfinder Photography Gallery, as well as Roberto Muffoletto of the VASA Project, for bringing me here today. I especially commend them for engaging in a synergistic collaboration on this program that can serve as a model for other arts organizations in these fiscally challenging times.

And I want to dedicate this talk to the memory of the late Chris Dickie, publisher and editor of *Ag: The International Quarterly Journal of Photographic Art & Practice*. In his role at *Ag*, and before that in his editorial position at the *British Journal of Photography*, Chris was the first to put my work regularly before the UK audience, offering me platforms I valued enormously. I got to meet him only once, last fall, at a Royal Photographic Society event, just months before his passing, but our fruitful collaboration lasted almost twenty years, and I miss him very much.

In this talk I plan to explore the evolution and (alas) devolution of photography criticism over the past four decades. Argumentatively, as is my wont, I will sketch what I saw as the potential of this discipline when I began my own work in the late 1960s, what did -- and didn't -- materialize over the next decades for myself and my colleagues, the current state of this form, and the various reasons (editorial, financial, technological, social) for what I project as its demise.

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As someone who believes in the social value of the public shaming of miscreants, I find the web useful as a virtual substitute for the physical pillory. This past summer, in a pair of posts at my blog, *Photocritic International*, I identified and took to task a photographer who'd stolen an essay of mine from its licensed appearance at another website and posted it without permission or notification at his own blog. In early August, in response to these posts, one Kyle Newberry wrote -- not in a public comment at my blog, but in a private email to me -- "You're dinosaur bones"; just those three words, not even a period.

I realize that this is what passes for thoughtful opinionation, nuanced argument, and scathing rebuttal amongst the cohort I think of as Generation Tweetie -- GenTweet for short. (Indeed, by the emerging standards of brevity in communication Newberry probably qualifies as verbose.) Easy enough to dismiss, of course -- my initial inclination. To quote Leonard Cohen, who, during his 2008 London concert, was quoting his 102-year-old zen teacher, "Excuse me for not dying."

But then I asked myself, suppose he's right?

As it happens, I've pondered that question on my own in recent years, intermittently. This past spring I got interviewed at length for two different projects in progress: one organized by Carol McCusker on the "photo boom" that began in the late 1960s, and another on Garry Winogrand, organized by Leo Rubinfien and Susan Kismaric. These recorded dialogues took me into a reflective mode, reconsidering with hindsight my particular project as a critic of photography and the roles played by those I consider my colleagues in that discipline from the late '60s on: Ben Lifson, Shelley Rice, Andy Grundberg, Vicki Goldberg, Carol Squiers, Charles Hagen, Vince Aletti, and then more recently David Levi-Strauss, Geoff Dyer, and some others.

And in both those conversations, which took place months prior to Newberry's dorky email, I came to the same conclusion: I'm dinosaur bones. I even used the word dinosaur to refer to myself at least once in those conversations, as I recall. And I went further, suggesting that the very discipline I practice, photo criticism, had become Jurassic as well.

The question, then, echoes that which Yahweh poses to Ezekiel in the Old Testament: "Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel, I remind you, answers, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know."<sup>1</sup> You can count on "God knows" as a safe answer to just about any question. But, with no hubristic intent, let me voice what Ezekiel was likely thinking in his situation, and what I think in mine: I doubt it very much.

No, I'm not planning to shuffle off into the gloaming to lay myself down in some bog for eventual resurrection, perhaps as some latter-day Piltdown Man my detractors might anticipate, skull of a chimp and jawbone of an ass. My own project's not nearly done, though I accept the possibility that it may get interrupted. Nor do I propose that writing about photography by others will cease. But a certain kind of writing about photography in certain kinds of forums, that which I and some others have practiced over the past four decades plus, has become obsolescent. This talk constitutes a vote of no confidence in the possibility of its revival any time soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 37:3

Let me explain, first, what I mean by my own praxis and that of some of my peers, and then describe the situation that enabled it versus the situation we find ourselves in today.

The medium in which I work is ratiocinative prose. My preferred form is the prose essay, my preferred length between 1200 and 5000 words. I've published over 2000 such essays since 1967. As a professional writer I've defined myself from the outset through the present as a photography critic. Not, to use variants of the trendy locutions, an art critic using photography or a photo-based art critic. Just a photography critic, though according to others some of my writing qualifies me as a historian, some as a theorist, and the broader field I'm in has become known generically as cultural journalism.

What does a working photography critic do? Based on my engagement as a reader with criticism of literature, jazz, rock, and some other arts, the working critic develops an awareness of the particular medium's full field of ideas, as articulated by performers, other critics, historians, and theorists; evolves positions in relation thereto; and engages with that field of ideas by addressing a reasonable cross-section of past and current work in the medium.

At least that's how I've always understood it. How does that manifest itself in practice -- my practice, to be precise? It means spending time with exhibitions, books, periodicals, and other vehicles through which photographers disseminate their output. Nothing arcane about it, at least from my perspective. Mostly, like the Rowan Atkinson character in the 1997 comedy *Bean: The Ultimate Disaster Movie*, "I sit and look at the pictures." Actually, not to get too technical about it, usually I stand when I'm looking at the pictures, because museums and galleries don't offer seating opportunities as often as they once did. Then I go home, where I sit down to write about them. I've done this since 1967, and while I've gotten old doing it, the doing of it hasn't gotten old. But the context that enabled me to earn my livelihood doing it has all but evaporated.

When I began publishing my commentaries on photography in 1968, I did so in large part because it seemed a matter of some urgency to jump-start a critical tradition for the medium, something that, inexplicably, it had lacked up till then. In his 1971 book *The Pound Era* the literary critic Hugh Kenner described the function this serves for the future, for history, for the ongoing life of a medium, in these words:

"There is no substitute for critical tradition: a continuum of understanding, early commenced. . . . Precisely because William Blake's contemporaries did not know what to make of him, we do not know either, though critic after critic appeases our sense of

obligation to his genius by reinventing him. . . . In the 1920s, on the other hand, *something* was immediately made of *Ulysses* and 'The Waste Land,' and our comfort with both works after 50 years, including our ease at allowing for their age, seems derivable from the fact that they have never been ignored."<sup>2</sup>

Photography had been pretty much ignored by critics up through the 1960s; the work of only a few of its major figures, and fewer of its minor ones, existed within "a continuum of understanding, early commenced." Beyond the poetics of photography, its then-disputed status as a medium for creative activity, there lay the much larger questions of its functions as a culture-wide visual communication system. Except for Marshall McLuhan and, before him, William M. Ivins, Jr., and before them Walter Benjamin, hardly anyone had thought those matters worthy of contemplation. All this struck me as fertile ground for inquiry, which I believed should take place before the broadest possible audience. Having become a freelance contributor to the *Village Voice*, a weekly forum for commentary on the arts, politics, and cultural issues, that seemed the logical place to start. So I did. My role models were my older colleagues at the *Voice*, as well as the art critic Sadakichi Hartmann, before me the most assiduous and consistent critic of photography, and James Agee in his work as a film critic for *The Nation*.

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Some 40 years later, in August 2010, I found myself in the historic city of Dali, near Kunming in the province of Yunnan, southwest China, serving in the role of international advisor to the second edition of a small festival there, the Dali International Photography Exhibition. In that role I got interviewed by local, regional, and national press on several occasions. During one such discussion, which went into my background and early experience as a critic, the interviewer asked if -- based on what added up then to five years of exposure on my part to the mainland Chinese photo and art scene -- I thought an independent critic such as myself, and a critical scene such as the western one I'd described to this reporter, could emerge in China.

As a matter of blunt fact, I doubt very much whether in my lifetime that military dictatorship will move sufficiently toward the model of an open society that any critic will find it possible to voice his or her honest opinion without fear or favor. However, I'm diplomatic enough not to make that explicit in the Chinese press, especially since, as a consequence of my current

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<sup>2</sup> Kenner, Hugh, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 415.

marriage, I have extensive family in China, where reprisal against relatives of anyone disfavored by the government enjoys a tradition stretching back for millennia.

So, to quote Brian Eno, I chose a more oblique strategy for my response. For a true critical dialogue to emerge around any medium at any time or place, I explained to my interviewer, certain conditions must exist. It requires, at a minimum, the following:

- A cultural and editorial environment that encourages the free public exchange of ideas.
- A publishing industry in which critics can function independently in relation to the individuals and institutions about which they write.
- A creative medium that's energized and in a state of ferment. That will attract attention from individuals interested in the medium who have a critical bent.
- An audience for that medium, even if only a small but devoted one, to serve as an initial readership and sounding board for critical response.
- Some publishers and editors of periodicals who see a value in serving that audience, and that medium, by providing editorial space for the critics.
- Sufficient compensation for those critics' editorial services to enable them at least to scrape together a modest living.

I didn't yet know enough about the art scene and photo scene in China, or the broader cultural scene there, I told him, to voice an opinion on the presence or absence of those necessary conditions. I added that while I'd found those ingredients available in sufficient quantity to enable me to sustain my own work during my start-up period, there had never been an abundance, and the supply had thinned drastically in recent years, in the States and elsewhere. So, I concluded with an attempt at tact, if China lacked an active critical dialogue about photography, it had company.

If the role of working photography critic has entered its Jurassic phase, then, one reason, certainly, has to do with the disappearance of anything resembling a support system for that enterprise.

This has never been a high-paying occupation; no one gets into it for the money earned by writing critical essays. As I recall, when I left the *Village Voice* in 1973 I got \$60 for each weekly column. The closest I've ever come to job security was the 1970 offer of a staff position at the *New York Times*, which I turned down in order to remain freelance for the *Times*, the *Voice*, and other publications.

The freelance life, precarious in the best of times, isn't for everyone. But I started out as

such at a moment when you could still live *la vie bohême* on a bohemian income in a major art and photography center like New York, especially if, like me, your luxury of choice was free time and you were willing to reside in the most remote of the so-called outer boroughs. Growing up in the heart of that city from the early 1940s through the middle 1960s I'd known many people in the arts and creative professions who managed to thrive in the cracks, so I assumed I could do the same, and did, for a while. But then they started tuck-pointing the cracks and raising the rents, till now it's become at best *faux* boho, a facsimile of bohemia. When people have to pay \$5000 monthly for their living and working spaces, they won't have much time for the life of the mind.

The fees I and my colleagues received for our articles, low at best, didn't keep pace with inflation or the cost of living. Nor did spaces open up for photo criticism at newspapers and general-audience periodicals to the extent that I anticipated as the "photo boom" of the 1970s began. I pieced together a living from a mix of writing revenues (including what I earned from my first two books), freelance teaching, and lecturing. Hand-to-mouth existence didn't appeal to me; I simply got used to it, but certainly understood when colleagues like Andy Grundberg and Shelley Rice left it behind to take full-time teaching jobs or executive positions in institutions that provided regular salaries, paid vacations, health benefits, and retirement plans, though they inevitably became only occasional writers with that decision.

Mind you, this was still the heyday of the print periodical. I've always believed that the cultural weight of serious discourse about any medium depends in part on the presence of that discourse in general-audience publications: newspapers and weekly or fortnightly or monthly magazines aimed at a broad educated readership with an interest in the arts. I also value the frequency of a readership's encounter with a regular contributor to a given publication's pages. That weekly, biweekly, monthly contact can achieve something akin to ongoing conversation, rather than the occasional chance encounter. But unless that conversation takes place in the same agora as discussion of politics, economics, film, television, and the events of the day, it's inherently ancillary, a side dish on the cultural menu.

And it only becomes the equivalent of a conversation when readers interact energetically and publicly with the critics of a medium, via the "letters to the editor" pages of the periodicals in which the critics publish. I've written at length about the unresponsiveness of the audience for photography,<sup>3</sup> so let me just say that the widespread absence of such feedback on the record

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<sup>3</sup> See "The Destruction Business: Some Thoughts on the Function of Criticism," in Coleman, A. D., *Depth*

provides no correctives for photo critics' errors and excesses, nor any tangible encouragement for their production. It also makes those readers, no matter how numerous, invisible to editors and publishers, leading them to conclude, not unreasonably, that the dedication of editorial space to photo criticism does not benefit the circulation of their periodicals in any way. Criticism of any medium in general-audience publications, when not subsidized by extensive advertising, is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of a mute and passive readership.

Don't get me wrong. I'm delighted to have had the opportunity to get published in small-circulation magazines like *Ag* and *Hotshoe*. As a writer I never know when or where my ideas will reach and resonate usefully with some reader who may not have access to my work in more widely distributed periodicals. And my numerous contributions to the medium's "little" magazines have enabled me to get certain ideas into print. Still, any dialogue that takes place only in the pages of small-circulation academic journals or specialized publications like art and photo magazines defines itself automatically as marginal in relation to the larger culture. So I aspire to get read by thoughtful fellow citizens of the world who may have an interest in the subjects I explore without any professional connection to the field. Hence my stints at the *Voice*, the *Times*, much later the *New York Observer*, and most recently a handful of pieces for newspapers in mainland China.

As you probably know, the entire publishing industry entered crisis mode with the advent of the World Wide Web in 1993. Publishers of books and periodicals, having hung on to 19th-century models far too long, found themselves in deep trouble. They began hemorrhaging revenue and readers, both of which migrated to the internet. That led to their demanding that writers donate online rights to them for no additional payment -- the cause of my departure from the *New York Observer*, as I'm insistent on retaining my copyright and subsidiary-rights licensing options. Compensation for online usage of work like mine has never risen to the painfully low level of payment for print usages, so, whatever its virtues, and they're many, the web did not represent a new revenue stream for myself or my photo-critical colleagues.

To the contrary, the web killed off many small, specialized print publications. Loss of circulation at larger publications led to loss of advertising, reducing the available budget for editorial content. That in turn has led them to a more reader-driven relationship to content, with the result that, in a steadily dumbed-down culture, Amy Winehouse, Kim Kardashian, Bruce Willis, Ashton Kutcher, and Demi Moore share front-page headline space with Arab Spring and

the European financial crisis.

Should I go along to get along? For instance, I feel confident that I could find an editor at a major magazine who'd commission a feature on celebrities who photograph -- people like Jeff Bridges, Dennis Hopper, Diane Keaton, Karl Lagerfeld, Richard Gere. Some of them aren't half-bad. If I'd started upright in my bed one midnight yearning to write that piece, I'd have done so. Instead, I cooked it up in a brainstorming session, half-heartedly trying to figure out what would sell instead of what I thought I should write next to make things hot for myself and my readers. That celebrities-as-photographers piece could turn into a lucrative book, even a traveling show, but it feels to me too much like sucking up to the rich and famous, or sucking up to the public's appetite for news of same, and my heart's never been in that.

On top of which, that assignment doesn't require a photo critic, who may look at those images and decide -- as I did recently with the paintings of Bob Dylan -- that they're competent and amiable but irrelevant to the medium's field of ideas. I guarantee you that's not what the editor who would commission such a feature would want to hear. No, that's a job for a cultural journalist. Specialized critics like myself, not just in photography but in all the arts, have begun to give way to "cultural journalists" -- jacks of all trades who know a little about many things and not much about anything in particular. They write as naïfs. A prime recent example would be Jane O'Brien's story, "Gertrude Stein celebrated at two Washington DC museums," posted at BBC News Online on October 14, 2011, which opens forthrightly as follows:

"I've often wondered whether approaching a subject from a standpoint of total ignorance sharpens my investigative powers, or whether it simply leads to inevitable embarrassment from which I'll never recover. That thought was uppermost when the National Portrait Gallery announced the opening of an exhibition on Gertrude Stein. Of course I'd heard of her -- wasn't she that famous feminist who burned her bra in the 1960s? -- But beyond that I really had no idea who she actually was."<sup>4</sup>

There you have cultural journalism in a nutshell, atypical only in the candidness with which its author confesses her incompetence for the task at hand and her editors' and publishers' willingness to lay on the table her lack of qualification for this assignment. To put it in our crude ex-colonial vernacular, O'Brien doesn't know shit from Shinola, crows about it in her news story, and gets paid for doing so by the BBC. Whatever its entertainment value for equally uninformed readers, paraded ignorance such as this adds nothing to the critical dialogue about

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15314287>.



Stein specifically or modernism generally.

I've chosen this example to demonstrate that the problem doesn't restrict itself to us bumpkins in the United States, knowing full well that doing so rubs salt into the wounds of residents of the sceptered isle, already smarting under the humiliating global scrutiny of its much grosser Fleet Street excesses. But that's another discussion. More to the point, are you prepared for features, reviews, and interviews on subjects photographic -- postmodernist practice, street photography, Victor Burgin, Jo Spence, Julia Margaret Cameron, Bill Brandt, you name it -- by cultural journalists who readily declare themselves *tabula rasa* but eager to learn? Because, ready or not, that's what you'll get henceforth in the mainstream press.

So one of the cluster of meteors that struck my little world to send up a smothering cloud of ash has begun to eliminate the editorial support system for what I do professionally as a writer, by substituting cultural journalism's one-size-fits-all daytrippers for staff or freelance specialized critics. Additionally, there's another change in the market that results from a change in their readerships. The *USA Today* model has permeated the industry. Editors now ask for short, punchy pieces, the shorter and punchier the better -- 250 words (roughly one double-spaced typewritten page) is great, 500 words okay, 750 words ample, 1000 words windy, and anything much over that longer than one can expect today's average readers to stay with to the end.

This is due partly to the widespread erosion of the ability to pay close and prolonged attention, for which we can hold the entirety of mass media and digital technology responsible, partly to the reading and writing habits of people who put in way too much time immersed in social media. Did you know that the average college student in the States today spends more than three hours a day doing email, instant messaging, and cellphone texting, plus another three hours surfing the web -- and that's the demographic publishers hope to reach?

The problem is that, given as I am to thorough disputation, I can't easily make the transition from essay form to the snippet, the text equivalent of the soundbite. I can extract substantive 250-word chunks from longer pieces much more easily than I can conceive and write them at that length by plan. Yet even when I do, I hear those fragments calling out to be reunited with the context from which I've severed them, like lost kittens mewling for their mother.

How does a critic compete with the claim on people's attention today of social media? I have a Facebook page to which I pay absolutely no attention. I'm not on Twitter. My idea of blogging, as you know if you've visited me at *Photocritic International*, involves writing at my preferred length and dividing it into parts for posting if an essay runs much over 1200 words. So

I genuinely have no idea how to do what I do in a much more condensed way. I do, however, give it thought. For example:

- Suppose I reconceptualize the 140-character "tweet" as a version of the form Allen Ginsberg named the "American sentence," a 17-syllable prose counterpart to the 17-syllable Japanese haiku?

- Should I try my hand at incorporating "lolspeak" or "kitty pidgin" into my writings -- for example, taking on the role of Ceiling Cat, benevolently declaring that "Edwurd Westin can haz negatif spayse"?

How about simply making my ideas more accessible to the current generation by converting them from texts into other formats?

- Turn my essays into spoken podcasts and/or YouTube videos.

- Turn them into comics, and my collections thereof into graphic novels, or fotonovelas:

*A. D. Coleman for Beginners.*

- Shift to a different model for my books: *Postmodern Photography for Dummies*, *The Complete Idiot's Guide To Group f/64*, *Photo-Based Art in 90 Minutes*. With lots of highlighted sections, bullet points, and tips.

This probably sounds facetious, but I have in fact considered all of the above, and may well try my hand at a few. As I told some colleagues during a lecture last week in Bratislava, 2011 is not 1960, and the college-age audience today is made up of people young enough to be my grandchildren. I and the cohort of students to which I belonged in 1960 resembled the 20-something cohort that walks into my classroom or surfs to my blog today only in their physiology and basic psychological and emotional structure. Socially, culturally, and especially in their relation to information technology, they're radically different from me, and from anyone born before the emergence of the internet and the World Wide Web.

On top of the texting and IM and chat I mentioned previously, they spend additional hours each day surfing online, then more time absorbing audio, video, and multimedia content -- on their computers, via their iPods and iPhones and Androids and Kindles and other electronic devices. These are their habitual relationships with technology. The abilities necessary to utilize these media also constitute skillsets, at which they are in most cases more adroit than I. Expecting them to set all this aside in order to work with my ideas in the form of printed texts exclusively, or even primarily, is simply unrealistic. So either I recognize and engage this cohort's technological skillsets and media preferences or else I lose them (or, at the very least, lose all but that small percentage who've come to enjoy substantive ratiocinative prose). Which

would leave me preaching not only to the converted but to a graying and dwindling subset thereof. Not an appealing prospect.

At the same time, they're also habituated to obtaining the content they consume for free. If I go to the trouble of developing new skills so that I can multipurpose my content in forms they enjoy more, they'll just swipe it -- and, like Kyle Newberry, diss me when I object. So why bother? Lately the theme song running in my head is Gillian Welch's "Everything is Free." You probably know its wry commentary on IP theft, which strikes a chord with me. However, her solution -- to sing privately, at home, for herself and those she loves -- doesn't really work for a critic, whose activity is either public or pointless.

Let's see if this old dog can learn some new tricks, while finding ways of making it pay for itself. Of course, I could use some help at this. I understand you can hire people to manage your social-media life for you, and it may come to that. But I've already created a video for YouTube, in my performance-art alter ego as The Derrière Garde; podcasting doesn't seem all that hard; I'm reading Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Barbara Slate's *You Can Do a Graphic Novel*; and a lolspeak post at my blog isn't out of the question. Adapt or die, right?

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Let me return to considering the state of the discourse. Due to an unfortunate combination of circumstances, I parted company with the *Village Voice* in 1973 and the *New York Times* in 1974, published in assorted comparatively small-circulation or targeted periodicals for the next 14 years, and didn't establish a platform at another general-audience publication until I commenced my column in the *New York Observer* in 1988. So, as a working critic, I was sidelined during much of the photo boom that brought the medium to center stage in the art world and the wider culture.

Still, I felt heartened to watch photography start to get some of the attention it deserved, and photographers -- including some who'd paid a lot of dues -- start to get some respect. But then two things happened unexpectedly. First, in 1977 Susan Sontag published the one book on the medium that we can now expect a culturally literate person to have read. She titled it *On Photography*, though she subsequently confessed that "[*On Photography*] is not about photography! [Emphasis in the original.] . . . Now you've got me. I said it, and I didn't mean to say it. It's not about photography, it's about the consumer society, it's about advanced industrial society . . . [and] about photography as the exemplary activity of this society. I don't want to say it's not about photography, but it's true . . . I'm not a photography critic. I don't know how to be

one."<sup>5</sup>

Well, silly me -- and perhaps silly us -- for taking her book's title at face value, instead of sussing out that she'd simply chosen photography as a convenient whipping boy. Among the things that disturbed me about Sontag's treatise were its "case closed" tone, which discouraged its readers from inquiring further into the medium's field of ideas by suggesting that it had none, and the fact that nowhere in it (indeed, nowhere in any of her subsequent writings on the medium) does Sontag pay close, careful attention to even a single photograph, verifying her assertion that she didn't know how to be a photography critic.

A quarter-century later, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2002), Sontag recanted many of her positions on the grounds that they were "now fast approaching the status of platitudes" -- as if they hadn't been such when first uttered. But the impact of the first book has far exceeded any counterbalancing effect of the much less influential follow-up. Certainly no one who has used her original aphorisms and *aperçus* as substantiation for their own positions has felt any need to revise their stands drastically because Sontag did so with hers.

Sontag's book was written in accessible language; even the passages plagiarized from Roland Barthes came from his newspaper columns, not his denser treatises. But *On Photography* served in part to popularize the set of ideas concerning photography and its relation to culture that was coming to be known as postmodernism. The usefulness of some of those ideas notwithstanding, the advent of postmodernist criticism precipitated a breathtakingly rapid descent into highly jargonized discourse with a patently gatekeeping subtext. Most of those producing it showed no interest in mainstreaming their theories via general-audience publications; they published in (and often founded for that purpose) small-circulation journals like *October* and *Afterimage*.

A few advocates for the movement, like Andy Grundberg at the *New York Times* and Ingrid Sischy at the *New Yorker*, achieved a more penetrable style in which to propound postmodern notions. But their writing made it clear that one purpose of this approach was to valorize a certain defined set of practitioners and, to use one of their favorite locutions, "discredit" others (Minor White, W. Eugene Smith, Sebastiao Salgado among the "discredited"). These elevations and dismissals were based not on the power of the photographers' work but on assessment of the correctness of their politics. All of this reminiscent, if you know your music

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<sup>5</sup> These statements appear in Victor Bockris's interview, "Susan Sontag: The Dark Lady of Pop Philosophy," *High Times*, March 1978, p. 36.

history, of the Stalinist Ewan McColl organizing the members of the UK's folk-music clubs to disrupt Bob Dylan's pioneering rock & roll concerts during his 1966 tour.

Whatever our respective relationships to postmodernism, I'd hope we could agree that in practice postmodern theory does not encourage close scrutiny of individual images as such, nor concern itself with their facture or the physical characteristics of them as crafted objects. One can read the entirety of the critical literature on Cindy Sherman, for example, without encountering much in the way of detailed description of any of her images or prints. To whatever extent Sontag, and the postmodern critics addressing photography from the 1970s on, prompted people to think about photography and photographers in the abstract, they didn't do much to make them feel it might be important to "sit and look at the pictures." Nor to make them feel that engaging critically with photography could be done by the average citizen, in everyday language, without benefit of clergy.

The decade following the publication of Sontag's book saw an enormous investment in projects and activities devoted to the sesquicentennial of photography, the designated 150th anniversary of the medium's public birth. New museums of photography, new departments of photography in art museums, new photo festivals in dozens of countries; new histories of photography and other monographs in dozens of languages -- these and more made a wealth of images and information about them available to a rapidly widening audience for the medium.

We missed that boat. For a year or more the world regularly turned its eyes to the medium. We did not have a cohort of critics ready, willing, and able to take advantage of that teaching moment and convert it to a permanent, multi-levelled, polyvocal public debate about photography, its practitioners, their images, and the many issues relating to all those. With all the hooplah attendant on the sesquicentennial, you'd have thought that by the end of 1989 every major newspaper and general-audience magazine, and many minor ones, would have a knowledgeable writer on photography on call, if not on staff, and contributing regularly. That never happened, perhaps because so many of my colleagues were busying themselves distinguishing the signifier from the signified, a distinction that, incomprehensibly, has never gripped the public imagination.

By dint of perseverance and good fortune, in mid-1988 I'd managed to establish myself at the *New York Observer*, a weekly newspaper, as their official photography critic, producing a weekly column. By then art magazines worldwide had opened themselves up to coverage of photography, and a whole slew of "little" photo magazines had sprung up. I multipurposed and self-syndicated that *Observer* material, and more, to publications across North America, in

Europe, and in the U.K., for close to a decade. Some I converted to broadcasts for National Public Radio. It felt as if, in tandem with my colleagues, we were all right on the cusp of something huge, the field of photography simultaneously consolidating and expanding.

Then the tsunami of the World Wide Web hit, as previously mentioned, rapidly changing the publishing industry in ways that certainly didn't benefit writers as professional content providers. And the web represents an even larger, epochal change: the cultural shift from analog to digital information at every level -- production, storage, retrieval, transmission. Suddenly it became possible to create an image, or a text, without having to create an object -- the dematerialization of communication.

As a result, the medium of photography itself has morphed into something so new and different that we begin to call it by other, provisional names. Post-secondary former departments of photography scramble to rename themselves: digital imaging, multimedia, media arts. Museums of photography, photo festivals, and photography magazines face the same challenge. And so, certainly, do those few of us self-identified as photography critics. If the terms *photographer* and *photography* now inch toward the archaic, photo criticism as a descriptor can't lag far behind.

I've deliberately defined my territory widely, from the start. I continue to believe, as I always have, that there's a value to having someone grounded in the history and evolution of lens-based imagery addressing the broadest spectrum of work related to that medium, from classic 19th-century photography through photo-based art to photorealist painting to holography. Increasingly, however, I see work at photo festivals, in photo galleries and museums, at the websites of artists self-defined as photographers, that includes kinetic as well as still imagery, incorporates sound or animation or computer graphics, presents itself in installation format. At what point does the rubric "photography" cease to function as an accurate way of identifying such projects, and when does it become unproductive, indeed inaccurate, to call someone who writes about such works a photography critic?

Were I setting out today on an updated version of the enterprise I initiated in 1968, even one in which critical attention to 19th- and 20th-century photography played a central role, I wouldn't present myself to editors as a photography critic, out of concern that they'd find that not just overly narrowcast but even esoteric. I don't know what I'd substitute, but that designation has now outlived its usefulness, though a few of us who mined that vein when it ran rich may end up stuck with it for life.

Mind you, though I'm technoskeptical I'm not technophobic. I've written about electronic

communication and the emergence of digital forms since the late 1960s. As a professional writer, I've worked on a computer since the late 1980s. I started publishing my first website, and my first blog (though we didn't have that term then) in 1995, making me an early adapter of the World Wide Web. Nowadays I publish and edit four sites. I also write reviews of computer software and hardware for Mac Edition Radio, a website. So I'm comfortable in the digital environment.

And I want to make it clear that I'm not mourning the passing of print per se as the vehicle for a critical dialogue about photography. Conceivably that dialogue could take place in cyberspace. To date, and to my surprise, I'm alone among my colleagues in establishing a substantial presence on the web via a site of my own. And while some photography magazines have gone online, such as *Viewfinder* and *Hotshoe*, they emphasize presentation of photographers' projects rather than critical discourse.

Yet even if dozens of my colleagues start blogging and one or more online journals devoted to photography criticism emerge, as I hope they will, that won't have much more impact on the broader culture than would the publication of several more equivalent specialized print journals.

The effect won't be the same as it would be if, say, the *International Herald Tribune* and *Newsweek* added photo critics to their rosters for the first time, and the *New York Times* returned such a designated hitter to its staff -- even if those publications were to terminate their print editions and become entirely web-based. Because that coverage, in such forums, in print or online, signals that a medium has achieved a level of cultural gravitas. Recall, if you're old enough, the pivotal moments when criticism of jazz and then rock & roll moved beyond such magazines as *Down Beat*, *Metronome*, and *Crawdaddy* in the States, or *Melody Maker* here in the U.K., and started showing up in the pages of the London *Times*, and you'll know what I mean.

Whatever the condition of the discipline of photography criticism, the still photograph remains much more than an obsolescing historical artifact. Over the past several decades we've had a number of teaching moments, occasions on which commentary from prominent, articulate critics knowledgeable about the medium should have formed part of the public debate over situations involving the medium:

- the so-called "culture wars," of course, in which much of the attack from the right centered around controversial photographs;
- the ongoing U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" war with Iraq, which began in 2003, premised itself in part on energetic misinterpretation of aerial photographs, ostensibly showing

manufacturing sites for weapons of mass destruction that did not in fact exist;

- the Abu Ghraib scandal of 2006 that discredited the U.S. in much of the Middle East and elsewhere resulted from the release of snapshots of torture of prisoners, images made by unidentified U.S. military personnel;

- and the resignation in 2011 of Democratic U.S. Congressman Anthony Weiner over the "Weinergate" photos started with the disclosure of self-portraits he'd used in "sexting" a 21-year-old woman via the social media website Twitter, images he suggested had been "doctored" before 'fessing up and leaving office.

These particular instances highlight the fact that the still photograph has not lost its potency as a cultural artifact. To the contrary, photographs made and presented within the contexts of vernacular photography, news photography, evidentiary photography, and contemporary art activity have provoked extraordinary response in our time. Meanwhile, digital imaging has unleashed a flood of altered still images, as well as an upsurge in claims that verifiably unaltered images have somehow been falsified. We can't afford a citizenry unsophisticated in its relation to such images and unequipped to question and challenge manipulative public presentations thereof. Such a discourse requires exemplars and guides, roles in which dedicated critics serve the public. But they can only provide that service when they speak from platforms that make them publicly visible. Such platforms, never plentiful, have dwindled in number and seem likely to disappear altogether.

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Allow me to sum up what I'm proposing as the symptoms and causes of the demise of photography criticism as a substantial public discourse.

- Unlike criticism of most of the other creative media -- literature, music, film, theater, dance, the visual arts -- photo criticism never established more than a tenuous toehold in widely distributed general-audience publications, such as newspapers and magazines devoted to coverage of cultural issues. Thus it never became a mainstream form of criticism, remaining a peripheral or minor one at best.

- The limited opportunity to do such work for adequate compensation made the discipline of photo criticism less than attractive to potential practitioners of this craft. This enabled only a few people to pursue it vocationally; most engage with it avocationally.

- The lack of any financial support for photo criticism (in the form of advertising) from the institutions and industries that sponsor the public presentation of photography -- museums, galleries, book publishers -- made the inclusion of photo criticism in such periodicals optional



and thus dispensable, from a financial point of view. The current international financial crisis ensures that this situation will only get worse.

- The absence of a responsive audience for photo criticism -- an audience ready, willing, and able to interact energetically and publicly with photo critics via letters to the editor -- not only delimits the dialogue to infrequent public exchanges between critics but means that editors and publishers remain unaware of the existence of any readership for any photo criticism that they put into print.

- Postmodern theory has dominated critical writing about photography since the late 1970s. The writing style of many critics of the postmodernist tendency is off-putting to the average reader (and thus to the editors of large-circulation periodicals). Most such writers thus restrict their writing to specialized, small-circulation journals and their audiences to the readership thereof.

- Concentration by many postmodernist critics on a small roster of photographers and artists using photography -- Jeff Wall, the Bechers and their students, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Andres Serrano, Alfredo Jaar, Laurie Simmons, Robert Mapplethorpe -- has in fact ensured the existence of a "continuum of understanding, early commenced" that constitutes the early phase of a critical tradition for their work. But there's a much wider range of significant work, past and present, that has received insufficient critical attention, and that gap widens instead of shrinking.

- An opportunity to mainstream photo criticism presented itself in the 1980s, in connection with the energy and activity surrounding the upcoming sesquicentennial of photography in 1989. While that period resulted in the establishment of new photography museums and festivals, other new photo-related institutions and organizations, new magazines of photography, and other ventures, it did not lead to an increased presence of photo critics in the mainstream media -- due in part to the shortage of critics able to communicate effectively in such forums, and interested in so doing.

- The crisis of the print publishing industry generated by the advent of digital formats and the World Wide Web has led to the drastic cutting down of editorial space available for perceived "boutique" content such as photo criticism.

- The replacement of critics specialized in one or another of the arts with generalist "cultural journalists" has radically reduced the opportunities for knowledgeable photo critics to establish platforms for their work in large-circulation general-audience periodicals, whether in print or online.

- The shortened attention span of the contemporary audience is not compatible with the standard form for critical writing: the substantial, carefully argued prose essay.
- The transformation of the medium of photography itself, the transition from analog to digital for most of the primary forms of vernacular and quotidian photography and even many of its specialized uses, has redefined the medium to such an extent that defining the activity under consideration as photography criticism may not effectively outline the territory such a commentator would explore.

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For all those reasons, then, I think the heyday of photography criticism has passed. I don't mean to suggest that no one will write passionately, critically, and well about photography ever again, and I can state as a certainty that numerous others have done so to date. But as a variant of the cultural function sometimes called the public intellectual, the photography critic per se made it out of the minor leagues only briefly, and photo criticism as the form in which such an individual would cast his or work has rarely escaped its microbrew status. I don't say this to castigate anyone else, nor to fault myself. Though I think it might have gone differently, I can't prove that.

So yes, Kyle, I'm dinosaur bones -- and Andy Grundberg, Vicki Goldberg, Tony Bannon, Vince Aletti, and a small bunch of others along with me. Hope springing eternal, as it tends to do, I'll close by saying that perhaps time will convert us into a fossil fuel that can drive the engine of some future ongoing high-profile international public debate over lens-derived imagery of all kinds and their implications, facilitated by informed provocateurs. I don't care whether they call themselves photo critics, or define their work as photo criticism. Critical writing about photography is, in any case, a subset of critical writing in general, which in turn forms a category (though not often enough acknowledged as such) of literature. And I feel toward my little corner of that territory as Jean Rhys felt about hers: "All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. And there are trickles like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don't matter. The lake matters. You must keep feeding the lake."

(This is the complete text of a lecture delivered on November 8, 2011 at Hotshoe Gallery, London, co-sponsored by Hotshoe International, Viewfinder Photography gallery, and the VASA Project.)