

**My Camera in the Olive Grove:
Prolegomena to the Legitimization of Photography
by the Academy**

by A. D. Coleman

The past decade has borne witness to a new and surprising phenomenon: a dramatic increase in the academic acceptance of photography as a serious field of creative and scholarly inquiry, and, as the inevitable corollary thereof, the rise of a photographic academy whose structure, function, and attitudes are analogous (and, in most cases, essentially identical) to current versions of the more established academies within such media as painting and literature.

The prime symbol and crowning glory of this sudden ascension, at least on this side of the Atlantic, was the establishment in 1972 of the David Hunter McAlpin Professorship of the History of Photography and Modern Art at Princeton University. That segment of the photographic community which is still caught up in the battle for photography's recognition as a "legitimate" art form has taken great satisfaction from this specific development and the larger iceberg it implies.

Certainly, on a ritualistic level, it is a formal vindication of Alfred Stieglitz, his apostles and descendants, and their years of struggle to win a place for photography within the charmed inner circle of the "high" arts. (That the man for whom this \$1-million chair was custom-built — Peter Bunnell, former curator of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography — wrote his doctoral thesis on Stieglitz adds an appropriate symmetrical fillip).

Such an unexpectedly warm welcome is naturally intoxicating. Yet, after more than a century of academic scorn as the illegitimate offspring of the sciences and the graphic arts, it might be wise — if only on principle — for the photographic community to be somewhat less eager and more cautious upon being clasped to the bosom of the aesthetic nuclear family.

To have "legitimacy" thus instantly conferred is at best a mixed blessing.

For anyone who takes photography seriously, it is of course gratifying on one level to witness an increased attention to the medium from art critics, galleries, museums, collectors, and institutions of higher learning. On another level, however, acquiescence to the elevation of photography from the ranks of the "low" arts tacitly affirms the validity of a hierarchy among the arts.

This peerage is a hoary construct, deeply rooted in capitalistic premises. Its fundamental principle is an aristocratic one: that a medium's stature and significance are not to be gauged on internal qualities — i.e., the calibre of the work done by its exponents — nor on such work's effect upon the external world, but are instead proportional to that work's financial worth, inaccessibility, and lack of functional utility. The high arts, after all have always been those which only the leisure class could afford to pursue.

For those of us who are seeking the elimination of this archaic, elitist concept of art, the reaffirmation of that aesthetic stratification, with its obvious allegiance to the class system, may understandably be viewed as counterproductive. Photography is inherently a democratic medium; anyone concerned with the cultural shortsightedness which has ensured the accuracy of Moholy-Nagy's frightening prediction of visual illiteracy cannot help but look askance at such priorities. In evaluating photography's newly-conferred academic respectability, then, it is important to take note of the implicit premises thereof. Wrapping the mantle of scholarly approval around a medium which has received the cold shoulder from birth is surely a significant attempt at redefinition.

Simultaneously, we must look closely at the emerging photographic academy itself, in order to examine the implicit and explicit definitions of photography which it propounds. Photography is a unique medium in many ways, one of which is that it is enormously widespread and highly diversified in its utilitarian, communicative, and creative functions, yet young enough to have developed only a few centralized power blocs. These loci therefore exercise an ability to shape our definitions — and thus our culture's understanding of photography — which is quite disproportionate to their age and size.

The new photographic academy is certainly one of these. Paradoxically, to consider its influence at length is to risk extending that influence; yet we cannot afford to ignore it. It is unlikely that it will simply go away.

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"I think today you are seeing the beginnings of a very significant decline in the number of photographers who will be producing serious work for the simple, basic reason that their primary economic source is drying up, which is teaching. It's absolutely true. We have no monopoly on it, but we've got a very, very high percentage of our people who are fundamentally in the teaching profession as a vehicle to support what in fact is an art that is not being supported through any other vehicle."

— Peter Bunnell, *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, Vol. IV, No. 3, July-August 1973.

Though it may be looser structurally, on a practical level an academy operates in patterns common to such kindred organizations as craft guilds and trade unions. One of the primary functions of such institutions is to promote the interests of their members by venerating and propagating standards of performance which, not coincidentally, reflect with considerable accuracy the capabilities, work habits, and taste patterns of those who belong to them.

A standard is a goal whose achievability has been proven beyond question. Within a guild/union context, standards proclaim what can be accomplished comfortably and decorously. No such organization has ever propounded standards which could not be met with relative ease by the lowest common denominator of its membership. No goldsmith's guild ever drums out all but the Cellinis. Standards embody the average competence of those who subscribe to and promulgate them. Such standards are maintained by limiting the number of licensed practitioners and requiring that new licensees be trained by older ones. In guild and union situations, this takes place through the process of apprenticeship: learning to do something the way someone else does it.

Until quite recently, this transmission of craft competence was the sole thrust of formalized photography education. As a beginning, this was necessary. There were few textbooks — much less organized, coherent programs — dealing with the problems and issues of creative (as opposed to commercial) photographic image-making. Consequently, the best and often the only sources for relevant information were those few individual master photographers who had pulled together some coherent, communicable *modus operandi* from their own experience and were willing to disseminate their personal know-how in the classroom.

This was certainly better than no photography education at all, but it had numerous flaws. One of these was the creation of a star system under which a particular college, university, or art institute would be considered photographically significant not because it had, say, an intelligently-structured and well-rounded program which gave students a thorough grounding in the history of the medium and all the diverse processes it encompasses, but rather because Harry or Aaron or Minor or Ansel or Jerry was teaching there. To be sure, there's nothing wrong with wanting to know how Harry or Aaron or Minor or Ansel or Jerry "does it," but the leaking of one's trade secrets to (and the infliction of one's taste patterns on) a group of students hardly constitutes a formal educational methodology.

One central issue in photography education (and, for that matter, in photography criticism) is the necessity for developing a useful, comprehensive, nonsectarian vocabulary for discussing the expression and communication of ideas, feelings, and perceptions through photographic imagery is among the The lack of such a vocabulary is among the crucial problems in contemporary photography. It was surely perpetuated by the star system, which encouraged students to mimic the dialect of one or another individual image-maker, instead of evoking a mother tongue for them and encouraging proficiency therein. During this period, students from different schools often had so little in common that they could not even discuss their differences profitably. This problem has been and continues to be compounded by inarticulate photographer-teachers who delude

students into the false belief that verbal incompetence and illiteracy are a photographer's badges of honor.

Nevertheless, one can also point out some highly beneficial results of this apprenticeship system. The general level of craftsmanship among students of creative photography rose markedly across the board during that stage in the growth of photography education, and it also spread much more widely than might have been expected, due to an explosion of interest in studying photography which began in the early 1960's. This is not the proper place to trace the causes of that upsurge, which are multiple and complex, ranging as they do from increased affluence among the young to Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*. Suffice it to say that during that decade colleges, universities, and art institutes across North America added new photography departments and expanded extant ones. This in turn created a booming market for teachers of photography, fostering the illusion that anyone with a Master of Fine Arts in creative photography could always "fall back on teaching" to support him/herself.

When the economic bubble burst at the beginning of the 1970's, many of these young photographers found themselves redundant. The job market in teaching creative photography began to dry up, the competition became stiffer, and the ability to make personal images, even interesting ones, was no longer enough to guarantee one gainful employment in some school somewhere.

Those schools now hiring teachers of photography are in a position to pick and choose, so they are beginning to require credentials beyond a camera, a portfolio of prints, and a sheepskin. Generally, they are coming to expect applicants to be adept at all the various photographic processes, old and new, even if they don't employ such means in their own work. Increasingly, they expect candidates to have enough of a background in the history of photography to teach that subject as well. Often they require some training in teaching, which is a craft in itself. And, as a more interdisciplinary approach to photographic education at last begins to flower, schools are starting to sift through the mass for those who are able to teach photography not only as a means of introspective self-expression but

as a major language form — one whose communicative effectiveness can be of value to students from such diverse disciplines as sociology, history, and psychiatry.

Naturally, this puts the squeeze on those who are really only in it for the money, a fact which Peter Bunnell bemoans in the statement quoted above. I feel quite differently about it: the last thing photography needs, at this point or any other, is a generation of students whose instructors viewed teaching not as a calling but as a sinecure. Whichever of these attitudes one agrees with, the fact is that education is currently metamorphosing from the guild-derived master-apprentice relationship to the professor-scholar symbiosis of the academy, and that this is occurring at a time when there is an unprecedented demand for photography education but an oversupply of would-be teachers.

Under such circumstances, any association whose imprimatur is convertible to heightened employability and/or job security is in a position of power. With such power comes politics.

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"Artists now not only admit to but are acutely aware of what they once only suspected and often avoided; that the central theme of their picture-making is imagery itself."

— William Jenkins, "Some Thoughts on 60's Continuum,"
Image, Vol. 15, No. 1, March 1972

What differentiates an academy from a guild or union is that the academy concerns itself with transmitting not just craft competence but ideas as well. It is precisely in this regard that an academy always poses a threat to the medium it nominally represents. By definition, the purpose of an academy is to formalize the history of its medium by the analysis, annotation, and codification of that medium's traditions. But traditions, by definition, cannot be thus regimented and reduced to formulae. As John Szarkowski has written, artistic tradition "exists in the minds of artists and consists of their collective memory of what has been accomplished so

far. Its function is to mark the starting point for each day's work. Occasionally it is decided that tradition should also define the work's end result. At this point the tradition dies."¹ Once an institution such as an academy becomes the source or reference point for the traditions of a medium, those traditions become fixed, immobile, and begin to lose their vitality. They cease to operate as traditions and instead are converted into conventions.

Conventions, like standards, are embodiments of competence. But creativity and competence are often incompatible with each other. This is not to say that incompetence is a virtue; but from a creative standpoint, a state of incompetence is often a necessity. Competence, after all, directs its possessor towards the duplication of what has already been done via the employment of time-tested, foolproof procedures. Creativity, on the other hand, is a form of incompetence aimed at generating that which has never before existed and which therefore has no pre-set rules to guide its making, no extant model by which its success or failure can be measured. Creative activity is essentially anarchic, incorporating accident, risk, innovation, abnormality, change.

An artistic academy is therefore almost always a contradiction in terms. Conservative by nature, devoted (like all institutions) to stability out of self-preservation, an academy seeks to maintain the past in the present by molding the present with the past. Such an organism, whose phase is predominantly entropic, is automatically at loggerheads with its medium's avant-garde. For it is always the latter who are disregarding and/or deliberately violating their medium's history and traditions, breaking through the boundaries on the academy's maps in order to keep their medium alive and growing. Historically, an academy's relationship to the living pioneers in its medium has usually been an antagonistic one, since academies are bastions of conventionalism while subversion of the established order — emotional, aesthetic, political, philosophical, and cultural — lies close to the heart of the creative impulse. Academies tend to be the mausoleums of

¹ *Looking at Photographs; 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 120.

tradition, as museums tend to be the graveyards of art.

Often there are positive benefits to be derived from the presence of an active academy within the larger context of a living medium. Some of these we are already beginning to reap. Among them are the spread of craft competence; the organization of an informational network, and a consequent increase in the rapidity of communication; the preservation of significant creative works and research materials; an increased attention to the medium's history and development; revitalization of still-viable methods and processes (such as the non-silver processes of the late nineteenth century, which will be newly useful in the silverless late twentieth century); and the power, respect, and money which accrue to academically established media as a rule.

These are unobjectionable in and of themselves, but there is a flip side to most of these coins, a price to pay. Overemphasis on craft competence can deaden creativity. A short-circuited informational network of the sort William Jenkins waxes so enthusiastic over can rapidly become inbred and anemic (a demonstrated tendency of academicized creative activity). Western culture's obsession with permanence and immortality manifests itself in our continual warehousing of the past. The scrutiny of art isolated from the personal and cultural contexts in which it grew leads to the dry, reductivist formalism of "photographs about photography." And too much time in the ivory tower can convince one that life imitates art — or, indeed, that art replaces life.

Those are some of the risks on the down side insofar as the existence of a photographic academy is concerned. Yet, inconsidering that eventuality it is imperative to do more than merely strike some balance between these advantages and drawbacks. As noted previously, photography education is at a point of transition. The key problems facing us at this juncture are: the development of a nonsectarian vocabulary; the shaping of a methodology for teaching the fundamentals of visual communication with photography to workers in all disciplines, not only to "art photographers"; and the broadening of the base of photographic education so that photography becomes a tool as basic as writing,

taught from grade school on up to all members of our society.

These are not insoluble problems, but they are inarguable priorities. If the new academy can provide assistance in solving them in the most productively visionary fashion possible, then its presence will be a positive factor in the medium's evolution.

If, however, the photographic academy proves to be such deadweight as only a bastion of tradition can be, we might do well to remember that photography has already altered permanently the ways in which we experience our world and understand our experience. Photography has done so entirely without an academy of its own, and often over the active opposition of the larger academic community. Under such circumstances, it would not be ill-advised to retain the option of reverting to bastardy, should that involve losing nothing more than the dubious distinction of the good name of Art.

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