

Items for an Agenda

by A. D. Coleman

You might think it eccentric of me to propose that a program in Latin American studies would be sensible preparation for a career in art photography. Yet there's something here for those with a nose for the ironic, for what afflicts North American art photography today is a complex of conditions that we gringos are more prone to attribute to the social dilemma (as we understand it) of Mexico and other countries in the southern hemisphere. That is, North American art photography today is produced by a migrant-labor caste that cannot escape its condition because it is politically uneducated, only marginally literate, and addicted to its religion and its lotteries.

This migrant-labor caste, from which emanates what one recent anthology optimistically labels "new American photography,"¹ is composed almost exclusively of men and women under the age of forty with Master of Fine Arts degrees granted by photography programs housed in colleges, universities, and art institutes. This M.F.A. degree is considered to be a terminal degree — that is, the highest form of academic certification available to the studio artist.

As almost anyone who has bought one will agree, the M.F.A. degree has only one practical application: it is a work permit that qualifies its possessor to seek employment in the academic-photography sector of the photographic-art establishment. For several decades now, that establishment has actively encouraged thousands upon thousands of young people to enter a program of studies in order to acquire a credential which would only certify them as potentially capable of teaching what they had been taught. They were lured by the promises of full employment and a work situation which would leave them ample time to pursue their artmaking inclinations.

For various reasons, this agenda was attractive to a certain sector of the North American public: white, middle-class, untypically close to parity in its gender distribution

¹ Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, *New American Photography* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1985).

— a privileged group, in short. Politically uninformed, unaware even of what would constitute its own enlightened self-interest, this caste bred so rapidly that it soon flooded the labor pool. This, along with that caste's reliance on movies and television for its sense of history and its relation to language, enabled management (in our case, the academic-art establishment) to use this labor force against itself.

Erosion of the tenure system, in opposition to which there are indeed numerous sensible arguments, was the first step. Then came the elimination of long-term contracts. With the Yeshiva University decision several years ago, in which the Supreme Court declared faculty of private institutions of higher learning to be management, thus ineligible for collective bargaining, this marginalization was virtually complete. More and more, teaching artists and art teachers (these are not synonyms) work under short-term contracts of two years or less, moving continuously from job to job. Their tenuous hold on stability is further undermined by the evolution of an underclass of freelance pieceworkers: part-time teachers willing to work for next to nothing, with no protection or benefits — even willing, in their desperation, to serve as levers for the removal of anyone who complains, since there are dozens, indeed hundreds, ready to jump into any abandoned niche without asking difficult questions.

Fortunately for the power structure, it has not been necessary to shatter a spirit of community or a sense of working-class solidarity in achieving this control: those attitudes were already alien to this caste. However, two forces traditionally used to keep migrant labor from rebelling against its oppression are in active operation here.

One is religion. In this instance, the belief system begins with faith in the status of artist as a privileged, even transcendent position in our culture. This is encouraged by the training schools in which academic artists are bred. So too, of course, is the notion that their degree certifies not only that they are artists but, magically, good artists; and, even more amazingly, that at the ripe age of twenty-four or so they have something to teach to others.

(By the way, there is rumor that some schools, unable to guarantee employment to their M.F.A. graduates, are planning to invent a *new* terminal degree, the Doctor of Fine Arts or D.F.A. This would instantly obsolesce all M.F.A. degrees, forcing the entire

labor pool back into school for job retraining, thereby temporarily alleviating the pressures of unemployment. A brilliant stroke, no?)

Like state-run religions, state-run lotteries are invariably counter-revolutionary. If religion promises pie in the sky when you die, transcendence in the afterlife, the lottery seduces one into gambling for a piece of the action, upward mobility here on earth. Paradoxically, lotteries are a form of taxation of the poor yet also a means for calming them; no one with a ticket for a sweepstakes in her pocket is likely to work wholeheartedly to change the system.

The myth of the specialness of the artist is this migrant-labor caste's religion. What are its lotteries? Why, the National Endowment for the Arts grants to individuals, along with such other sources of selective support as the Guggenheim Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts, for one. Another is the gallery-museum network, with its' star system, sometimes plucking the to-be-anointed right out of their graduate-school thesis seminars.

Almost all contemporary artists play these lotteries, even if warily or cynically; very few abstain on principle. The younger ones seem unaware that it was once considered possible to be an artist without ever getting a grant. Like welfare clients, they have become enmeshed in a psychological cycle of dependency on the dole, unable to conceive of a creative project that does not require outside funding or to initiate one that does not receive it.

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All this is a not-unpredictable consequence of following one particular model of artistic activity. Is there an alternative?

Consider this statement from the Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo, made in 1968. It is intended to describe Mexican mural artists, but I think it also limns a radically different artistic attitude and a different type of artist altogether. (Although I suspect he would not say so himself, I've always taken it to be the photographer's self-description and credo as well.)

Popular Art is the art of the People. A popular painter is an artisan who, as in the Middle Ages, remains anonymous. His work needs no advertisement, as it is done for the people around him. The more pretentious artist craves to become

famous, and it is characteristic of his work that it is bought for the name rather than for the work — a name that is built up by propaganda. . . . The art called Popular is quite fugitive in character, of sensitive and personal quality, with less of the impersonal and intellectual characteristics that are the essence of the art of the schools. It is the work of talent nourished by personal experience and by that of the community — rather than being taken from the experiences of other painters in other times and other cultures, which forms the intellectual chain of nonpopular art.²

I know of no more succinct description of that black hole which is the current North American photo scene — a voracious vacuum into which crop after crop of highly-touted new stars have simply disappeared, a vacancy which threatens to suck all the life out of this so recently young and vital medium. Impersonal, intellectualized, egocentric, detached from the context of its own time and place, sustained by hype: these are the same phrases so many of us mutter as we walk through museums, galleries, the corridors of graduate programs across the country, or thumb desperately through monographs and magazines, looking for anything worth looking at twice.

If this is, unintentionally and by indirection, a description of the way things are here, it is also (again by indirection) a prescription for how things might be changed. Piecing together the clues imbedded in Alvarez Bravo's statement, I would extrapolate a set of understandings in the shape of an agenda which I offer for the contemplation of anyone who, like myself, finds the "new American photography" stillborn.

- If you would be an artist whose work truly matters to any group of people, you must live as one of them, speaking their language, sharing their experience, their air, their food, their water, addressing your mutual concerns. Therefore, the first rule is: *Stay put*. Grow roots; allow the soil to feed you.
- Dig in your heels. Do not accede to any system that would shunt you aimlessly, constantly, from one context to another. Such systems are hostile to your survival. Develop versatility; there are alternative means for supporting yourself.

² Quoted in Edwards, Emily, *Painted Walls of Mexico: From Prehistoric Times until Today* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 145.

Learn to thrive in the cracks.

- If you live in an art ghetto, you will think like a herd animal; if you live as a hermit, you will make hermetic art. Find some middle ground where there is room to breathe and time to think, where no one knows of any reputation you may have acquired. Try to keep it that way.
- Make a home for yourself. Heed the rhythms of intimacy. The artist must learn to be at home in his or her own work, to invite others in and make them feel welcome.
- Know history, especially your particular history, that of yourself and your people, whoever they are. You must be aware of all that has brought you to this moment. Only then can this moment, or any other, be truly yours.
- You are a worker, a producer of objects, a citizen in the polity. Be aware of your class origins, your class position, your class aspirations. Never allow yourself to believe — as did Ernest Hemingway — that the only difference between the rich and the poor is that "the rich have more money."
- Speak — and make art — when you have something to say. Otherwise, teach yourself to shut up. Accept the natural rhythms of your own fallow and fertile cycles. Do not produce work merely to prove or reassure yourself. Artists are artists even when not making art.
- Put your own work on view in your home and studio, where you must live with and confront it daily. If your images cannot nourish you and sustain your own interest at length, they are unlikely to be of use to anyone else.
- Hone your craft. There is always a deeper level of communion with your tools, materials, and processes to work toward. You must find ways to make even pain and ugliness engage the senses; otherwise who will be persuaded to look at length — and why else make a picture in the first place?
- There are many ways to learn your craft. Be neither proud nor ashamed of the sources of your knowledge. But no matter what form your education took — the academy, apprenticeship, self-teaching — you must recognize your student work as such and put it behind you; otherwise you will make student work all your life. Only then can you begin to build a poetry of your own. This will take years. Be

patient with yourself.

- With perseverance and good fortune, you will find your true subjects — or they will find you. In either case, be prepared to be surprised: one does not choose one's obsessions.
- If economic security is your goal, you are in the wrong profession. Frugality is one of the artist's tools. If you're lucky, such economic success as comes your way will arrive in increments which enable you to go on working without ever forgetting the experience of hunger. In that way your work may continue to speak to the hungry, who form the largest audience in the world.
- If recognition — or, even worse, fame — is your goal, you are again in the wrong profession. Modesty is another of the artist's tools. If you're lucky, any recognition you gain will be merely commensurate with your achievement, and any fame that afflicts you will pass quickly, leaving your sense of self undamaged, so that you can get on with your work.
- Get on with your work.

I do not know what North American photography would look like if a generation of its photographers followed this advice. I can only assure you of this: It would not look anything like it does at present.³

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³ This essay is a slightly revised excerpt from "Meditations on a Set of Hypotheses Extrapolated from the Work of Manuel Alvarez Bravo," the text of the Brehm Memorial Lecture in honor of Manuel Alvarez Bravo, delivered at Ingle Auditorium, Rochester Institute of Technology, April 10, 1986.