

The Perils of Pluralism:
Thoughts on the Condition of Photography at Century's End

By A. D. Coleman

A most apropos recent definition of the concept of pluralism comes from David Gelerntner, who referred to U.S. culture as "a plywood culture that gained strength from the crosswise grain of many separate, glued-up sheets."

From what we can learn by reading the various histories of photography, we never had -- to use Thomas Kuhn's term -- a single dominant *paradigm* for this medium anywhere. Indeed, even during the very heyday of formalism in the States, from 1940-1970, there was no one primary paradigm operative, but there were at least several clearly defined ones. One had the classical view-camera tradition as defined by Weston and Adams; a documentary style exemplified by Paul Strand, Walker Evans and the Farm Security Administration team; a small-camera poetics originating with emigres like Andre Kertesz and the U.S.-born older members of the "New York School"; and an investigation of process experimentation conducted by Clarence John Laughlin, Lotte Jacobi, Edmund Teske, Frederick Sommer, and others.

Using a Kuhnian model, we could say that each of these competing approaches functioned as a paradigm: a persuasive hypothesis about the nature and function of photography and photographs. And 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.

However, since the late 1960s what I call the "international image community" has entered a state that we would have to consider a version of Kuhn's paradigm shift: the collapse of an established model of thought and its inexorable replacement by a new one. But in art old paradigms never die; instead, they undergo a conversion process that turns them from belief system into style. "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 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. But the argument that any of those approaches represents some tendency inherently truer to the medium than others has lost almost all its drawing power and energy. The innumerable variations now being practiced -- from daguerreotypy to holography, and from digital imaging to a revival of the wet-plate collodion process -- and the freedom practitioners feel to move at will between them from project to project without apology or explanation are the distinguishing marks of contemporary photographic praxis world-wide. I've spoken of this elsewhere 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.

In any case, it would be extremely surprising to find any country or ethnic group henceforth producing a coherent photographic output with a distinguishable flavor based on unique and discernible national or cultural characteristics. Nowhere do we see anything like a new paradigm -- in the Kuhnian sense of a magnetically charged new model of thought -- emerging. Nowadays, for better or worse, aside from region- or culture-specific data, photographs from anywhere look like photographs from everywhere. Fact is, if there's a "world music," then there's a "world photography," an internationally circulating repertory of styles and approaches and ideas.

Thus it seems the time has come for some of those involved in the observation and criticism of photography to shift critical and analytical paradigms -- 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 our innate, hard-wired tendency toward visual communication. 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 as we enter photography's third century.