

Choosing and Losing

is a human condition, not the special problem of the artist

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I was asked by Camera Arts to write an opinion piece based on an issue which arose during the national conference of the Society for Photographic Education, in Colorado Springs in March 1982. The Society today is quite different than in those days, but I think some of the issues are still relevant.

Homo Sapiens appeared on earth 50,000 years ago; academic art photography has received a smidgin of social recognition in the last ten years. As yet photographers are not consulted on foreign policy by our nations' leaders, do not shape or influence economies, have not been sent on any mission into outer space, do not have their own syndicated national television programs, are not voted into the Senate or Congress, and are not the subjects of best-selling biographies. They do not even make the columns of People magazine. Art photographers have less social clout than pig-breeders.

I am making these observations about our medium not in order to irritate but to place our passion in perspective. We are in danger of taking ourselves too seriously and of making a ludicrous spectacle of ourselves in the process.

If any of you are inclined to doubt this assertion it is a pity that you did not attend the annual conference of the Society for Photographic Education earlier this year. For those not in the know, the Society is the most important - because it is the only organization of its kind - group of photographers "devoted to the practice and analysis of photography particularly as it relates to art and teaching." It was formed in 1963 when there was no social support for photographic teachers. A pioneer group of photographers/educators decided to band together for mutual encouragement. Since then the Society has made efforts to become a professional body, complete with endlessly revised by-laws, a journal (Exposure), and a national conference with formally delivered papers presented by members of the Society and specially invited guests. The efforts have failed, and its ramshackle structure, unprofessional meetings and chaotic conferences have been a major factor in its charm and usefulness for most members. The national conferences have been an annual excuse for meeting friends, making new acquaintances, and partying. And a lot of fun it is, too. On the level of an annual, informal get-together of like-minded individuals, the Society performs an excellent service to the academic art community and I, for one, eagerly await each conference.

However, some of the members have misread the growing acceptance of art photography by the gallery fraternity as a signal that their personal problems and their pronouncements on matters unrelated to their pictures have cosmic importance. This reflects an inflated sense of the individual's importance, a blinkered refusal to acknowledge that art photography is only a narrow band in the medium as a whole, and an endearing though unrealistic notion of the power of photographers of any persuasion, to make social change. Such arrogance is embarrassing. The latest census reports indicate that 107,000 people consider themselves professional photographers. The total membership of the Society for Photographic Education was, at the last count, 1,102. One-third of the membership changes each year. Only 18 new graduates, according to a recent survey, found employment teaching still photography in 1980. It is as well to ponder

these figures when we talk about the influence of art photography in society.

Personally, I care not a fig whether or not art and/or photography has any cosmic potency; for 20 years my love for the medium has been the means by which I am becoming actually what I am potentially. That is enough. No complaints. And I am getting progressively more irritated by those who see in their personal problems, and in their art, some resolution to societal and political issues which have daunted brilliant minds for thousands of years.

For example, at the Society's annual general meeting (at which only about 40 members bothered to turn up, and most of the directors were absent) a vociferous handful of individuals made strident motions that the Society should send President Reagan a message condemning New Federalism and warn both the U.S.A. and Russia that the SPE is against nuclear war. Anyone who objected felt like a fascist warmonger. But the real issue was not politics but the notion that a few hundred artists could affect world politics by a simple statement, as though the Politburo would not make a decision without asking what the SPE members thought. Perhaps the fact that the conference was held in Colorado Springs was giving them the jitters. Nearby was Cheyenne Mountain, out of which 693,000 tons of granite had been scooped to house the headquarters of the North American Air Defense Command; it is from here that the first nuclear warning will be issued (there have been three warnings in the past three years - two of which were due to computer errors). The hotel in which the photographers discussed their art was shared by the NATO commanders in their comic opera uniforms. All this made the motions of the artists more poignant but no less ludicrous. As one colleague remarked on listening to the debate: if all these artists were vaporized this instant it would not even make the evening news - unless the hotel was damaged.

This is not to assert that artists should be apolitical, only to point out that the SPE is an inefficient vehicle for political action. Membership in SPE does not preclude membership in another organization with specific political ends which it could reach with far more clout than through a tiny and ineffectual (politically) group of teachers and artists.

On a more personal level the same assumption of arrogance oozed from a new film about Judy Dater ("The Woman Behind the Image: Photographer Judy Dater," directed by John Stewart). I have an enormous respect for Dater as a photographer, but the film chose to emphasize her personal dilemma over a choice between being a committed artist and her need for a relationship with a man/her decisions about childbearing. This, it was implied, is a special problem for women in this age. Both implications are false. *Everyone*, male and female, makes a continuous series of decisions about their career and their personal life, with the implicit knowledge that choosing automatically and inevitably leads to losses. That's life. And it has always been true. The difference about this problem in this age is that wealth and leisure have given us more freedom of choice. Instead of reveling in this freedom we tend to self-indulgently wallow in the consequences of our acts, complaining to the world that we cannot have everything we want. I have had it up to here with the whiners and simperers. I have a great deal of sympathy for Judy Dater's problems, as one human being to another. But she, like all of us, makes a choice and pays the price. That is a private act of courage; it is not a unique problem for public breast-beating.

Gertrude Kasebier faced the same problem and in her words we can sense the indomitable spirit that willed her to solve it:

I am now a mother and grandmother. My children and their children have been my closest thoughts, but from the first days of dawning individuality, I have longed increasingly to make pictures of people... to make likenesses that are biographies, to bring out in each photograph the essential personality that is variously called temperament, soul, humanity. I had no conveniences for work, no darkroom, no running water in the house. Owing to the long twilight, I could not begin developing before ten o'clock. I had to carry my wet plates down to the river to be washed. My way was through a darkness so dense I could not see a

step before me. It was often two o'clock in the morning, or almost dawn, when I had finished. I could not avoid dragged skirts and wet feet. More than one friend predicted I would get my death.

My point is not that these personal decisions are delusions. Far from it. They are real, traumatic, tough to solve and there is always a penalty. They are inherent in the human situation and are not the prerogative of the art photographer. Yet today there is a sloppy self-indulgence in the medium, manifested in the fact that artists assume that every rattle in their mental machinery and every twinge in their emotional life has public importance. That is merely arrogant self-indulgence. Art is not derived from weakness but from a fired will, an indomitable spirit, a refusal to accept defeat - in short, heroism. That is what is in such short supply, and what will make art effective again, both at a personal and a political level.

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