

Confessions of a Feisty Romantic

Dear Independent Photographers of East Anglia,

Your editor has asked me to address you on this page and the only guidelines seem to be: stir things up, be controversial, apply your "usual" invective. Lash out, he seems to imply, at some stupidity in the medium. And I always thought of myself as Mr. Nice Guy! Nevertheless I wish to comply, which provokes a minor existential dilemma akin to what would happen if you went back in time and murdered your own grandfather: if I dip pen in poison then, perversely, I am demonstrating my desire to please the editor and, hence, proving my niceness.

Anyway, I always prefer to attack people I know, so I have decided to criticize myself...

Bill Jay

I now feel that my thirty year career in writing about photography has been recognised. At last. After hundreds of articles and more than a dozen books, my contributions have been featured in a book about critics.

Well, "featured" may be putting it a tad too strongly. Let us say that my writings, from the medium's pre-history to contemporary issues and trends, have been objectively surveyed and fairly assessed. But if we *did* say that we would be accused of exaggeration. So perhaps I had better 'fess up. In truth my life-long contributions as a critic were noted in a short and dismissive sentence which reeks of the odor of disapproval. But what the heck, it's *something*. At least it is an acknowledgement of existence: I stink, therefore I am.

The actual sentence occurs in *Criticizing Photographs* (Terry Barrett, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1990, and reprinted this year. I like to think that the use of my name in such a dismissive way contributed to the book's popularity) on page 138: "Bill Jay, a photography historian, resorts to name-calling..."

Barrett, I feel sure, did not mean this sentence to be complimentary. In context it is obviously a criticism, in the general sense of the term. However, I rather like it. That's the trouble with people trying to put you down, it tends to raise the spirits. You see, Barrett is right. I did "resort" to name-calling in the single article of mine to which he refers. I should do it more often. It feels good to cut through the

narcissistic, nepotistic posturings of academic air-heads (name-calling!) and point a finger at the blankness of their minds and the coldness of their hearts. So, thanks, Terry, I needed that.

By the way, I was also amused by your insertion of "photography historian" after my name, as if to disassociate me from the real critics about whom you are writing. That's fine. I'll wear the epithet proudly (even though the vast majority of my published articles have been about current issues in photography.) But if you and the other critics do not want me to be associated with your group then I will not only understand but remind you that I would be offended if you even considered me for membership.

The single article which Barrett quotes in order to dismiss me as a critic was indeed a polemic, attacking the dominance and divisiveness of the Woman's Caucus agenda on the conferences of the Society of Photographic Education. I called the more radical of its members "pseudo-marxists" who are "pernicious and vicious", says Barrett. Guilty as charged, M'Lud. I also think they are bitter ideologues who warp history in order to justify their own lack of productivity while fostering their own careers, (Just in case you need another quote for the next edition, Terry).

Much more important than this single issue, however, is the idea of name-calling in general, and here I confess to some ambivalence. As Louis Nizer so cleverly remarked: "When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at himself". (Actually, only three fingers are pointing backwards, but don't let's quibble...)

This means, I presume, that when Terry Barrett accuses me of name-calling he is name-calling. And rightly so. If a critic engages any issue with concrete, vivid and energetic prose then he/she will be always open to the same charge. I cannot see that any of us can enlarge the debate about meaningful issues, or attack any idea or ideology, or make a stand on any topic without explicitly or implicitly stating that those with whom we disagree are misguided, short-sighted, muddle-headed or corrupt! And, of course, we must accept that our opponents will make the same accusations against us. It is the clash of two flints which produces sparks. And it is the conflict of tough, sharp opinions which generate the light and heat necessary for catalytic changes in photographic direction. Like the flints, the critic's arguments should be brittle and delivered with directed force at each other from opposing directions.

And that is why so much of critical writing in photography (often produced by the very people that Barrett lauds) is ineffectual for any practical purpose. It lacks specificity, direction and force. Its purpose is to puff up the critic's ego, while intimidating the reader who is forced to wade through meaningless pseudo-

intellectual posturings, not to shed light on a problem or to heat up a debate about an issue. Indeed in much of this type of critical writing it is impossible to determine what point is being made or even the stance being taken by the writer, which means that no one can counter-attack because the critic is hidden somewhere "out there" in a miasmic, ever-swirling smoke-screen of insubstantial verbiage.

One prominent thinker in the medium provided me with an inkling of how this works. He has been a frequent lecturer at conferences for several decades and I have heard him speak on many occasions. I am a copious note-taker and yet never write more than a few lines whenever I am a member of his audience. Within minutes I am completely lost and, although his words sound so profound, I could never get them to condense into specific ideas. After his last lecture I stood with a group of colleagues who were congratulating him on his brilliant utterances and the depth of his insights. With a smile, he turned to me and asked: "And what did you think, Bill?" Also with smile, I replied: "As usual, I didn't have a clue what you were saying". So he put his arm around my shoulder, pulling me away from the group, and whispered: "You should learn not to be so direct. Dance around enough and you are not a very good target - and the audience thinks you are brilliant!" He was laughing.

And that is the problem with photographic writing today: very few critics are willing to be targets for counter-attacks, so they duck and weave and dodge in a maddening effort to avoid any reader knowing where they stand on any issue.

Why would they care whether or not they are "targets"? The reason, I am convinced, is that they do not understand or have not learned a simple fact of professional relationships: the person is not the issue.

It takes a certain amount of intellectual/emotional maturity to accept that you can dislike, disagree with, and vigorously attack, a person's ideas, utterances or actions yet still respect and even like the person. It takes an even greater amount of intellectual/emotional maturity to accept that *your* ideas will be attacked but that you as a person need not feel intimidated or threatened. Indeed you might find that you respect, even like, some people *because* they are strongly opinionated and disagree with you so frankly and energetically. This maturity is singularly lacking among today's photo-critics.

There was a time when critics/photographers could vigorously engage in the cut and thrust of debate over images and ideas yet also retain mutual admiration. Nowadays the prevailing attitude is an infantile agree-with-everything-I-say-or-I-will-hate-you-personally-syndrome.

These remarks, I believe, are all germane to the issue of name-calling. Earlier I confessed to some ambivalency, because there are three types of name-calling which I make every effort to avoid and which I dislike when used by others.

I dislike "woollies". These are words and phrases for which a dictionary is required and which are substituted by the critic for perfectly simple ones in everyday use. Their purpose is solely to razzle-dazzle the reader while elevating the status of the critic. Calling a spade a spade is not less intellectual than calling it a manual agronomy probe. Critics cannot hide the shallowness of thinking behind exercises in semiotics or paper over the cracks in their arguments with the flimsy tissue of philosophical/psychological jargon and invoking the names of third-rate French philosophers.

I dislike "fly-swatters". These are words that kill all meaningful dialogue, which instantly close down all possible discussion and which are deliberately introduced to dismiss rational arguments. Typical fly-swatter words in common use today are "racist", "sexist", "homophobe", "misogynist", and all similar slurs favored by the politically correct.

I dislike "insults". These are words aimed at the individual by name, not at the group mind-set or the issue. There is a huge difference between: "I think your ideas are stupid" and "You are a stupid person". In the article which Barrett quotes, I did not say: "Catherine Lord (a leader of the Woman's Caucus) displays a photographic acumen equivalent to a mollusc" - and I would not say it. She is a highly intelligent person who, in my opinion, holds inaccurate and objectionable ideas. And it is these ideas which I am happy to attack.

On the other hand...some insults received, as opposed to given, can be illuminating.

I am reminded of a conference in Rochester, New York, which I attended a few years ago. About fifty of my colleagues were gathered together talking, to my mind, the utmost balderdash about some arcane issue. I voiced my opinions. One individual was so incensed at my words that he leapt to his feet, eyes popping, and spluttered: "That's typical of Bill Jay...he's just a...a...a *feisty romantic* !

Obviously, the epithet was not intended to praise. But it was good for me. I am too modest to claim that it is true, but in the quiet of my heart, I hope it is. It has a nice ring to it. Sometimes it is better to receive than to give.

But only sometimes. So I will end with an exercise in name-calling directed towards Terry Barrett, who started this article, and my remarks only demonstrate

that any one who sets themselves up as a target, by adding their name to any image or piece of writing is fair game for a pot-shot.

Barrett is an art-educator and like most of his ilk cannot resist categorising the mysterious process of creation and analysing the ineffable merit of the resultant image. He's a systems manager of the medium, with slide-rule and flow-charts, pigeon-holing pictures with a bit of psychology and a smattering of philosophy. Having forced pictures into their assigned boxes they cannot be extracted without creases, tears and general destruction.

And, like me, he's also a nice guy.

In a chapter exhorting and guiding readers who want to write about photography, he asks: "Have you refrained from being and sounding dogmatic about your views?"

I hope not, Terry.