

How to be Famous, Sort Of

and why fame has nothing to do with it

Bill Jay

Inexplicably some people want to be famous, while others are hoping for abduction and the prospect of being used in alien sex experiments. Both groups have equal chances of success. But the really, seriously delusional are those who want to be famous as photographic artists. These unfortunates are classified, professionally, as suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder 1. And I am not making this up.

According to the mammoth tome known as the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association, the above disease is instantly identifiable because the sufferer "1.) has a grandiose sense of self-importance . . . ; 2.) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success . . . ; 3.) believes that he or she is 'special' . . . ; 4.) requires excessive admiration; 5.) has a sense of entitlement . . . ; 6.) is interpersonally exploitative . . . ; 7.) lacks empathy; is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; 8.) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him . . . ; 9.) shows arrogant, haughty behaviour or attitudes."

That accurately describes pretty much everyone I know in the world of art and photography. But it is nice to know that it is not their fault. They are mentally deranged, on a par with those unfortunates in our society who suffer from encopresis, or the "repeated passage of feces into inappropriate places" such as alien space-craft. (Billing code: 307.7)

To be fair I must admit that even a cursory scanning of the Manual reveals that everyone is a neurotic sicko, so photographers should not be singled out. As compensation for my insensitivity, I will now act as therapist and guide you through your delusion. I already have the billing code, 296.01, thank you very much.

Let us start with what is meant by fame, before moving on to tips for getting it if, by that time, the incurables among you still think it is worth having.

I think we can agree that any definition of fame would include such phrases as "popular acclaim," "known far and wide," "public estimation and regard," "household name," and similar tributes. Now lay back and concentrate. Name an active living artist-photographer who is famous* (The dots represent time passing. Go ahead, think about it for as long as you like.)

Ready now? Good. Who did you come up with? Joel-Peter Witkin. Robert Mapplethorpe. Annie Leibowitz. Sally Mann. Who? Never mind – we have enough names for our purpose.

The next question is: how many people in the USA have heard of any one of these names? As I cannot hear you I will answer the question myself. Probably one thousand at any one time. More? OK, let us up the figure to five thousand although I think that is stretching it.

Here is the first conclusion: in a nation of 260 million even the higher figure does not represent “public acclaim”; it means that the name is recognized by only five persons in a quarter of a million. Now, compare. When a minor television sit-com actress of dubious talent declared her lesbianism she inundated every major news outlet for weeks, including the cover of Time plus seven inside pages, and her coming-out episode was watched by everyone in the universe except me. That is fame.

And the second conclusion is: fame has absolutely nothing to do with merit, achievement, talent, contributions to society or culture, brilliance in a chosen field, lifetime dedication, or haircut. Basically it has to do with sex, but we will get to that later .

..

The point is that if you want to be famous the least likely route is via photography, which concerns the media hacks about as much as a flea on a wart-hog. As a case in point, look at the much-touted extravaganza called “American Visions” by Robert Hughes of Time; its special issue devoted to art history includes examples of quilts, lamps, gravestones and chairs but its time-line does not even mention the birth of photography, although the date of 1839 is marked – by the introduction of the rules of baseball. So much for the most significant art historical development of the past two hundred years. Photographers are invisible in the culture. They do not preoccupy the tabloids even if they (the photographers) engage in nefarious conduct with squids or aliens; they do not shake hands with Presidents, even at flower shows; they are not asked to open orphanages; they are not sent on overseas goodwill tours on behalf of the nation; they are not elected to positions of political power; they do not have office tower-blocks named after them; they do not perform in Las Vegas; they are not the subjects of unauthorized best-selling biographies. Frankly, my dear, no one gives a damn. They are more likely to be castigated from the floor of the Senate for sexual perversion. With any luck.

I hope you are getting the message, young photographer, that fame in your chosen field is not fame at all, but a fickle passing fad of total irrelevancy to the culture at large. Whenever ageing art-photographers gather at their favorite watering-holes you may be forgiven for assuming that the stimulating conversation centers on post-post-modernism and its influence on aesthetic subtexts, or how best to educate their students. It doesn't. After a lengthy (six-pack minimum) ribald discussion on who-is-bonking-whom, the

conversation inevitably reels towards the issue of utmost concern to the nearly-famous or not-quite-made-its: “Whatever happened to ?” (Note: In this case, the dots do not represent time elapsing, although they could, because inebriated photographers have a hard time dredging up the names of dear chums of last week let alone of twenty years earlier. No, the dots represent any name who was “famous” a short time ago but has since been totally forgotten).

So fame in photography is not only illusionary, restricted as it is to a few thousand, but also it is short-lived. How short? Exactly the same as the life-span of a gerbil.

We already know by consulting our diagnostic manual, suffering as you do from a grandiose sense of self-importance and a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, that such reality checks as i) fame does not exist in art-photography and ii) even in its tiny in-house version its duration is insignificant, are not going to deter you. So here is the practical conclusion. I will now reveal to you for the first time anywhere in print (“shows arrogant, haughty behavior”) the secrets to becoming a short-lived, inconsequential success.

1.) What you photograph is more important than how well you photograph it. One of the supreme lessons of photographic history is that there are a limited number of subjects which impinge on the culture at large. They are: portraits of actresses, female nudes, and nudes of female actresses, not in that order. The budding famous photographer would do well to bear this in mind. I will be frank with you, much as it might hurt your delicate feelings and undermine your need for admiration, your arty snaps of out-of-focus tract homes taken with a plastic Diana camera will not make it. Nor will beautifully crafted large-format images of land-fills, just to affirm that these strictures have nothing to do with technique. What is important in being famous is subject matter, subject matter, subject matter. In that order.

Famous people are best to photograph because you borrow their fame in order to increase your own. Like Annie Leibowitz. She also has the advantage that she can convince celebrities to do daft things for her camera, such as taking off their clothes. Another strategy is to become a stalker, called a paparazzi (named after a spaghetti dish from Italy), like Ron Galella, who followed around Jackie Onassis and assorted film stars wearing a football helmet for fear of being beaten (even more) senseless by Marlon Brando and Sean Penn, who are famous people, unlike Galella.

The other sure-fire subject for success is anything which is highly disturbing to those uptight sickos who think a libido is a French bathroom fixture. The more outrageous the images – unconventional sex, dead things or freaks, preferably all three – the better. The aim here is to get denounced by the church, the educational establishment and/or a Senator as a corruptor of public morals who is a spiritual enemy of dire consequences for the fabric of this great God-loving nation of ours and a pinko commie pervert to boot. It is not a coincidence that Joel-Peter Witkin is successful. His images of severed

heads, hermaphrodites and big breasts are as offensive as they are compelling. Let this be a lesson to you.

Next to sex, religion is a good subject, especially in America where no one sees the irony in public polls which reveal that 96% of the population believes in a personal loving God, and where "In God We Trust" is printed on every penny, that this is one of the most violent nations on earth. Use this irony, or hypocrisy, or stupidity, or whatever. If you are perceived to doubt the faith of these gentle, loving Christians then they will clamor for the reintroduction of the Inquisition and drool at the thought of ripping you limb from limb. The instructive example here is Andres Serrano, who was a photo-nonaut until he cleverly offended righteous bigots (everyone in America who is not a photographer) by photographing a crucifix in a jar of his own urine, or Kool-Aid, or something. Now he is famous, sort of.

2.) If you do not have access to famous people, weirdoes or Jesse Helms (often the same people) then you have to cultivate a powerful pusher in the medium of photography. Pushers, once upon a time, used to be photographers, or at least knowledgeable about the field, which helped to keep out most of the riff-raff.

For example, when John Szarkowski was chief pusher at the Museum of Modern Art he could create a reputation by stamping "MOMA Approved" on the foreheads of his chosen band of acolytes, which included Gary Winogrand, Gary Winogrand, Gary Winogrand and Whatever- Happened-To-Whatsisname-Egglestone.

Now that Szarkowski is retired, the MOMA no longer has this power to create fame, so no point in dropping off your portfolio, not that there was much hope before, so you have to suck up elsewhere, like the saunas frequented by filthy rich homosexuals who are not photographers. This was Robert Mapplethorpe's clever ruse, and you can learn a lot about what is wrong with contemporary attitudes in photography by studying his rise to fame. He was a second-rate professional studio photographer until he determinedly cultivated a rich friend/lover called Sam Wagstaff. You must find your own pusher who is plugged in to the sort of moneyed clout that will do you the most good, but I cannot help you in this matter as I have never visited a sauna that I will admit to.

Now that you have a portfolio of explicit photographs of sexual acts unimagined even by abduction wannabees, you have cultivated a rich pusher, and you have outraged the moral standard-bearers of the nation, your quest for fame is pretty much assured. You can further smooth the way ahead by one or more of these strategies.

Get a job in academia. The reasoning here is that university/college administrators are ever vigilant about activities which are deemed to corrupt the minds of the young, so this should fuel the fires of outrage and hence increase your fame. Also a college job increases your chances of getting National Endowment of the Arts funding, which can

be used against you by irate taxpayers and right-wing politicians. When you are fired for moral turpitude the resultant lawsuit will bring national fame, or a jail term.

If all else fails, die. It is no coincidence that all the most famous photographers are no longer alive. Still, there is not much point in shedding your container, to use a current euphemism, unless someone discovers your remains (the photographs, that is) and is willing to promote them in order to boost their own income and sense of entitlement. You can help by a) absolving any future biographer from all legal liabilities and b) providing a salacious, tantrum-ridden diary to accompany the images, emphasizing your wayward genius, victimisation and, of course, your sexual escapades with famous actresses and actors.

I know, I know . . . one or two of you care about beauty, goodness, truth, virtue, ideals and all those other namby-pamby words which prompt the gagging reflex in all neurotic fame-seekers. So my advice, although it is hardly worth wasting a sentence on so few of you, is: get a life! You will never be famous or even abducted. You're a loser.

Like me.