Incest in Academia and an appreciation of Myron Wood

Bill Jay

In the late 1960s I was ardently engaged in a continuous and seemingly hopeless battle to establish "photography as art." The battle was being waged on many fronts in many lands by scores of committed individuals. My own particular front-line was England where commentators wrote that I "led a crusade rather than a campaign" and waged it with "missionary zeal." Others were no less zealous for the cause throughout Europe and America.

In the past few years the greatest rout has occurred in the USA; photography has decisively stormed the art establishment. Here, at least, the battle is won. But, if I could have predicted the results of the victory, I am not so sure that I would have been such an energetic fighter in the cause. Photography is now Fine Art. Often, I regret the fact. The battle might have been won - but the casualties, to my mind, have been too high.

Photography-as-art has led us into a morass of problems that denigrate the medium. I am thinking of the fact that galleries - and not the photographer's peers - are now the arbiters of taste and photographic merit; that "success" is equated with fame and not with an individual's struggle to transcend self; that photographic journalism is riddled with pompous, unintelligible art-jargon and that clear, informative prose is hard to find; that photographers' egos have become so inflated that the individual's integrity has floated out of sight; that differentness, perversity and slickly presented banality is touted as photography of the highest quality; that gallery and media hype has replaced a long-term committed paying-of-dues and that instant "stars," created by publicity and comprising nothing more substantial than hot gases, have diverted attention from the serious worker who has quietly struggled to maintain his or her vision and faith over many years; that something inexplicably yet intrinsically *photographic* has been killed in the fight for art acceptance.

I am now a teacher in the Art department of an American university and it disturbs me that many of these spurious attitudes are being fostered in the nurseries of academia. This assertion needs explanation at greater length than I am permitted in this column. One point, however, I will make with as much passion as I can muster: Art - if equated with photographic merit - is *not* solely the prerogative of the academic system. However, if you believe that art defines a particular attitude to the medium which *is* the prerogative of academia then I would assert that this type of photography occupies only an extremely narrow band of the photographic spectrum and that art has no prior claim on quality - all other "bands" coexist equally.

To some that might sound self-evident; to the others I would direct your attention to the images lauded by galleries and museums and published in the art-media. You will see at once that something is amiss. With very few exceptions the best of contemporary photography is assumed to be synonymous with the work of teachers. Whatever happened to the committed professional, who dares earn his living from the medium? Not all, or even most, of them will display personal visions, but some will. The almost total ostracization of the non-teacher is not only inexcusable it is downright dangerous.

It is ironic that the "old masters" whom the academic community professes to admire, and whose works are held up to the students as examples of art, were so often *paid* (God forbid!) to make pictures. Even the standard history of photography is by and large the history of professional

photographers. In the 19th century that list would include Mathew Brady, W. H. Jackson, Francis Frith and with few exceptions practically everyone else. In fact the distinction between art and commerce would have seemed absurd to the typical photographer of the last century. Most of them made no distinction between photographs for personal pleasure, photographs for display to their peers and photographs for sale to the public. In this century, the list would continue with Eugene Atget, Walker Evans, W. Eugene Smith, Weegee, Diane Arbus and practically everyone else of any stature; they were not averse to earning their living by doing what they do best - making photographs. Bill Brandt once told me that he never took out his camera unless he was being paid to do so. And, lest we forget, some of the greatest photographers alive today are professionals - yet they are consistently ignored by the art establishment and by the academic community because they are not subscribers to this new, self-styled art-elite club.

Art photography in academia is a tiny family, where the normal behavior is incest and self-propagation. And like all continuous incest, it eventually produces results that are more than likely to be deformed. I contend that deformations of attitude are occurring in photography right now, in the first generations spawned by this tightly structured, narrow-minded area of academia. What is needed is a new sense that photography is a continuous swirling blend of all that is best in every area of the medium. Academic photography needs cross-fertilization with other areas of the photographic spectrum; this is a matter of survival, before art photography is relegated to just another backwater of the medium, like camera club pictorialism. But this will be difficult. A relatively small group of mutual admirers has a stranglehold on the growth of the medium. Since members of this group are teachers who dictate the limits of the medium to a larger group of students, who then become teachers and pass on the same blinkered attitudes to an even larger group of their own students, it is easy to see why the medium has been glutted by such narrow-minded ideas in only a generation or two. There is nothing pernicious in this attitude; it is mere neglect that promotes "their own" and excludes all "others."

I was asked to locate my piece in the photography of the Southwest, and I find that I have been neglectful of the charge. So I will end with an example of what I have been trying to say. One of the area's committed photographers, whose attitudes and images I have grown to admire, is the Colorado photographer, Myron Wood. Whenever there is a group show of photographers from the region, or a conference of photographers, or any show-and-tell session involving image-makers in this region, Myron Wood is consistently ignored. I do not think it is a coincidence that Myron Wood is not a teacher. He is a professional daily-working photographer and hence rejected as a serious photographer of personal vision. Perhaps "rejected" is too strong; he is merely not in contention. Think of photographers, think of art photography, think of members of academia. That is how the chain of association works.

Myron Wood has been photographing Colorado and the four-states region of the Southwest for 30 years. Last year he was given his first major exhibition (at the George Eastman House). Barbara Jenkins asked him if he was bitter about the years of neglect. "Oh, no," he said, "As far as I am concerned, it's just right. I don't think 10, or 15, or 20 years even, is very much time for maturity. I think that I am just now at the point where I have photographed long enough and thought long enough." This is a refreshing attitude in an age of demand for instant gratification and quick rewards.

Since 1973 Myron Wood has been amassing an enormous collection of Colorado documents for the Public Library of the City and County of Pueblo, photographing the land, people, architecture, agriculture, and industry of this particular region. Recently he was given a unique opportunity to document the members of the religious sect of the Penitente Brotherhood. There is no doubt that these images *en masse* comprise an exemplary documentary project that will inform and enrich future generations. Yet they are also suffused with the ethos of the photographer. Like all good photographs they emerge at the interface between the objective reality and a subjective spirit. The photographs have both historical value and individual passion; a specific life-attitude emerges from

the work seen in quantity. And there is something special, and specially photographic, about the quantity of images amassed by Myron Wood, from a subject matter about which he deeply cares. This is not evident from single images. A person is not recognized by a fingerprint; his work cannot be assessed by a few reproductions. But as a whole his thousands of images point to a moral: there is no substitute for years of committed hard work.

Myron Wood is not unique in this region of the USA; there are hundreds of photographers of his commitment and concern throughout this country. There are thousands more quietly and seriously working across the world. Many of them will leave us some of the medium's most inspired and inspiring bodies of work. I would like to think that, just occasionally, we could acknowledge their efforts and thank them for their examples - while they are still alive - even though they are unconcerned with defining "art," and even less concerned with academia.

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