

## Life/Work

---

Bill Jay

Once, I dated a psychologist. Briefly. She would throw me, unexpectedly, bizarre questions and then delight in analyzing them, detailing the negative aspects of my personality. We were watching football on television when she asked: What position would you prefer to play. I should have known what was coming, but without thought I responded: I would prefer to be the commentator in the box, high above the field, watching and attempting to predict the patterns of play. Naturally this meant that I was antisocial, aloof, an egotist, a voyeur of life rather than a participant. Because she was probably right I was, naturally, even more irritated.

Certainly, that is how I see my relationship to the medium of photography. Not so much as a participant, more of an enthusiastic commentator on the "game".

So, with your approval, I would like to make a few general observations on the relationship between art and life in contemporary photography. Then, if anyone is interested, I will answer questions of a more personal nature.

The question before the symposium is this: What relationship does a personal life have on an individual's photographs - and vice versa.

The answer, like a response in the *I Ching* to any of life's big problems, can be amazingly succinct: life and art should have *everything* to do with each other. In practice, as I view the medium of art photography, from my outsider position, art and life have very little connection. In fact, I think this is the central problem in the medium of art photography at the present time.

Like all short responses to complex issues, more questions are raised than are answered, until they start bubbling into consciousness at an increasing rate, popping in the mind at alarming frequencies. Words like "Art" and "Life" tend to have this effect more than others. (Books don't get written by photographers about words like "sump oil" and "hamburgers"). So a few more words are necessary to explain more clearly what I mean by art and life being connected in a much more profound way than I observe occurring in contemporary photography (or any art). First, a simple example:

While living in England, I would perform a double-act with David Hurn, a Magnum photographer. He was often asked to lecture at colleges but disliked speaking in public. So I would traipse along and "interview" him in front of the audience. This, for him, was a lot less stressful. One day, the students had prepared for our visit by mounting an exhibition of their work which we dutifully viewed before the performance. As the "interview" progressed, students increasingly asked: but what about *our* work? Eventually, the question had to be answered. Hum's answer was: they are incredibly boring. He said: When I look at a young photographer's images I expect to feel *jealous* because he/ she has access to subject, life-styles, places, people that are closed to me, because of my age and who I am. Where, he said, is an expression of *your* uniqueness as a human being? You have only photographed what I, and any other professional, could have, have already, photographed and better!

It is a good point. Of the thousands of photo-students graduated from a college or university each year I have yet to see even a single portfolio of what it was like to be a student at an American college.

Students are taught, by implication, that their photographs must make reference to current stylistic trends, deal meaningfully with critical issues in the medium, refer self-reflexively with photography itself. Because that is what so-called significant photographers are doing. Life itself? Irrelevant.

A few years ago, a teaching position became vacant at the university with which I am associated. Forty applicants submitted work. *Fifteen* photographers, from all over the USA, submitted images of bushes, at night, lit by flash, in color! (Trends, nowadays, are so short-lived that this fact could be used to identify the exact year - and even the time of year - when the applications and portfolios were submitted). What magic suddenly made bushes so relevant to the lives of so many photographers simultaneously? Why was the burning desire to picture bushes so rapidly and simultaneously extinguished?

I am sure you can all think of similar short-lived trends: the urge to record the corners of nondescript rooms, garages and motel lobbies, for example. Or San Francisco's own "Fabricated to be Photographed" mania.

All relevant to personal lives? I do not believe it.

In art photography personal lives have become irrelevant. Appearance of the image is all. Issues in the medium swell up randomly and arbitrarily, sweeping the tiny, insignificant world of academic image-making. Those who have been blown away in the first gusts, receive the attention of the medium and become "known" for, oh so short a time, until the

wind blows in a new name. And who is blown away first and thus receives attention? Those whose work is not firmly rooted in life's experiences. Hence we have an explanation why those who least deserve attention are often the quickest to receive it.

Am I recommending that photographers concentrate on the intimacies of their own lives, self-indulgently examine every bit of fluff in their own navels, thrust their cameras into every crevice of their, and their partner's bodies? God forbid.

At least the sterile images of the formalists can be viewed with the bored indifference that their work deserves. The frontal intimacies of those who act as if they were the only individuals to experience emotional *angst* are as difficult to ignore as spoilt brats, clamoring for attention while the parents are attempting to communicate.

One of my friends was determined to photograph Real Life. He decided to photograph his wife and kids in all moods, not just the nice moments. His wife could not conduct her toilet without having his camera thrust at her; in the midst of a domestic squabble the camera entered the fray; the camera accompanied them to bed. No wonder the wife divorced the unfeeling, callous son-of-a-bitch.

A colleague told the following story, with approval, of a photographer's commitment. He was asleep in bed, with his wife, when the telephone rang. He answered it, listened for a while, and asked the caller to hold on. He then fetched his camera, focused on his wife, and woke her to tell her that the call was for her. When she picked up the telephone she learned that her mother had just died, while the husband was photographing her reactions.

That is *not* caring. That is active, out-and-out aggression.

Apart from a lack of manners, taste and common humanity (all essential traits, in my opinion), these photographers display an abysmal ignorance of life: no one cares a damn about the sordidness of their petty lives.

Having mentioned both ends of the formalist/ intimacy spectrum, I owe it to you to state what I think is meant by the ideal relationship between life and work/ work and life.

A photograph is the end product of someone caring about something 'out there.' The best photographs exude this caring attitude in a manner which is not definable but which is very evident.

Lewis Hine, for example, was not interested in promoting himself as an artist-photographer but he did care deeply about the plight of children who were employed in

dangerous environments under conditions of slave labor. He began working for the Child Labor Committee in 1907 and his photographs, badly reproduced in such tiny images that they often seem swamped by text, were published in The American Child. He recognized that words would tell the story, but that his photographs could make the story dramatically real. He cared, and it showed.

But this caring for the subject is not the prerogative of such emotionally charged themes as child labor. Stephen Dalton obviously has a passion for, and deep knowledge of, insects. His technically amazing, and aesthetically beautiful, images of insects ooze a love for bugs even to those who have an aversion to the little beasts themselves.

Other examples would be superfluous because all good photographers have a deep commitment to, and involvement with, their subjects, and through photography they are communicating their understanding and passion to others. If nothing out there is utterly absorbing then a good photographer cannot exist. It's like trying to be a scuba diver in the midst of the Mohave desert. If the photographer is communicating a personal passion in something, anything, through the pictures then the images are also revealing, incidentally, a great deal about the photographer as well as the subject. His/ her attitude to life is evident.

On a simple level this fact is explicable merely because a photographer's choice of subject matter can be revealing of personality as well as interests. At a deeper level, the issue becomes more profound. The more intensely the photographer struggles to place emphasis on subject matter so, paradoxically, the photographer reveals a personal attitude to life itself. This is never revealed in a single photograph. However, a body of work by a photographer begins to reflect back to the viewer the author's relationship not only to the subject but also to a unique life-attitude.

This cannot be injected into a photograph by intent. Style is not like a filter which when placed over the lens will affect the image. Too many young photographers shoot a sleeping drunk in a doorway to show they care; in actuality it usually shows the opposite. As one character remarked disparagingly: you can tell the price of a photographer's equipment by the number of rags in the picture.

When I walk through the forest at night, the track emerges from the darkness by not looking for it. A unique style emerges in photography by ignoring it, concentrating on the subject, and allowing care, passion and knowledge to bubble to the surface through a lot of hard work over a long period of time. That is why the best photographs are truly reflective of the photographers. The pictures become extensions of the person and it is evident that a personal style has emerged, which cannot be confused with the works of

any other photographer. This is not difficult to understand; it is clearly evident in the style of writers, poets or musicians. Style in photography operates in exactly the same way, in spite of this medium being more closely linked to reality.

There is no paradox In the close link between a life-attitude and a discussion of style. This was deliberate because in the same way that the subject matter reflects areas of interest so a photographer's style reflects his life attitude. For example, Don McCullin is probably the greatest war photographer the medium has yet known. His subject matter is depressing to put it mildly. Starving refugees, bombed children, mutilated civilians, dying soldiers, terror-struck families and decaying corpses seem as though they should be extremely depressing images by a masochistic voyeur. Yet. . . look at a large number of McCullin's horrific images and another deeper impression emerges to counteract the first shock reaction. The photographs, *en masse*, exude a dignity, pride of spirit and commitment to human values under the extreme test of their endurance. They are inspiring, and in spite of the subject matter, elevate the spirits and reaffirm or even elevate the hope of humanity. And that is the mark of a great photographer.

Therefore there is no paradox between a photographer placing emphasis on subject matter yet by dint of commitment and understanding revealing a personal life-attitude. All great photographs are made at this interface between reality and subjective response. They are personal and objective simultaneously.

So, the question of most relevance to all young photographers is this: what are you interested in, what excites, intrigues, moves, fascinates and energizes you? What could cause you to wake up with a sense of excitement about the coming day? More often than not, the student will not, cannot respond. The very notion seems preposterous. Formal education (in photography) has a lot to answer for. We have legitimized, sanitized, academized, the medium until we are left with issues not substance, critical stances not action, we have encouraged the mimicking of already dead images, like 19 century painters who spent years copying Greek statuary.

The umbilical cord between life and art has been severed. And academic art photography is dying. I'm in favor of euthanasia to put the patient out of its miserable existence.

But that is such a negative note on which to end. So I will read you the truest, most beautiful, relevant and humbling words ever written (in my opinion) about the relationship between life and art. In his introduction to the film script of The Seventh Seal, 1968, Ingmar Bergman talks about the building of Chartres Cathedral:

. . . *it is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was*

*separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. In former days the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God. He lived and died without being more or less important than other artisans; "eternal values," "immortality" and "masterpiece" were terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invulnerable assurance and natural humility.*

*Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy. Thus we finally gather in one large pen, where we stand and bleat about our loneliness without listening to each other and without realizing that we are smothering each other to death. The individualists stare into each other's eyes and yet deny the existence of each other. We walk in circles, so limited by our own anxieties that we can no longer distinguish between true and false, between the gangster's whim and the purest ideal.*

*Thus if I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon's head, an angel, a devil - or perhaps a saint out of stone. It does not matter which; it is the sense of satisfaction that counts. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.*

**Delivered as a lecture at a symposium at the San Francisco Art Institute, April 1986.**