

PHOTOGRAPHY – Pariah of Art or Outpost of Creativity?

In my 5-pointer Theory of Art, personality plays an integral part. Could also be called historical background of artist, or the humanising of ignorance, rejection and cold-shouldered aloofness. Personality forms a range of experiences that build character, showcasing individual identity and creative choice. And viewed over a longer period of time, the artist's overall message can also be termed personality. Even stand for a specific streak of creative life that may not have looked as such when it first started out or when it passed the half-way mark, huffing, puffing, struggling along, catching its breath from plenty strain and stress, yet that comes out a winner at the end of the rat race! Not a winner as in win or lose but becomes an artist and achieves fulfillment in a life well spent and dedicated to unravelling value and exposing insincerity.

Winning the inner creative struggle against slovenness and ego-tripping. The message, that is, sent from and by and thru personality, delivering a full and mature body of work that eagerly awaits our exploration and assessment, our appreciation.

This means that an artist's or photographer's life-stream, the timeline of life, using computer speak, can be a good starting point to assess personality and body of work. Same counts for painter's, muso's, actor's, dancer's, in fact any creative person's biography that may not have looked as such initially! That looked as if written in brackets but nonetheless allows for application of the 5-pointer Art Theory, inviting those on the outside or those forging and manipulating, lastly contorting the idea of what's acceptable and relevant, what's creative or not, to stand up to scrutiny as well.

Such a view from behind, as aftermath of career, the overall view from atop a hill down into the whole damn secret and hidden valley, suddenly spread out openly on a clear and sunny day, or dipped in mysteriously tinted haze of ambiguity and non-compliance, controversy, shock and disgust, opens a whole new universe. Of enjoyment and application, allowing PHOTOGRAPHY to enter the sacred halls of Art, too. After it had teetered and struggled on the brink of acceptance as pariah and outcast of galleries and museums, rarely seen as independent branch of artistic expression and deep-seated creativity.

In PHOTOGRAPHY, my own preference belongs to two artists who we mainly know as black and white masters, namely Ansel Adams and David Bailey. Yet, when I got serious about shades, forms and contrasts, pinned on resin-coated paper, and studied the tonal nuances in fashion, pop and rock'n'roll sentiments, expressed in eye-catching portraits,

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David Bailey was the right name.

Launching a new exhibition of 250 pix at the National Portrait Gallery, Bailey said in 2016: "You can't teach Art, that's the irony of Art school. The only thing you can't teach at Art school is Art. I don't think you can say whether something is Art or not. Photographs are not Art, paintings are not Art; it's whether the person doing it is an artist or not."

Which brings us back to personality or personal history, to the artist as person whose DNA is unique, particular and very imaginative.

Let`s build a bridge to another visual discipline, linking PHOTOGRAPHY to painting. Picasso is the right choice here, a creative master whose personality helped lift his paintings and sculptures onto a higher level. Onto the distinguished plane of true Art.

Picasso`s unique and probing interpretation of creative activity by virtue of his very own, very imaginative, inventive and often innovative approach to visual representation did the job. So that without his personality impacting on his artistic career, his paintings would`ve remained just that: crazy strokes of an anonymous paint brush, splashed incoherently and often incomprehensibly on an empty canvas. Without meaning or value.

But Picasso`s personal history changed all that and created some of greatest and most influential works in the modern era!

Even his agent and dealer in the creatively rich albeit liminal inter-war period between 1918 and 1939, Paul Rosenberg, held that view: Personality does the job! He espoused a deep-seated adoration for the complex personality of a venerated friend and the producer of his immense wealth. At least before World War 2 when the co-operation between sharp and well connected Art dealer and even sharper artist broke all conventions, governing the creative universe up to then. And lead to the term of Modernism or Modernist Paintings. Read all about it in an 1934 article by Mr Rosenberg for the magazine Art in Australia.

Paul Rosenberg`s interesting life as mentor and dealer of the incipient Picasso is in turn quoted in a book, entitled „Picasso, where are my harlequins?“ and written by his grand-daughter, Anne Sinclair.

Therefore in visual Art, Picasso is often referred to as the father of Modernism. And without Picasso`s personality his paintings would`ve remained just that....paintings!

Returning to my PHOTO influences, and expanding on the issue of personal preferences, David Bailey saw his work as clever people management, similar to running a brothel,

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with himself as the favoured sales object:

“I’m a whore,” he said. “I fall in love with my models while they’re with me. Whether they’re man – I try to keep away from dogs – or woman. You just have to fall in love with people so they’re the centre of your universe for that two or three hours or all day you’re with them.”

And where does he get his inspiration from, the spiritual blasts that turn dust to eloquent plastic and black and white contours to photographic portraiture of exquisite quality?

“Of course sex inspires me – it does.”

I`ll return to that branch of the Art and Photo world later.

However, David Bailey`s innumerable portraits, bringing to life Beatles adoration and pop music in the 1960ies, show rich and poor, celebrity and royalty, criminal and law-abiding citizen, dress code and undressed, in a new light and remain some of the most iconic in modern-day PHOTO-ART.

Converting close and cold scrutiny into the wild and cackling flames of creative fire, running on an individual and unique backburner, can also be termed the chemistry of picture-taking, and produces worthwhile teachers and influencers in the field of seeing thru a lens....

I then switched attention to the shady, at times hazy spectrum between dark and light, where half-tone rules. Where clear and razor-sharp variables, of a defining nature, determine a comprehensive grey zone or grey scale system, and where Ansel Adams was the right reference, the artistic personality we know so little about.

His evaluation of grey tones in natural landscape and scenic events went far beyond plain black and white contrasts. And can be applied to COLOUR PHOTOGRAPHY as well.

That is because we are dealing with an accomplished artist, a creative personality fully immersed in social and natural context, in fact who made images of nature the real social value that allowed for committed environmental activism. At same time it called for an improvement, a major update, in the tools of our trade.

Adams`s contribution to the Art of PHOTOGRAPHY touches on the universal skill of fixing a light-induced image, showing good detail, especially in the shades or grey areas, onto a chemically treated roll of film or coated paper.

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His invention of a half-tone scale, running from white to black, owns revolutionary properties, the overthrow of staid and stale knowledge, values, conventions, and in his specific case includes successful environmental campaigning in support of the beauty of nature and its sensible preservation. As he did for the Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks in the USA.

Yet for a long ime, PHOTOGRAPHIC aesthetics, its specific variables of seeing and fixing an image, no matter if as analogue print or digital algorithm, were outcasts of Art galleries, schools, collections, and museums. The Art of PHOTOGRAPHY was seen as mechanically as much as chemically induced activity/gimmick, executed by a machine called camera, and producing anonymous and plain, albeit very detailed pictures of reality. Not of a spiritual and philosophical but of a socially low and hard material reality, in fixed, static or rolling images, lacking the tormented, twisted, incomplete genius strokes of paint brush, pencil, pen or crayon. And therefore lacking any claims to inclusion in the holy temple of universal Art. So they maintained, these alleged Art insiders.

Believe it or not, this stern and anti-creative view among dealers and gallery owners still prevailed in 2015, as recent as 3 years ago, when I returned from a successful exhibition of my best photos in Copenhagen, the Danish capitol!

I arrived in Hamburg in northern Germany and approached gallery after gallery with a review of my Copenhagen show, suggesting to stage a follow-up exhibition, BUT RAN INTO THE PHOTOGRAPHY-IS-NOT-ART BRICKWALL! Without exception, there wasn't one single gallery or museum willing to look at my work. And that not only in Hamburg, but in Berlin and Frankfurt, too, allegedly two very arty-farty mertropoles. Which left me with a wow and a real bad feeling...

Meanwhile, from a Fine Art point of view, the PHOTOGRAPHER'S paint brush is the light and his canvas is a photo print, these days a computer or a desktop window or even a movie screen, while his skills for arriving at the pinnacle of creative expression surpass those of the traditional artist by far.

A letter I once wrote in 2003 to the magazine of the Bureau of Physical and Technical Standards – PTB - summed it up:

„With a view to the expression of light and its phenomena or appearances by a PHOTOGRAPHER, showing marked differences to an informed evaluation by the physicist or natural scientist,

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especially with regard to light particles, I dare say that PHOTOGRAPHERS are in fact PAINTERS, BUT that we paint with light as our brush strokes, while coated film and chemically treated paper, these days even a computer screen or a desktop window, constitute the canvas.

Thanx to the articles in your magazine, I have discovered exciting new aspects of light and its properties."

The PHOTOGRAPHER´S toolbox includes scientific, mathematical, materials and aesthetical knowledge. His or her intricate box furthermore reveals a creative eye for reality in its myriad nuances, an eye for seeing what others don`t even recognize, a feeling for magic scenery as well as for positive people management, skills that others had sought but never found and hedged and trained and thought of as relevant. Eg by applying the two thirds rule or bracketing your shots and other tricks of composition and colour enhancement. The toolset includes cropping, layering and filtering, too, qualities a good Photoshop editor owns to support a distinct and defined creative edge.

And while the Art of PHOTOGRAPHY promotes the free-flow of consciousness and the joys of inspiration, it dwells on the stark and dark and soiled side of documentary reality, the ever-widening income gap, too!

In South Africa, shortly before and after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, photo documentaries on real conditions in a country isolated by international sanctions enjoyed widespread usage. Some of the household names, churning out political as much as creative work, embracing harsh yet rather graphic photo-realities, and often gripped by tight censorship claws, were David Goldblatt, Paul Weinberg, Omar Badsha, Juergen Schadeberg, Rashied Lombard, Alf Khumalo, George Hallet, Basil Breaky and others.

Yet, PHOTOGRAPHY has created its own sets of values and challenges in meantime and has really come of age as a plain, anti-spiritual, secondary and too realistically tainted and mechanically invoked way of creating copycat kind of graphics! Photo-graphics to be exact, not worth our critical appraisal or headline-steering and hair-raising exhibitions?

Nonsense!

Meanwhile a new style of seeing has evolved, yet ends up swept under the creative carpet, banned from galleries and museums, and pushed back into a dark age without resin-coated paper and chemically laced film, and exposure times between 3 minutes and 18 hours.

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Pushed back into the dinosaur age of the camera obscura?

**Where PHOTOGRAPHY can rarely match with,
let alone swim in and float atop the swampy
sludge called MEDIA + COMMUNICATIONS.
Where the Art of Photos takes us back
to the MUSEUM OF WOW!**

In my 5-pointer Theory of Art, personality plays an integral part.

Both PHOTOGRAPHERS, mentioned here in more detail, yield interesting personal and historical backgrounds. So do the South Africans. And if it wouldn't have been for the universal pervasiveness of their pictures, Bailey and Adams could have already qualified for the arty-farty angle on biography alone.

Catch my point?

Even if they wouldn't have excelled in their discipline and had only churned out non-committed, unrefined and insensitive work, the escape route to relevant creative activity remained open. That is because their CV's would've humanised ignorance, rejection and cold-shouldered aloofness. That is because their personalities form an important building block to their exceptional standing as creative masters, MASTER PHOTOGRAPHERS.

So this angle of my 5-pointer IS-IT-ART? checklist allows for individual, personal identity as yardstick of creative choice. And viewed over that long span of active duty by above PHOTOGRAPHERS, their expressions of reality and interpretations of light own the power of biting and incisive visual messages, forged and chiselled out of a unique artistic history. That no critic can tear down, then bury in the wastelands of hidden, never-to-be-opened-again archives, faded photo albums. As the world of Media and Communications does when they cover a story for 3 weeks and then drop it like a hot potatoe. Never to be unearthed or referenced again. A standard practice which is full-on anti-Art, anti-creative and in deference to stringent censorship. But is very popular among newspaper, magazine, certain book and most TV editors.

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