

K.B. Dixon

Not So Quick: Notes on The Photo Album

Several years ago I wrote a short, unconventional novel titled *The Photo Album*. It was a catalogue of imaginary photographs, an idiosyncratic mix of character study and meditation—a glimpse into the life of a peculiar photographer named Michael Quick and a questioning, if somewhat cursory examination of the medium. It was a work of fiction, and while many of this fictional character's attitudes toward photography were my own, many were not. There has been over time some confusion about this. People familiar with the book have assumed they are familiar with my feelings about the medium, and I have on more than a few occasions been compelled to defend or to disavow Mr. Quick's musings. As time has gone on I have felt more keenly a certain pressure to clarify my position in relation to his, to discuss both our agreements and our disagreements.

The book is divided into 120 short chapters—some are a sentence or two, others a paragraph, still others a page or two. At the top of each chapter is a graphic—an empty picture frame, a numbered “plate” that holds the imaginary photograph described or alluded to in the text below it. This text carries both the story of the narrator's life as well as his ruminations on the nature of photography.

Gum-Chewing

In his introduction to *The Photo Album* Mr. Quick informs us that he has been getting serious about photography—or, as he says, getting serious about it again. One of the problems with getting serious about it, he says, “is that at some point in the process ... you will find yourself thinking more than you would like to about the subject of photography in general—about the recalcitrant mystery of it: what it is, what it should be, how it should best be done. It is grueling and ultimately profitless, this noetic gum-chewing.”

I understand and sympathize to a degree with my ersatz doppelganger, but I do not feel this way myself. I do not find thinking about the subject of photography to be “noetic gum-chewing.” I find it (in measured doses) to be both diverting and exhilarating. I do, however, worry I may be thinking too much about it—that I might be following my inclinations down an analytical rabbit hole.

The poet Phillip Larkin was once asked to write a brief statement of his views on poetry. He did so grudgingly. He did not, he said, find theorizing on the subject any help to him as a poet—and, in fact, he had avoided it as best he could out of concern for his art. It was one thing for a commentator to dissect an impulse, something else entirely for a practitioner. Trying to analyze a photograph is like trying to analyze a joke: the fundamentals may be illuminated, but what is essential will not survive. I am wary of what I recognize in myself as a predisposition. I don't want a set of abstractions, however seductive, mediating my responses to the visual world.

Snapshot

I have never been an advocate of the "snapshot" aesthetic. I have some sympathy for it—especially insofar as it is a reaction to the contrived and airless alternative so popular with a certain downtown crowd—but I find most of these sorts of pictures interesting only as illustrations of a theory, a theory that seems to me conceived in desperation.

I would say the indomitable Mr. Quick and I are in essential agreement here.

I like this aesthetic's commitment to the everyday and to photography's unique relationship to reality, but I do not share its suspicion of thoughtfulness. There is a religious reverence for the spontaneous at the center of this aesthetic, an anti-art bias that conveniently discounts talent and tribulation. While there are things I like about some of these sorts of photographs—their vitality, their immediacy—there are two things in particular about this idealization of the impulse that trouble me. One is its anti-intellectual nature. The other is a certain piety at the heart of this cult—the feeling that the spontaneous, predominantly unmediated response to certain visual sensations captures something primal and authentic and that this primal, authentic thing lends the resulting photograph a certain sort of moral authority. This romantic conception of the impulse is noble-savage nonsense. It fails to take into account or simply ignores the many dubious sources of impulse and the many complex sources of authenticity. It feels false, facile, self-aggrandizing.

Suffering

Like many, I am attracted to the strange beauty of ruination, to the visceral effects of the peeling-paint picture. My inclination is to prefer those that allude to a metaphysical rather than a sociological subject—pictures about loss, decay, and the passing of time as opposed to those about deprivation and injustice.

Here Mr. Quick has spoken for me once again. My inclination is to photograph things that interest me psychologically, things that interest me graphically or aesthetically. I do not photograph things that interest me politically or sociologically. I do not, as a rule, go to art to be lectured about poverty, genocide, or environmental depredation. I go other places for that—places where these lectures belong. I go to art for an aesthetic experience, for hope, for pleasure, for insight, for sustenance so that I may find a way to endure the reality of poverty, genocide, and environmental depredation. I leave the photography of suffering to others—to optimists, to sadists, to idealists, to propagandists, to people with a mission, to photojournalists. While there are exceptions (ordinary and extraordinary ones), I see this sort of work more often than not as exploitation—a sort of business decision rather than a testimonial act of empathy.

My own photographs, which are essentially done in the documentary mode, are not done in service to a cause, but as acts of preservation and personal expression. I have tried to capture the outline of what is for me a meaningful moment. I do not have a reformer's bone in my body. My wife, on the other hand, has approximately 206.

Style

Style is a perennial problem in photography—that is, individual style. There isn't much room for it. One's choices in style—the varieties and variations—are severely limited by the medium, which is why "subject" almost invariably ends up becoming so important to the intrepid practitioner. It is much easier to make a subject your own than a style—down-and-out farmers, for example, or circus freaks.

Here Mr. Quick is a little too quick for me. I agree in part with what he is saying, but I don't think he has said nearly enough on the subject to serve as a suitable proxy.

Style is indeed, as Mr. Quick observes, a perennial problem in photography. For me there are essentially two types—one that is imposed on a photograph (for a myriad of reasons, usually mercantile) and another that arises organically from a photographer's conscious and unconscious predispositions. The imposed style—a thing formulated to be consistent and easily recognizable—is basically a branding exercise. It's good for business, a way of claiming celebrity status for the photographer. It has nothing to do with modes of expression and everything to do with getting noticed, with catching the right someone's eye, with turning a gimmick into money—into a house in the Hamptons, into a mention in *The New York Times*.

The organic style is subtler in most cases, a thing that emerges naturally over time. If there is calculation, it is about basic composition. Each photograph is a report on the photographer. It contains trace amounts of a unique temperament. It is like an answer on the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory)—a singular clue that when put together with other singular clues provides a sense of the complex consciousnesses behind them. It is a style that is naturally reductive rather than artificially so—constrained by the limitations of the photographer as opposed to constrained by the demands of the art market.

The style Mr. Quick is talking about as being "limited by the medium" is the imposed style. This has led him, I think, to overestimate the importance of the subject and underestimate the importance of the photographer. The subject of a photograph plays one role in the imposed style, another in the organic. In the imposed style it is evidence of what a photographer thinks someone else might be interested in whereas in the organic style it offers evidence of what the photographer himself is interested in. Both, of course, offer coded commentaries. The emphasis placed on these two things—subject and manner—is divided more evenly in photography than in painting. I do not share Mr. Quick's feelings of an inherent bias.

Manipulation

As a rule I try to keep my postproduction manipulations of the image to a minimum. I will crop, I will adjust both white balance and color, I will sharpen, I will occasionally do a little dodging and burning—that is about it. I have never been able to fully equate technical manipulations with imaginative ones.

Mr. Quick and I are very much on the same page here.

I have little interest in digitally manipulated images—photographs that

are not photographs. I am not talking about basic digital darkroom manipulations—the adjustments Mr. Quick refers to (exposure, white balance, the excision of dust spots, etc.), but the wholesale transformation of images. I'm talking about composites, collages, constructions—about additions and subtractions, imported backgrounds, fakery, anything that degrades a photograph's "adherence" to its referent (if you'll excuse the stupefying art-speak). In short, I'm talking about photographs that are fictions. Both those that are obviously so, and most particularly those that are surreptitiously so—those that are conscious deceits. My interest is in capture, not confabulation; in the real world, not in still photography's "special effects." The farther a photograph moves away from its realist roots—the source of its greatest strength, its magic—the less my interest. Crossing over from the actual to the conceptual is not for me a way of legitimizing the medium, but a way of addressing status anxiety. It is a way of claiming for oneself the prestigious title of "artist" as opposed to the considerably less glamorous one of "photographer." A photograph is a miracle. There is no need to apologize for it not being a painting.

Statements

This picture is included not so much for its subject or its formal qualities as for its relationship to a fleeting sense I had of myself as a photographer. If you are going to get all serious about it—and I'm not sure that I think you should—a photograph is an admission by the photographer that however much he might prefer to equivocate, this is something he has found engaging.

Mr. Quick's parenthesis here bothers me. People mistake his tentativeness for mine. I have no doubt that photography is something to be serious about. I understand, however, Mr. Quick's wariness of the crowing photographer—the photographer who wears his seriousness like a sandwich board. Mr. Quick has, I believe, read a few too many "artist's statements." I try to stay away from them. I have never read one that made me like the artist or the artist's work more, but many that made me like him, her, or it less. I believe naively that an image should speak for itself. If it requires a caption or a statement it is not a photograph—it is an illustration. In most cases these statements are nothing more than polysyllabic sales pitches—efforts not so much to explicate or to inform as to present the artist as someone substantive and profound—in other words, a good investment.

The Ordinary

What sort of pictures do I take? I would say in general that I stay away from both the sublime and the ridiculously ordinary—in part because they have both been so hopelessly overdone, but also because I have an obdurate predisposition to be suspicious of extremes. In the beginning when I did list in one direction or the other, it was, of course, more likely to be toward the sublime than toward the subtexturally encrusted antithesis, but lately this has changed. Exploring the quintessentially common is a tricky thing to do right—it requires greater foresight and additional technical expertise—but I have found myself getting more and more interested in trying it.

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I would say that here Mr. Quick and I are in agreement yet again. I have, as of late, sensed a growing interest in the “portentous significance” of the ordinary. I have a feeling, however, that Mr. Quick may be—at the moment anyway—a little farther down this road than me.

Representation

This shot of an unassuming brass table lamp is as emotionally neutral as I could make it. A simple statement of fact, I think of it as a sort of ode to representation—a comment on the banality of the phantasmagoric, on the changing image-landscape super-saturated as it is with computer-generated inventions where the fantastic has become a stale bore and the quotidian an endangered exotic.

I share completely Mr. Quick’s terse assessment of the contemporary image landscape. (See “Manipulation.”)

Street People

This is another photo taken for my Portland, Inside and Out project. The subject is one of our colorfully disturbed street people. I have not taken many of these sorts of pictures because I cannot shake the feeling that they are exploitive. It would be silly to pretend that I do not find these marginalized people fascinating, but I am just not prepared very often to try this sort of thing. I have never been able to convince myself that I am doing it for the right reasons—that I am in some way providing an introductory service, embracing a difficult diversity, celebrating a broader view of humanity rather than simply trading on a prurient and callus curiosity. These people are easy subjects—they provide even the most mediocre photographer with credentials as a sophisticate, but these sorts of shots are not what they used to be. The elevating audacity was drained out of them decades ago. While I do think these sorts of pictures can make a valuable point about alienation, about isolation, about suffering, about the nature of the human condition, most of them don’t. The respect repeatedly declared for the subject invariably seems more perfunctorily prescribed than sincere.

Yes, Mr. Quick is speaking for me here. (See “Suffering.”)

Time

There is something uniquely attractive about the geometric form. There is a rightness and wrongness to it—a rectilinear precision—that is not present in the biomorphic form. As I have said, I indulge myself periodically. I enjoy taking these sort of pictures more than I enjoy looking at them. They are usually of interest to me only briefly. I do not see them as intellectual or emotional communications—I see them simply as optical exercises and/or symbols of a cold and sanitary style.

Mr. Quick and I are in complete agreement here except I think I have just the slightest bit more liking of the occasional abstract image than him. This does not mean, however, that I am regularly engaged by abstraction—I am not. These sorts of images can be graphically interesting, but they are not photographically interesting. They are missing what is for me one of the central elements of the medium—time.

Whatever else a photograph may do, it invariably preserves for us the slightest snip of time—the ghost of that millisecond just past, the radial reflection of an actual existence. This temporality is at the heart of photography. A photograph that ignores this ignores the essence of the medium. There is a quality I have heard described as well as it can be of “thereness”

to a good photograph. It puts you in direct visual and visceral contact with a person, place, or thing that (or who) is physically and temporally distant from you. These photographs ripen with age—the temporal distance becomes more dramatic with each passing year. It adds to a photograph's value as a document and as an aesthetic object.

My problem with abstract images is the same as my problem with most landscape images. They are timeless—or are supposed to be. They do not ripen. I am not particularly interested in a photograph of a mountain range taken in 1865, but a storefront, a shopkeeper, or a soldier—that is different. For me photography can be about a lot of things, but it is always to some degree about time. Time and light.

Trivialities

I like this simple little shot—this isolated sliver of reality that is normally overlooked. Teasing the meaning from apparent trivialities—it is one of the things that photography does so well.

We agree again, Mr. Quick and I. As he said elsewhere in his introduction, “there doesn't seem to be anything [the camera] cannot make interesting.” This is both a blessing and a curse. It is one thing to tease the meaning from apparent trivialities and another thing to make apparent trivialities appear meaningful. Not every mundanity contains a marvel. Some trivialities are, in fact, just trivialities. When the camera suggests otherwise, it misleads.

Description

If I were interested in this photograph being considered a work of art, I would have had to deny the debt it owes to its subject. I would have had to insist on the primacy of a personal vision, claim that what has been presented is an esoteric interpretation of light and space or an expressive evocation of some sort of meta-physical mood. There is no idea more insidious, more responsible for crap pictures than the idea that mood or individual interpretation supersedes description. Description—which is at the heart of documentation—is at the heart of photography, and to cavalierly derogate it in favor of a self-aggrandizing aesthetic of visionary license seems to me simply wrong-headed and craven. The fear, of course, is that emphatic description will remind the viewer that the image is the product of a camera when the glory-hunting narcissist would prefer he think it wholly that of a rich imagination.

This passage surprises me. I am very much in agreement with it—I just did not know Mr. Quick had been thinking along these lines. I am wary, of course, of endorsing this paragraph as it is heavily nuanced and requires a careful unpacking. I can see it easily being misunderstood. It is essentially a plea for equal treatment. It does not disparage individual expression, it emphasizes the importance of documentation—the source of photography's power. Mr. Quick is a little strident perhaps in his defense of documentation, but I understand fully his frustration with the coddling conventions of toothless commentary.

Art

Is photography art? This was apparently a question for debate until just recently. According to the professoriate the question has been answered in the affirmative by institutional consensus. Personally I am not so sure. (I am also not so sure it actually matters.) That photography has had the title conferred on it is obviously true, but with contemporary curatorial silliness running the polished hallways of power unchecked, the authority of these institutions to make this conferment has been rightly called into question. I know photographers would like it to be considered "art," would like to have their names decorated with the designation, but it seems to me an overly broad use of the word. Referring to a photographer as an "artist" is like referring to a musician as one; it may be loosely accurate, but it doesn't really seem to be strictly the case. The appellation seems more a complex species of honorifica than a statement of fact.

This section of this peculiar little book (and one in which Mr. Quick refers to photography as a "peripheral art form" that was "maybe on a par with dance") has caused me considerable trouble. We agree about the manipulated image for the most part, but his opinions on photography as "art" are entirely his own. The stance he has taken is, I believe, purposefully provocative. It is one he was obliged to take for "dramatic reasons" by a manipulative author, so I am not going to hold it against him—not entirely. Photography for me is quite obviously an art. It is a new art, not a peripheral one. Where it ranks in the hierarchy of arts has yet to be determined. The struggle for status (and its accompanying financial rewards) has just begun. The most impassioned advocates seem to be those who are trying to monetize the medium. I have none of Mr. Quick's trepidations.

Thumbprint

Larkin wrote poems, he said, to preserve things he had seen, thought, and felt both for himself and for others, but that his first responsibility was to the experience itself, which he sought to keep from oblivion for its own sake. I must admit a cynic's inclination to distrust all proclamations of altruistic motivation. I think this "art for art's sake" trope is and always was something of an esoteric dodge. The experience may have intrinsic value and deserve saving "for itself," but it has always had an attractive ancillary value as well. What Larkin sought to save from oblivion was not only the experience, but evidence of the experience's experienter—the perceiving consciousness. I think this is very much the case for Mr. Quick and me. In addition to documenting a very small part of the world around us, we are hoping to preserve for ourselves and others forever a transient moment of aesthetic pleasure, a moment that will by necessity bear however faintly the thumbprint of the experiencing consciousness that just so happens to be him—and me.

I hope this has cleared up at least some of the confusion about Mr. Quick's general attitudes and mine—that it has defined some of our agreements and disagreements. It will not, I am sure, be the last word.