

Welcome to the afternoon session of the f/295 Symposium on Lensless, Alternative and Adaptive Photographic Processes here at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA.

I wish to extend my gratitude to Tom Persinger for his Herculean efforts in creating a much-needed forum for imagemakers working with non-traditional forms of photography.

I'm going to take this opportunity to present a philosophical synopsis of my forthcoming book, *Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes*, Third Edition, which is due from Focal Press late this year. Then I will give an introduction to my pictorial sculpture, *World in a Jar: War and Trauma*, which opens this evening at the Pittsburgh Filmmakers at 8 PM. Although outwardly dissimilar, both examine photographic processes as dynamic, changing entities, capable of functioning as creative, cultural tools, whose visual results can affect how we know and define our place in the world. Each component is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation of project images. I will be happy to take questions at the conclusion of today's talks.

Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes Third Edition

In print since 1990, *Photographic Possibilities* is a trusted gateway for those who want to experience and understand innovative ways of thinking about and working with the photographic medium. The book is designed for imagemakers who are familiar with the basics of black-and-white

photography and are keen to learn about uncommon ways of expanding their visual practice.

Specifically, *Photographic Possibilities* is devised for those who find it vital to interact with the photographic process to thoughtfully interject their personal responses to the subject being portrayed. It is a book for expressive imagemakers whose photographs represent an essential component of how they observe, describe, define, communicate, remember, celebrate, and express their response to life.

In a wide-ranging and open manner, *Photographic Possibilities* surveys what today's alternative imagemakers are actually doing in the field, something different from the ordinary, in terms of apparatus, materials, processes, representation concepts, and notions of creativity. The text also provides a historical background about the major processes it covers. Unfamiliar terms are defined upon their first use. A Resource Guide of additional sources of information and supplies, including Websites, is provided at the end of subject sections whenever appropriate.

The book's art program presents a stimulating survey of works by over 130 contemporary photographers from Australia to Germany and throughout North America, which *illuminate*, not illustrate, concepts and methods discussed in the book. Images were curated through an international work call and also by contacting specific artists. I communicated with each imagemaker about the working methods they employed to realize their vision. This information was then distilled into captions, which allows the makers to speak directly to the readers.

The guiding principles of *Photographic Possibilities* are to explore, encourage, and present works by artists who utilize photo-based processes to *evoke* an inner state of consciousness and grapple with a subject beyond its external physical structure. This approach can be likened to the Japanese concept of *shashin*, which says something is only true when it integrates the outer appearance with the inner makeup of a subject.

The book provides a resource for artists working with nonconformist photographic forms. It supports the belief that innovation matters, and we learn and understand by doing. *Photographic Possibilities* champions “human images,” those that possess their own idiosyncratic sense of essence, time, and wonder. Such work is often aesthetically challenging, for it may not provide the customary audience-friendly narratives and well-mannered compositions some have come to expect. But this methodology is often what is necessary to get us to set aside the predetermined answers to the question: “What is a photograph?” and allow us to recognize photography’s remarkable diversity in terms of form, structure, representational content, and meaning.

Much of my imaginative energy is rooted in a notion I call the “*Possibility Scale*,” which proclaims: “If I can imagine it, there can be a way to make it happen.” It is transcendent artistic thinking – one that seeks to reach beyond the range of known experiences – encouraging one to adventurously visit regions once deemed out of bounds or inhabited by demons to push the limits of our understanding. This framework disrupts many assumptions and conventions and provides a pathway to supplying answers to the question

“Why not?”

Photographic Possibilities pursues a working premise that construes reactions to photographs are personal and should not be pigeonholed into tight-fitting, predetermined roles. Many people have been conditioned by the mainstream media to believe the purpose of a photograph is to quickly provide empirical commentary “about” a subject. However, it is possible that a photograph may not be a direct sign that stands for something else, makes a concrete statement or answers a specific question. A picture may not necessarily be about something; rather it may be something in and of itself that possesses its own innate structure, value, and vocabulary. It may be enigmatic or a work of the imagination, giving viewers access to something that could not be perceived or understood in another medium. Such unrestricted images can be eccentric and changeable, thereby disturbing standards of correct practice, which makes them more complex to look at and ascertain meaning.

Some artists feel photographic meaning can be realized when a photograph is thought of as being a conversation among the photographer, subject, and viewer. In this scenario, every conversation has its own context, whose participants not only exchange words but also formulate meaning based on their own independent criteria including: how the words are spoken; to whom they are addressed; the body language of the participants; the personal stories among those involved; the environment in which the conversation takes place; and perhaps most importantly, their time and place in history. When the participants actively ponder a specific subject or image, a distillation of meaning becomes possible. This type of critical thinking

involves the resourceful interaction among the participants, whose ensuing clarity of focus can lead to definition. Definition allows those involved in the process to take responsibility for solving a problem or reaching a conclusion about what an imagemaker deemed significant.

Photographic Possibilities is concerned with subjective imagemaking, involving purposely-controlled representations of what makes up reality. When knowledgeable viewers look at a photograph they can usually trace it back to its technical origins, such whether it was a pinhole or view camera or whether the capture was film or digital. Each image is a culmination of the following: the properties of the original subject; the specific materials used in its creation; the production process; the photographer's artistic vision; and the presentation method. When an image is viewed, people may disagree about whether or not they consider the picture to be "photographic." What they are really arguing about is the amount of image management, the degree of deviation from the original image capture, which audiences will tolerate for a work to still be considered photographic in nature.

Paradoxically, the fabricated nature of digital imaging, which ended analog photography's dominance of the practice, has expanded what mainstream audiences now readily accept in terms of photographic time constructs.

Unintentionally our culture has acknowledged images are made of segments of past, future, and intervening time, thus accidentally recognizing the claim of no manipulation, an unconditional photographic truth, is really highly manipulative and false.

Photographic Possibilities is not involved with the long-standing assumption that photography is nature's mirror. Rather, it is intrigued by

how photography allows the manifestation of personal realities by means of light-sensitive materials (film, paper, sensor) to see beyond the fixed frame. Simply put, but difficult for some to accept, there is no mandate of how an image should look. When two, first-rate photographers independently photograph the same subject they will produce different results. This is because the underpinnings of inventiveness and originality are formulated by autonomously actions, which in turn generate different representations than previously established views of a similar subject. In this spirit, *Photographic Possibilities* recognizes that fresh ideas come from re-contextualizing existing knowledge and is link in this chain of knowledge. When we look at other images, we draw in memories of things we never directly knew and commingle them with our own experiences, expanding our worldview. The more one comprehends how images are made, the more one realizes that imagemaking is a derivative, collaborative, and interpretive process.

Notions of what constitutes creativity and originality have always swirled around photographic practice, thus making it imperative to realize that Western society's intellectual heritage, including photography, is founded on a culture of transformation, one of borrowing, sharing, re-borrowing, and then amending, expanding, and improving – the full range of ways in which new art builds on and emerges from the old. Consider one of America's cultural icons: *Steamboat Willie*, the 1928 Walt Disney cartoon that introduced Mickey Mouse. *Steamboat Willie* borrowed from, and played off of, Buster Keaton's 1928 silent film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, which itself had borrowed from a 1910 song, *Steamboat Bill*. Disney's creative act was to snatch material from the ethos around him, mix it with his own talent, and

then imprint that union into the character of our culture. Select an art form and you will find this 1-2-3 combination of snatch, mix, and imprint. As Pablo Picasso quipped, “Bad artists copy; Great artists steal.”

It is worth noting that in the early history of photography a series of judicial decisions could have changed the course of the medium: courts were asked to decide whether a photographer needed permission before capturing an image. Was a photographer *stealing* from an architect or building owner when photographing a structure or from an individual whose photograph he or she took, pirating something of private and certifiable value? Those early decisions went in favor of those accused of thievery. Just as Disney took inspiration from Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* and the existence of real mice, imagemakers need the freedom to interpret the archive of human knowledge without the bonds of restrictive and expensive copyright laws to expand our fund of collective information.

Photographic Possibilities inspires imagemakers to acquire a working, hands-on understanding of a wide range of photographic processes, expanding their visual lexicon to obtain their desired outcomes. It puts forward the assertion that learning a range of representational models and photographic methods is vital to the act of translating an abstract idea into a specific physical reality. Only after a working knowledge of a process is obtained can precise control begin. To that end, this text provides basic working procedures and introduces a variety of well-tested photographic methods, with examples of how and why other photographers have applied them. It promotes a position of inclusive thinking in terms of concept, content, and process, with the ability to freely navigate among them, to

fabricate one's own meaningful destination. In this setting process is placed in the service of concept to construct evocative content. This is possible when the heart and the mind combine an idea from the imagination and determine the most suitable technical means of bringing it into existence. Then individual vision is the trump card, an outcome superbly summed up by former New York Yankee catcher and pop philosopher Yogi Berra who said: "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is."

Postscript

For those who would like more detailed information about contemporary, alternative photographic practice, please visit my website and download my article: "Flexible Images: Handmade American Photography, 1969 – 2002," which was the cover story in The Society for Photographic Education's magazine *exposure*, Volume 36:1, 2003, cover and pages 23 – 42.

<http://www.lightresearch.net/articles/handmade.html>

World in a Jar: War and Trauma

Following an aesthetic strategy of search and discovery, *World in a Jar: War & Trauma* utilizes the camera as an artistic tool to curate and re-imagine key components from historical and original images to explore the workings of our collective societal memory involving loss, popular culture, religion, tragedy, and the nature of evil over the past four centuries. *World in a Jar* evolved out of my response to the events of 9/11 and has allowed me to use camera vision to personalize large themes by dislocating the specifics in

favor of the general. It is shaped by my visual re-examination of history, which is fueled by my collecting of photography books and pictures. These sources allow me to rework and reinterpret images to explore life's Big issues and to ponder what history and images can and cannot teach us.

World in a Jar is a free-form sculptural montage that rethinks the customary linear narrative by offering a supermarket of moveable images. The original installation consisting of 850 individual image jars, stacked 4 high on a 50 x 4 x 2 foot serpentine display pedestal, was surrounded by ten individually framed 40 x 60 inch prints. Each glass jar contains a different picture, a twin printed twice on a black field (akin to a 19th century stereo card), which lets them be seen from multiple points of view. Each jarred image serves as an interchangeable viewing block, allowing the complete collection to be a perpetual work in progress that recreates itself each time it is installed. This permits each photograph to not only present its own split-second historical reference, but also informs the context and interpretation of the surrounding images. There are no captions to anchor the images to particular events, which allow them to transcend their specific time-based circumstances. Rather, images freely float in an ambiguous and enigmatic space, encouraging viewers to interact and expand meanings based on their own interpretations. This engagement is a reminder how we natively continue to allow photographs to seduce us into believing that they are objective records, when in fact all images are not what they initially appear to be and require thoughtful interpretation. This open-ended production, emulating how the puzzles and paradoxes of our own memories are constructed, can convey an endless tale about the human condition that exists outside of chronological time.

Most of the project images were made from other photographs, as well as from drawings, paintings, and prints for the purpose of questioning the nature of the photographic image. It is a Socratic process allowing me to engage in a philosophical and visual dialogue with other times, places, and makers, flowing from the principle there is no correct first version of how an image should look. I am not redefining an image as much as I am inquiring into the metaphysical contradictions and opposing social forces that swirl around each image. I am asking each picture a question while examining its origin and how its significance changes over time.

One aspect of *World in a Jar* examines how the power elite has utilized images, as well as words, to rule dreams, knowing that in turn dreams rule actions. Such images, dreams, and actions are not necessarily benevolent and can, in fact, be malicious. Evil can manifest itself in the form of an obligatory fairy-tale in which a power-seeking group concocts a narrative of self-glorification that de-humanizes another group it wants to subjugate. Such myth formation converts *Those* people into allegedly powerful enemies, whose very existence is supposedly responsible for the ills of that society, thus justifying their elimination to save that way of life. The Nazis produced a culture of cruelty by fabricating giant lies, such as the 1940 film *The Eternal Jew*. In it Jews are portrayed as wandering cultural parasites, and referred to as cancer, excrement, and plague, labels that also provided pseudo-scientific cover for their claim the world needed to be cleansed of such deadly germs.

A fundamental *World in a Jar* theme is my personal perceptions of the post-

Holocaust world. In 1961, during the fog of the threat of nuclear annihilation, I watched, on a black-and-white television, the trial in Jerusalem of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann for crimes against humanity for his role in administering the mass deportation of “undesirable” people to ghettos and extermination camps. I watched with my mother’s father whose family had vanished up the death camp’s chimneys. I was stunned. My family didn’t talk about it. I knew my father had left college to enlist in the Army Air Corp *before* Pearl Harbor and spent 5 years in military service during World War II, but I had no perception of the enormity of the Nazi atrocities. I could not comprehend systematically murdering people, including one million children, based on no more than faith in a fictitious, racist viewpoint.

Seeing the black-and-white photographs made at the concentration camps after the Allied liberation, naked corpses of women and men with numbers tattooed on their arms, degradingly piled like so much kindling, made me feel as if my head had been split open and filled with monstrous fiends who pursued total annihilation. No images, before or since, have so powerfully affected me. They left an indelible streak of anxiety upon my psyche. Clearly, everything I had been taught to believe about the world was wrong. It seemed we are only are expected to pretend we are rational beings, that power, violence, and sex don’t make the world go round, that things are different than they really, when in fact they aren’t. Suddenly, I found myself bound up with ancient hateful beliefs, a rapidly spreading mental plague that resulted in the horrific deaths of millions of people. Their anguish, sorrow, and terror, like undeveloped film, were latently tattooed inside me.

These appalling, grainy, black-and-white photographs of the Shoah subconsciously influenced my future direction to work in black-and-white photography, which I saw as being more authentic and essential than the glossy patina of color photographs. I began making interpretive images about the Holocaust when I was in my mid-twenties, but it took me 30 years of intellectually wrestling with the enormity of these ghastly crimes before I was satisfied I was not trivializing the subject. Although I have taught and extensively written about color photography, it has only been since completing this project that I have begun to make color pictures.

As a member of “the hinge-generation,” Jews living between the experience of the Holocaust and its memory, I believe that as last of the Survivors die it is essential for artists to find innovative ways of remembering what happened. Memory is mutable. It is only as real as the last time it is remembered and the failure to renew these memories is akin to a belated Nazi victory because what they did will quickly and deliberately be concealed and forgotten.

That said I reject the notion of myself as a victim of victims, damaged by calamities perpetrated on someone else by unknown demons in another time. I don't believe that actual trauma is transgenerational, but I do think the complex web of cultural inheritance involving ideals, mandates, prohibitions, and values allows a wounded spirit to be passed on to the next generation. However, what is paramount is recognizing and confronting those who are responsible for humanitarian offenses, stopping atrocities as quickly as possible, and bringing those responsible to justice.

World in a Jar also examines the nature of visual veracity. History bears out the more outrageous the lie; the more the perpetrators seem to be motivated by it. Eventually these lies become ubiquitous, contaminating and bogging down an entire society with falsehoods. As the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay pointed out, “It’s not true that life is one damn thing after another. It’s one damned thing over and over.”

Even now that Photoshop has become a verb people still want to trust their own eyes, even when they are aware they are only seeing pixels, thus validating Groucho Marx’s observational wisecrack, “Who you going believe – me – or your lyin’ eyes?” Yet people continue to expect photography to render reality transparent and understandable rather than acknowledging its inherently devious nature and ability to make lies visible.

During the mid-twentieth century Henri Cartier-Bresson’s concept of “The Decisive Moment,” that fraction of a second when the essence of a subject is revealed, defined full-frame 35mm photographic truth. Its foundation was constructed around the hand-held camera’s ability to freeze and isolate action, giving it the appearance of being true. Unfortunately this widely accepted theory ignored that such Decisive Moments were disconnected from their original context and sequence of events.

Today’s abundance of dynamic digital moments, constructed from many different pieces of time and space, challenge such popular assumptions by asking: Is the postvisualization of an image innately less truthful than a previsualized one and can such an assembled picture reveal previously unseen truths? Consider Jeff Wall’s highly structured image *Dead Troops*

Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986), 1992. Wall's elaborate devastating war scene fabrication, camouflaged as truth, describes a real situation that defied the photographic approach of grabbing a scene out of the flow of real time. Wall's methodology skates on the edge between life and theater and points out that The Truth is a fluctuating cultural construct where our legends commingle with facts to form an accepted social reality. This is why allegory or symbolic expression remains a favorite method for representing moral, political, and spiritual messages.

As previously discussed, new ideas and evaluations are not the result of spontaneous generation, but arise from evolutionary combinations of existing ones. It is in this context, *World in a Jar* provides a shape shifting, framework that encourage audiences to "read a text" from both their conscious and subconscious mind, among the specimens presented for examination. As in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), one's stream of consciousness is free to appreciate each image or sequences of images, in order to fabricate a personal, dream-like narrative ignited by a weave of retinal associations that dispense with linear time.

Time is a crucial component of *World in a Jar*. Time calls us all and measures change. If there is no time, there is no change. If there is no change, there is no action. If there is no action, life stagnates. And we need action to foster creation, for creation propels life and provides hope. Where there is no hope, evil takes hold. The real struggle of *World in a Jar* is between hope and evil for it is at this juncture that the mind's eye can offer up possibilities for new and innovative realities. Can alternative forms of

photography play a role in this process? I think it is possible...

Thank you for your attention.

My gratitude to Mark Jacobs for his close reading and critical counsel of the presentation drafts and to Anna Kuehl in preparing the PowerPoint shows.

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