Online Photographic Thinking

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Photography travels. Photographic images customarily appear on coffee mugs, t-shirts, and front pages and this capacity to roam continues to be one of the defining characteristics of our slippery medium. This essay addresses the context of the web for photography. It's a new frontier that, from the standpoint of an independent practitioner, doesn't seem to have fulfilled its potential, given photography's phenomenal recent expansion as a contemporary art form as well as its over 150-year-old track record for multiple expansions. I want to ruminate on why that might be—on what conditions might have led to an underwhelming response by serious and independent photographers to the potential of the Internet.

First, to contextualise myself: I am a 39-year-old photographer/educator living an hour from London. My own work, I like to think, is experimental and often takes photography as its subject. I have regularly operated in the editorial, fashion, and music industries. I studied Fine Art in the late 1980s, when computers were just finding their way onto campus. In those days, my idea of innovation was Brian Eno's wonderfully plodding "Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan," in which the monitor, at that time almost solely linked to a televisual experience, was turned on its side to accommodate an image generated by a camera in equivalent condition. This anachronism may seem simplistic by contemporary standards, but it proposed an important dialogue with the imposed system of image reception, a subtle "detournement" that informed my own engagement with media systems, both in integral and formal ways.

My own work, which had previously consisted largely of self-obsessed street photography, made the hop from the page to the screen in 2001. As a big budget flaneur for British Telecom, I filed daily image and text reports as I drifted through pedestrian precincts. I shot on film, mailing handwritten notes to a web designer in Soho. In 2002 the cosmetics giant Shiseido commissioned "Beauty Where You Find It," a two-month circumnavigation with a remit to photograph things I found beautiful. This developed my antenna for idiosyncratic fancies, from a knitted bicycle cover in Myanmar to the retro-utopias of Brasilia and Chandigarh. For this project I worked with a Sony Cyber-shot (still my favourite capture palette) and a laptop from which I emailed images to the Paris La Beauté gallery for immediate display, as well as upload to a site.

The following year manifested a similar process for Nick Knight's SHOWstudio in a project called "New World," made on a camping trip through New Zealand. By then the technology fit in my pocket, a clunky camera phone that afforded me freedom from cyber-café negotiations. The tool of delivery had changed radically in three years, with a particular emphasis on reduced cost and size along with increased speed. The new technologies gave me license and encouraged me to deliberate less about whether or not to actually take a picture. Liberated from the worry that the film in my camera would run out just as I stumbled across the best observation of the day, and from the fear of "wasting" valuable film in the process of experimentation, I developed a confidence and a flippancy that allowed me to take new sorts of pictures and not to be too precious about my practice.

I'm conscious of the contradictory ways in which I've responded to digital photography. For some projects I've become slower and take fewer pictures. I launched TheDailyNice.com in October 2004. The project has channelled a few personal anxieties towards catharsis. I show one picture at a time, uploaded at bedtime. There's no archive of previous days' daily nices: when it's gone, it's gone. At a point in photographic history where commodification offers new challenges to practitioners, I wanted to kill my darlings one by one, which has been a cause of anxiety for many viewers. The images are always of something that was its own reward and that made me happy at the moment when I found it. Real beauty is not about perpetuity; it seems that there are a few people out there (34,000 visits per month in the winter and 32,500 in the summer months) who enjoy a Web site that is dedicated to a happy moment in each day. It's a good news page, and by harnessing the ephemeral aspects of photography, I now come across more "nices" than I can show. In a society that discourages such behaviour, I have owned and shared my happiness.

Without the World Wide Web, I could not make such a project happen. The site has generated an international audience and dialogue (visitors respond with everything from haiku to rambling essays on aesthetics). The other great advantage of this Internet-based project is the ratio between the numbers of visitors and my own expenditure in launching and

maintaining the site. Magazine, book, or gallery projects just can't compete on this level. There is the quality versus quantity debate, but I like to think that I have that down, too. Thus, I've reached the biggest audience of my life with no content compromise and an entirely affordable process. There is no coffee table book in the pipeline, for which I am glad. Contemporary collectors seem only to discuss what they own, rarely the content. My work is no longer hemmed in by the deadening, hyper-accelerated capitalist objectification of magazine advertising as in my editorial days. I feel free.

Creating TheDailyNice site has encouraged me to think about other applications of my pictures online. I'm making book-type projects now that paper publishing has a different imperative. Like many photographers in the mid-1990s, I was sucked into a sense of inadequacy from not having a monograph by the time I was thirty. In the 2000s, I started talking to publishers and hearing what a hard time they were having; stories of editions of a thousand barely shifting half the print run. In 2007, I launched TheNewScent.com, and it had 3,700 visitors in its first month. If an audience is what you prefer (as opposed to a physical thing like a book or a show as the testimony to your photographic talent), then the Internet is for you. How the perceived populism and the lack of exclusivity of my online presence places me in relation to, say, the gallery system has yet to be determined.

In the inevitable and frankly tedious digital versus analog debate, my position is one of either/and. Both systems offer distinct possibilities, but I ultimately believe that they are just different sides of the same coin. Photography's comparatively brief history is littered with mechanical revelations and methodological revolution. I see the digital as nothing more than the most recent of these. Those who whine about the demise of Kodachrome rarely bemoan the lack of popularity or common usage of the cyanotype. Those fuzzy thinkers seldom make the connection between a beloved aesthetic and the motivations of the corporation that created it. We are not having our self-made choices taken away from us by the usurping of analog by digital; we just have to expand what photography can be.

Changes in "capture" characteristics, particularly the preview screen, have had an essential impact. In the "good old days," when we shot in the dark with intuitive reliance on a sense of skill, a serendipitous selection of "happy accidents" informed the development of the medium. With the preview screen, we are more likely to delete immediately anything that doesn't look like a picture we formally recognize—that is, photography that looks like photography as we used to know it. I'm an advocate for not pressing the delete button too readily—for leaving the (analog-born) door open for finding a new direction or cause for thought in your photography through retrospective editing.

Many of us come from a position of having learned to create photography with analog tools and outcomes. An interesting thing about the digital is that it does us good (mentally, anyway) to sometimes put aside the seductive "thing-ness" of photography (the crumpled papers, the hassles of framing and hanging) and engage directly with the image. I'm not saying, of course, that online/digital photography doesn't have form, or that there aren't already stylistic conventions emerging on the Web, but rather that the issues of form and aesthetics that are rightly heavy or serious ones for a photographer working in print form become lightened and are less the focus of my creative energy when thinking "www." When making work, we usually operate from a tangible experience that, no matter how many evolutionary links we are from a chimp, still seem to matter like hell when that same work becomes intangible. These are good buttons for us photographers to press.

In the recent scramble to establish the new cultural frontier that is "contemporary art photography," there has been a shift away from defunct ideas about visual "democracy," wide circulation of the "image," and the re-establishment of the photograph as object. Art market credo limits many of the defining characteristics of the photographic medium, simultaneously rendering "serious" work less likely to reveal itself with any real intent in the populist and, goddammit, free realm of the Internet. The prospect of all of those uncalibrated monitors is going to be a turn-off for any photographer who has laboured with specific tools and palettes to produce particular effects. Compare the "image" impact of a Gabriel Orozco to the "picture" production values of a Gregory Crewdson, and ponder which translates better to the Internet.

I know that this means that the Internet is not the place for everyone's photography. But we are a pragmatic group of people and, taking cues from photography's analog past, editorial photographers learn a stoicism when dealing with the reproduction quality of their work in books and magazines. 35mm doesn't deliver

the same quality as 8 x 10, but it delivers nevertheless. The argument that photographic imagery doesn't "work" on screen need only be directed to how well the Web's fleshly offerings serve their clients—there were 260 million porn Web sites by last year, which does imply that certain images can and do work rather well on the Net.

I've found myself shifting some of my browsing from the library to the Web, getting lost and found in digitized photography. At its most satisfying, I stumble across both intentionally and unintentionally brilliant photographs and ideas. The way Internet search engines work will always be a mystery to me, but I trust that they are like libraries with well-reasoned taxonomies and filing systems that I feel an obligation to subvert. Just like a library shelf organised on the lines of book height or accession date, the brilliant coincidences of what sits next to what on a Google search is food for my imagination. To round up these thoughts on Web-based photography, I want to describe some of the projects that inform and brighten my experience of photography on the Web.

I've never been very interested in qualitative judgments brought to bear on photographs; all photographs can work given the right context. A good example of this and of "bad" digital photography would be Useful Photography 002, which culls images from eBay—where sellers have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to illustrate their wares. These are pictures you will not be finding at a swap meet in twenty years' time.

For lovers of the vernacular, Squareamerica.com is a gift. This humanely curated collection overshadows recent paper publications on similar themes. It gives real insights into the collection, and the sense of humour that resonates through the selections is unique. The site's warm-hearted lightness of touch is a terrific pick-me-up.

During my cruise of Flickr I found the collection of Zimbaman (from 1–5). The edit is made up of vernacular images of fit/handsome youths, which have a contemporary homoerotic charge when seen en masse. Viewed in another way, this collection could be seen as a glimpse into the nature of masculine stereotyping in Israel; some of the photographs show young men in army training or posing in situations where flags and images of war machines are displayed. Others offer intimate bathroom posturing and poolside horseplay in which a besieged secular national identity apes a more liberal, relaxed lifestyle.

Either way, the collection offers the fascinating and poignant prospect of a vernacular form that perhaps informs the potency of the highly intentional speculations of Collier Schorr.

It might not be currently fashionable to make the kind of street pictures that you can see at In-public. com, with their dependence on mid-twentieth-century photographic standbys like timing, luck, and loitering. However, it's great to have a site that makes such a good bid at convincing us that the genre is alive and well rather than threatened by institutional paranoia about uncontrolled imaging and its potential destinations at a time when nearly everybody has a camera on their phone.

Also poignant is the site of a talented but reticent ex-student. Unlikely to rise through existing channels of photography promotion anytime soon due to a lack of ambition rather than talent (sometimes the art system supports those who are good at networking and form filling) is kevinbeckphotography.com. This Web format offers critical closure in what is otherwise an unstoppable stream of image production.

For me, Tim Barber's refreshing labour of love, Tinyvices.com, beats all other photography sites hands down. The volume, quality, and diversity of this altruistic selection is staggering and offers an "intimate" view of a range of work which one simply would not be able to access otherwise. The organic parameters defined by Barber's unswerving and kindly instinct shift and accommodate notions of photographic pluralism which would be hard to find elsewhere. His own blog is interspersed with images of and by (becoming) famous friends as well as the awesome "submissions" gallery and a huge collection of submitted folios of work, with contact details. Barber draws no income beyond occasional sales and hosts no advertising on this site, which lends a refreshingly un-corporate, DIY air to the proceedings (he does, however, have plans to use the site as a springboard to publishing artist's books).

I'm not arguing that the Internet should be considered as the only new frontier for serious and independent photography, anymore than I subscribe to the anxiety that I need to choose between digital and analog photographic capture and output. Instead, I believe that complementary versions of photographic thinking can be played out at this interesting moment in the medium's history and it's time for any photographer with public, discursive ambitions to shape our on-line context.

Imagine if the Internet had emerged in the early twentieth century. The majority of those "-ists" would have had a field day—and imagine Warhol and the Internet. I guess it is simply a matter of time before a generation not weaned on paper and chemicals sees the manufactured bubble of "art photography" for what it is, and begins to explore the potential of an inclusive, affordable distribution network and its inherently interesting formal qualities.

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