

Photography and Sound

by Mark Haworth-Booth

I was recently at a wonderful photographic festival. I spent a week in delightful surroundings, visiting many exhibitions of all kinds and meeting photographers in pleasant social settings. I chatted with photo journalists and documentarists, photographers who think of themselves as fine artists, and so on. Sitting on a sofa at a sunny Sunday morning brunch, I would be shown a book dummy or an exhibition maquette. I had, like everyone attending the festival, a privileged insight into many kinds of photographic practice. Sitting in an apartment, a garden or a bar, listening to photographers talking eloquently about their work, as we turned the pages of a book or album, was perfect.

However, the evening came for the audio-visual presentations in a large hall. If you have attended a photo-festival, you can probably imagine what it was like. There were many slide presentations – a dozen or more. Each one was accompanied by music. It was often hard, driving rock, though sometimes something slower, like Blues or a ballad. It went on for perhaps an hour and a half, with very short pauses between presentations. The odd thing was that the work of people with whom I'd talked quietly at length was now something completely different – a fast-paced, loud media event. All the context of the photographs, all the interpretation and all the subtlety, had been erased.

Some of them desperately needed context – the most extreme example being photographs of the bodies of Muslims burned by US soldiers in Afghanistan. At first I kept asking myself, why are you showing me this, what does it mean? – and then I gave up.

As I got up from my seat at the end, shaking my head with frustration and disappointment, I saw some of my colleagues from various museums. They had had the same deeply disappointing experience. One well-know and highly respected curator said: 'This is why I don't watch TV anymore – it's just meaningless'. It wasn't just a generational thing, either, because our younger colleagues felt the same.

Now, perhaps this kind of presentation does work for some audiences. I think I am right in saying that the audio-visual format for photography was pioneered for large audiences at the photographic festival at Arles in the south of France.

At Arles, of course, there is the remarkable Roman amphitheatre at which large audiences can be comfortably accommodated on balmy evenings, watching spectacular presentations on large screens. I have seen some great visual extravaganzas at Arles. So, I am aware that what one might call 'stadium photography', like 'stadium rock', can work wonderfully.

However, I think it is time for photographers to consider another model. Websites allow a careful matching of sound and image. As an accompaniment to photographs there is nothing so authentic as the photographer's own voice. Of course, it takes courage for photographers to trust their own voices and their powers of oral expression. But, returning to the festival I went to, photographers already constantly explain their projects to friends and colleagues and strangers. This is part of their work that photographers need to concentrate on almost as much as their photographic practice.

As it happens, there is already a perfect role model. This is the celebrated electronic programme by Pedro Meyer titled *"I Photograph To Remember"*. It was first issued as a CDROM in 1992 by the pioneering electronic publisher Voyager, New York. Meyer, a Mexican photographer, created the most moving account of his family history and his parents in particular, through the combination of his own documentary photographs and his spoken narrative. He happens to have a marvellous voice, but it is the creation of narrative links and cues that is most important.

This is something any photographer can aspire to without going to voice-training sessions. A photographer's voice will have in it, anyway, the knowledge and feelings that are appropriate to that photographer's own images. Not even the best actor or actress can provide the kind of authenticity that is embedded in the photographer's own experience and voice.



©Pedro Meyer

Another remarkable thing about Meyer's programme is that it has kept pace with the times. I first saw it in the early 1990s when it was new – but I just played it, free, from the Internet. It can also be downloaded to an i-Pod. When I played it again seated at my desk at home, it was even better than a dozen years ago. So, I'd like to propose in this editorial that every reader who does not know "*I Photograph To Remember*" should play it today.

Even for those who do not know Spanish or English, the two languages in which the programme is available, there will still be much to learn, I believe, about sequencing, narrative and the art of making the very private extremely public. For those who have either Spanish or English, the programme will provide a great lesson about photography and sound. I hope it will stimulate photographers to be bold and make use of their own voice alongside their images. The subtle combination of these media is already, for me, one of the most important features of Zone Zero.

This is a good moment for such experiments, because a new generation of curators is engaged with just such issues. For example, Charlotte Cotton, my former colleague at the Victoria and Albert Museum and now at the LA County Museum, pioneered the use of sound recordings of the artists in the gallery alongside their documentary photographs in the exhibition *Stepping In, Stepping Out* at the V&A in 2002. The moment is ripe for photographers to grasp, in galleries as well as cyberspace.

Mark Haworth-Booth

markhaworthbooth@googlemail.com

October 2007

**

Mark Haworth-Booth is visiting professor of photography at the University of the Arts London, a senior research fellow at the London College of Communication, and honorary research fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. He served as the V & A's senior curator of photographs from 1977-2004. He has organized numerous exhibitions and worked closely with many distinguished photographers including Ansel Adams and Henri Cartier-Bresson. His publications cover the entire history of photography. He sits on the editorial boards of *Aperture*, *Art History* and *History of Photography*.