

Kiss The Past Good Bye An Epitaph for Creative Camera

Written by Peter Turner

I am writing with a sense of regret. No: tears are more to the point. The magazine I edited for many years is no more. Creative Camera, lately retitled 'Dpict' is no longer part of the photo firmament, and I weep at its passing.

The Arts Council of England decided to cut off funding to the magazine, even though it raised 60% of its income through sales. (In statistical terms 'CC' out-performed Covent Garden Opera). It may not have been perfect, but for more than 30 years it was an outlet for photographer's thoughts and expressions.

DPICT's critical and enquiring take on photography was built on Creative Camera's legacy of risk-taking publishing. Over three decades its pages were home to strong and distinctive voices - writers and artists such as Roland Barthes, John Berger, Victor Burgin, Jo Spence and Helen Chadwick. As an important forum for the appreciation and critical reception of photography, Creative Camera became a key part of the scene it surveyed.

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During its first decade the title spoke for a new generation of photographers who yearned for an alternative to outmoded 'club' photography. Afterwards, the magazine specialized in showcasing innovative forms of photography and publishing critical and informative articles about the camera image in a broad cultural context.

Based in London, it had a world-wide circulation and over 30 years the magazine became a byword for quality in photography. The price for its fierce independence, however, was sacrifices by everyone involved, and over-reliance on financial assistance from the Arts Council of England.



The arts have always needed patrons - not because they lack worth, but because people must

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be constantly prodded to reexamine their values; it is when the arts are most disregarded, that we are most in dire need of them. This is why I find myself deeply disturbed at the fact that photography is being ignored in the general mire of post-modern confusion.

To sever it at the jugular is to pay a higher price than could be imagined; it doesn't help that the cost to resuscitate the corpse of serious photography will be huge and that people have lost their livelihoods. It is genocide, pure and simple: with these seemingly small actions humanity's terms are slowly aligned to bureaucratic agendas, making baboons of the bean-counting kind the more popular species of our planet. Sadly, we could soon be overrun.

What follows is a brief and anecdotal history of Creative Camera- a tragi-comedy to celebrate its existence and lament its passing. First let me introduce a cast. Topping the list of characters (you might call them eccentrics) who made the magazine possible is Colin Osman, the first publisher, whom I once described as 'having a taste for improbable ties'.

Next is me. I grew up with 'Creative Camera' and didn't wear a tie. I was a closet hippy, an idealist who eventually learned to be a business man. Then there was Bill Jay, editor and inspirer. Now enter two more characters - David Hurn and Tony Ray-Jones, both photographers with a sense for how magazines tick.... Tony died from leukemia in 1972 but David has done better and is still trotting around Wales (where he lives) and the world taking pictures.

Although different in temperament they both gave Bill Jay ideas and support. And both were

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wedded to an idea of excellence in photography. Me too, but that came a little later, after all, I was only a kid with enthusiasm. I had to prove myself. Bill eventually went to the USA where his talents were more valued. He has written a number of books - the latest is 'Sun in the Blood of the Cat'.

Before Bill came two South Africans; Sylvester Stein (publisher) and Jurgen Shadeburg (editor) and a magazine called 'Camera Owner'. Jurgen resigned in 1967 and returned to being a photographer. Stein was going to close the magazine. Enter Bill Jay who wrote for that magazine ('turned a trick' in common parlance) and contributor Colin Osman.

Colin was an intelligent person who had fallen in love with photography while running a family publishing business which produced a weekly newspaper for pigeon fanciers. It was highly profitable if somewhat surreal for non pigeon people like me,. Colin, while relatively wealthy, was not afraid to use his money for things that captured his imagination.

Between them he and Bill engineered a name change and co-opted Colin's wife, Grace, to take on much of the administration. Meanwhile the pigeons continued to flutter and lay money on the table.

Creative Camera was effectively subsidized by a bunch of birds. Colin was and remains a most remarkable person who put his money where his mind was. He embodies my idea of a grand socialist. Given the incongruity of the circumstances, (I mean, can you imagine hanging out

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with a bunch of pigeon fanciers who were more deranged than any photographer?), my years working with Colin were memorable. He was more like a father than an employer.

Photography has had few better friends, other than photographers, who are necessarily self obsessed. Colin's ideas were to put those obsessions into broader circulation - because he thought them to be worthwhile. He used photography to explain himself to himself and others too.



I went to 'CC' with a genuine sense of respect. At the time it was one of four magazines with international circulations that tried to address the notion of 'photography as art'. Or, as we put it, 'photography as a medium of personal expression'. The others were 'Camera' from Switzerland, 'Aperture' from the United States and 'Camera Mainichi' from Japan.

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We were a happy little union of like-minded souls. We wanted to try and tell a truth in photographs. Sometimes it was big tits, sometimes big guns but always big ideas.

There were other magazines, of course. Colin made frequent visits to Eastern Europe to conduct 'pigeon business' and would return with prints, magazines and books from a very active photographic culture. In retrospect I can see that I was an arrogant young Turk and not afraid of my opinions - a trait I have carried with me into middle age.

Time and experience has tempered my arrogance, but not my opinions. It was opinion that drew the picture of my life. And I got mine from photography.

I write this because 'CC' was so personal, though not individual to me. It would be impossible to list all the people who influenced the magazine. Over the years we published an extraordinary number of people; some famous, many not.

We loved young photographers, and old and ignored photographers, as well as classicists and iconoclasts. It was a wonderful time and we meshed with a burgeoning international interest in the medium. I once traveled across the United States from the boarder with Canada to the boarder of Mexico, meeting dozens of photographers.

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'CC' was my passport. I met just about everybody who was anybody. The same was true of Europe- I went from Sweden to Spain. It was a lucky life made possible through passion, hard work and a sense of conviction. As well as all the photographers I knew, I met poets and painters, architects, anarchists and art historians. I was even introduced to members of the Royal family and got to photograph Yul Brynner, a keen pigeon fancier. I mention this not for self regard but to give some context.

I left the magazine in 1978 to involve myself in book publishing, then became entangled in teaching, exhibition curating, and writing books.

Judy Goldhill took on my role, then in quick succession came Mark Holborn and later Susan Butler. Each added their own flavor and each was supported by Colin. Judy's contribution was largely visual, Mark's visual and verbal and Susan provided a hybrid mix of feminist polemic coupled to academe. Each arena was appropriate to recording its time and the shifting sands of photography as it re-defined itself. Meanwhile the pigeons were cooing more softly and not so much money was on the table.

Time to call in the thought Police, i.e., The Arts Council, and get some dosh. Colin did this. and was required to form an editorial board. This motley crew included me. The financial incidentals came from the presence of the 'Racing Pigeon' , so no rent to pay, no salaries to cover (at least in my case) , free photocopier and so on.

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But we were not selling enough copies of 'CC'. This is a common tale in photographic publishing when it is done without compromise. Some of the necessary expenses, like typesetting and printing were partly covered through book selling. For a while 'CC' had the best stock of photographic books in town.

But one day in 1986 Colin phoned and invited me to lunch. He told me that he was going to close the magazine - even with its Arts Council grant he could no longer provide a personal subsidy. I protested. Not about the lunch you understand but about the concept of losing an important and long lasting contribution to visual culture.

We hatched a plan to keep the magazine alive and I became editor and publisher. I sorted out the finances, found new premises and hired Eileen, an art history graduate from Sussex who

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had worked for Colin. Eileen was magnificent. As I would pace up and down our tiny office juggling too many balls she would make sage remarks of a kind I needed 'Come on Pete, you're not Superman'.

I thought I was, but (Dept of True Confessions) I was wrong. So we got along with reviving the magazine, keeping it visual and literate but backing away from the pomp of art history. There was a formula to that kind of writing which I found irritating. And I was trying to make the kind of magazine I would want to read. Meanwhile the Arts Council was going through its own changes, trying to balance the voices of a multicultural society with those of Thatcher's Britain - 'survival of the fittest and Devil take the hindmost'. I was given a few raps over the knuckles for being obstinate and Euro-centric, but I had rescued the magazine and was able to manage its finances.

So we got along by fair means and a great deal of support from the photographic community, most particularly from those who felt disenfranchised. We got other kinds of help too - volunteer workers, free accountancy, financial advice and a great deal of hand-holding.. Image-makers, writers, typesetters, printers all came to the aid of the party. We had a great group of Trustees too who shared in my enthusiasm. I thank all of them , not by name but they know who they are. The Arts Council got a bargain. But like their counterparts in other countries they looked a gift horse in the mouth and didn't like the teeth.

David Brittain is another very important member of our cast. Just like Bill Jay and myself he had been to art school (Glasgow School of Art) and worked as a journalist for a photographic magazine. I liked his style and got him to contribute to 'CC'. It lead to a job working with me - David had a finger on a pulse that I was beginning to lose under the pressure of keeping our little boat afloat and we got on well, probably because we were both quietly mad but knew the disciplines of magazine making. His input allowed me to spend more time on the administration side - boring but necessary. It became a symbiotic partnership.

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When I left the magazine for the second time (1991) I put it in David's hands because I knew he understood its spirit. I feel proud for him and what he did. Just like me he had to deal with shit hitting the fan yet still managed to pull off a thoroughly contemporary magazine. Major effort and minor money is what happens in the art world.

Then, about a year ago, my intuition was telling me that something was up; for a little and under-capitalized publication to have ridden the waves of financial change and the vicissitudes of arts fashion for more than 30 years is a testament to tenacity, but it also worried me that it needed loads of dosh and a sense of readership with an editorial responsibility. We lived in times with altered parameters, money talked much louder than it used to and original voices and visions are harder to find. Unfortunately, I was prove right, and I now find myself writing these words, saying good-bye to Creative Camera.



In retrospect, I find my years with Creative Camera were the most rewarding; my involvement with the magazine from 1969-78 and again from 1986-91 became a succession of personally defining moments.

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I met just about every one in Europe and the United States who cared about this medium: from Paul Strand and Walker Evans, to Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassi, K_rt_z and Bill Klein; Bill Brandt, Don McCullin (or was that Don McSullen?) , Phillip Jones-Griffiths , Chris Steele-Perkins, Martin Parr, Marketa Luscacova , Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Fred Sommer, Robert Doisneau, Mary Ellen Mark, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Ralph Gibson, Gilles Peress, Paul Caponigro, Ansel Adams, Minor White - the list could go on and on and would include a large number of women and persons from the so-called ethnic minorities. not to mention a whole host of museum people, historians, dealers and the general wierdos who gather around our profession.

Of course I wear rosy glasses while looking back, even if they are smeared with tears. Yet, despite the inherent subjectivity involved, I write with the voices of many very committed photographers I met throughout the world, who spoke to me of how the magazine had affected them, sounding in my ears. That I was party to this process is a source of pride.

Creative Camera was a large part of my life from 1969 onwards. It made my heart beat. Let us hope that even though the name has ceased to exist, something of its legacy will still beat loud and incessantly in the world of photography.

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/turner/turnereng.html>