



"This lively and idiosyncratic collection of writings from the diverse thinkings about photography will bring encouragement and insight to all of those engaged in lens-based media in the twenty-first century. From the early twentieth-century masters to the postmoderns and on to today's incisive visionaries, this thought-provoking book will navigate the reader through the varied landscape of photography, eloquently expressing what it means to be a photographer" one reads on the backside cover and that is, essentially, true save for the fact that not all authors express themselves as clearly and eloquently as, say, John Szarkowski or Berenice Abbott. Moreover, I really wonder what makes somebody an "incisive visionary"? Anyway, these are details to be neglected for this tome is definitely worth spending time with because the reader will find in it lots of stimulating thoughts. For instance:

In an open letter, dated 1928, Alexander Rodchenko responds to the skepticism of the critic and theorist Boris Kushner regarding the value of experimental photography by stating that "in order to accustom people to seeing from new viewpoints it is essential to take photographs of everyday, familiar subjects from completely unexpected vantage points and in completely unexpected positions. New subjects should also be photographed from various points, so as to present a complete impression of the subject." Isn't that pretty obvious? one feels tempted to ask yet it certainly was not when Rodchenko was writing his letter and, more often than not, it is still not today. Rodchenko elaborates: "Look at the history of art or the history of painting of all countries, and you'll see that all paintings, with some very minor exceptions, have been painted either from the belly button level or from eye level".

Then there's "Photography at the Crossroads", a magazine article from 1951 by Berenice Abbott in which she makes the point that photography - among other things - is essentially concerned with "realism - the real life - the now." Right, I couldn't agree more: the essence of photography is to be present. Let me give you two quotes from this piece that I've found particularly inspiring:

"Many photographers spend too much time in the darkroom, with the result that creative camera work is seriously interfered with".

"Let us first say what photography is not. A photograph is not a painting, a poem, a symphony, a dance. It is not just a pretty picture, not an exercise in contortionist techniques and sheer print quality,. It is or should be a significant document, a penetrating statement, which can be described in a very simple term - selectivity.

To define selection, one may say that it should be focused on the kind of subject matter which hits you hard with its impact and excites your imagination to the extent that you are forced to take it. Pictures are wasted unless the motive power which impelled you to action is strong and stirring. The motives or points of view are bound to differ with each photographer, and herein lies the important difference which separates one approach from the other. Selection of proper picture content comes from a fine union of trained eye and imaginative mind".

In "Untitled", an essay by Cartier-Bresson, I came across this: "Photography implies the recognition of a rhythm in the world of real things." I take this to mean that to be a good photographer one needs to understand that the real world is in constant flux. And, to discover the movements (the rhythm - how wonderfully put!) of this flux. Very true indeed!.

And then there is this smart statement by Susan Meiselas: "A lot of people buy cameras and film, and a lot of people buy photo books of a certain kind. The obvious example is the "Day in the Life of" series. Now, what's the problem? Why aren't people interested in what we documentarians are passionate about? Why are we in such a small ghetto?" Good question, isn't it? Actually, I liked her response even more: "We have to find ways of taking people someplace they don't expect to go."

What makes this book special, and recommendable, is that it looks at photography from a variety of perspectives - from reflections of photographers to how critics and educators see them, from thoughts on taking pictures by writers (although this is a rather poor section with a longer text by Wendell Berry, and two very short ones by Cynthia Ozick and Dave Eggers) to interviews with the ones who make it possible that photos find an audience (art directors, gallerists, visual editors etc).

I especially enjoyed the one with Robert Pledge, President and Co-Founder of Contact Press Images ("When I met Salgado in 1974 he was twenty-nine years old and only just starting photography. He has an idea of what the business was like. He took some hits early on. But he really knew where he wanted to go. The first time I met him we went to a café and he told me what he wanted to do, and I walked out of there thinking that this guy would become a giant. But he also had an education, which is essential to his work. He studied economics and geography. So, he was aware of many things. When you look back at what he's done, you see he knew where he was headed."). I was also impressed how Elisabeth Biondi, the Visuals Editor of The New Yorker, summed up what I would call 'a thoughtful approach to picture taking' (which isn't exactly the rule, I'd say): "I think of our photographs as 'intelligent' photographs, i.e., it starts out with an intelligent photographer thinking about what information, both concrete and implied, should be incorporated in the image. Once this has been established, it is the photographer's talent and esthetics that determine the quality of the resulting picture. Along the way, of course, we need the cooperation and goodwill of the subject as the best thought-out plan can go awry without it."). And then there is Charlotte Cotton, Director of Cultural Programming at Art + Commerce, who underlines the importance of looking: "It was a pivotal moment for me - I switched from being someone who was coming to photography from an academic standpoint where, often, photographs are illustrations of arguments rather than the objects at the center of your thinking. I learned how to look. I don't take photographs, I don't buy photographs, I don't accept photographs as gifts.""

"Photography is nothing - it's life that interests me", Cartier Bresson once said. And while I share this view, I feel like adding with Dorothea Lange: "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera".

# **The Education of a Photographer by Charles H. Traub, Steven Heller, and Adam B. Bell**

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/dcorner/traub/index.php>