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## **A Manifesto for Photography Education**

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"The illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike." That was Moholy-Nagy's prophecy in 1932, and what is startling about it is not only its accuracy but our persistent unwillingness to take heed of its implications despite four more decades of accumulated evidence demonstrating inarguably that photography is the most profound and energizing innovation in communication since the printing press.

In little over a century, photography has come to pervade Western culture (and much of its Eastern counterpart) to such an extent that if, by some chance, all materials and techniques directly or indirectly connected to photography were to vanish overnight without a trace, our society would be instantly paralyzed. So thoroughly interwoven is it into the fabric of our culture — the threads run through communications techniques, of course, but also through nuclear physics, biochemistry, medicine, all branches of industry and virtually every other field — that the warp of our culture and the loom of history are absolutely dependent on it for stability.

It should be obvious, then, that in any consideration of methods for alleviating the widespread photographic illiteracy of our time we are dealing with a phenomenon vastly larger than the mere appearance of a new graphic medium with expressive/creative potential. Of course photography is an art form, and of course the teaching of it as such demands a radical re-evaluation of our established methods for teaching, instilling and nurturing creativity. But that reassessment has been long overdue in the arts anyway.

To suggest that this should be the main thrust of photography education in our time is as constricted an attitude as that which says photography's real struggle within our culture should be toward its acceptance as an art form. Heated though these skirmishes may be — and they are both still raging — any overview at all shows clearly that these are false issues, red herrings, delaying tactics subconsciously evolved by the culture to divert energies and

slow down the photographic juggernaut. Both these fights — for acceptance of the photograph as art, and for new methods of teaching it as such — are legitimate and important, as are many others. The battle is everywhere. But the front is elsewhere.

The problem created by the emphasis on these two questions in photography education is that it forces us to view the situation through what McLuhan called "the rear-view mirror," to pit ourselves against the most benighted attitudes, rather than test ourselves against the most enlightened ones. There will always be someone to argue that you can't make Art with a machine, and someone else to say that if you can it'll only be by imitating "proven" esthetic attitudes from other media. Unfortunately, photographers — and virtually everyone involved in photography education is a photographer — take these arguments personally, and thus get sucked into trying to break through this chain of circular reasoning. That is why, just as war is too important to leave to the generals, photography education is too important to leave to the photographers.

This is not merely a facile analogy. Both the military and photographic experts make an identical and fundamental mistake by assuming that the population of the world can be divided readily into two groups. In the case of the military, these are soldiers as opposed to civilians; in photography, "serious photographers" as opposed to amateurs and non-photographers.

In both cases, this artificial and inaccurate distinction serves only to create a hermetically sealed world within whose confines experts and their acolytes speak only to each other, oblivious to their dependence on and interaction with those who fall outside these arbitrary perimeters. For just as there are no more civilians in contemporary warfare, so there are no more non-photographers in our culture.

If we tear ourselves away from the rear-view mirror long enough to take a long hard look at the role of photography in our culture, it becomes immediately apparent that a radical redefinition of our concept of the photographic community is necessary. For too long we have assumed that it included only "serious" or "artist" photographers, curators, critics, and that small public specifically interested in viewing, purchasing and reading the works of these three groups.

In light of the omnipresence of photographic imagery and the medium's manifold offshoots in our culture today, the elitist parochialism of this concept is painfully obvious. Even

if we exclude photography's effects in other areas and concentrate solely on the communications media — film, TV, books, magazines, newspapers — we are forced to conclude that we, as a culture, are now receiving as much of our information from the photographic image as we are from the written word, which in turn means that roughly 50 per cent of our decisions (collective and individual) are in some way based on photography. To exclude from the concept of the photographic community anyone who derives half his data input from the photograph is a bit ludicrous.

Let us, therefore, posit a new definition of the photographic community; one more appropriate for our own time. Let us include in it — with no insistence on ranking those we include according to the esthetic quality of their work or their awareness of their involvement with the photographic image — anyone who makes, uses, edits, views, assesses, incorporates, studies, learns from or teaches with the photographic image in any of its forms on a regular basis.

That is, I hope, all-inclusive. It suggests, I also hope, that virtually everyone in this society, and in the world, is part of the photographic community. Viewing this vast community as an organism with extraordinary potential for growth — a potential based on the demonstrated capacity of the photographic image, which is the organism's source of nourishment, to deepen the organism's understanding of itself and intensify its perception of the universe it inhabits — we must necessarily rethink our attitudes toward photography education.

To begin with, we must take Moholy's prophecy to heart in this new light and recognize how imperative it is that everyone in this larger photographic community (and not just those who eventually decide to make photography their vocation or avocation) be educated in the functions of the photographic image. Such instruction is precisely as vital as is that in reading and writing; it should begin in childhood, and be an integral part of the school curriculum at all levels. It would be a good start for every college in the country to offer a basic course in the history of the medium (such courses presently being scarce even in colleges with photography departments). But that is really just a drop in the bucket, and in a sense begs the issue.

That issue is this: If we are to come to grips with the phenomenal power of the photographic image in our culture and its potential as an evolutionary (as well as

revolutionary) tool, we must recognize that photography has multiple functions in this society, and that many of these functions have little or nothing to do with the esthetics and goals of "serious" photography. It has already been demonstrated, over the past century, that photography is an art form; but to teach it only as such — that is, to teach only the craft, the history, and the esthetics — is woefully, if not willfully, short-sighted.

What we need, instead, is an educational approach to photography which does not relegate it to the tail end of Fine Arts departments, but which integrates it with virtually every discipline. Unless we are so gullible as to believe that our ability to see ourselves, our relatives and our friends at various times in our/their pasts simply by leafing through a family album has no effect on our heads, we must face the fact that our perceptions of ourselves and those we know have been drastically altered by the photographic image. Where, then, is the school whose psychology and photography departments are jointly exploring this?

Unless we are willing to believe that the concept of war as a romantic, glorious experience simply died out, we must admit that it was irreparably shattered by photographs of war, from the early ones by Mathew Brady to the last ones of Larry Burrows. Where is the college whose history and photography departments are working on this question?

Similar questions could be asked of every discipline — sociology, medicine, literature — but the answers would all be identical: there are no such projects, there are not even many small independent studies being carried out along these lines.

To say that we need such researches and investigations would be minimizing the urgency. We need them desperately. But we will begin to get them only when everyone concerned with photography education is willing to look beyond the limited purview of the craft/esthetics approach and begin to apply pressure throughout the entire educational system for an interdisciplinary approach to photography education, an approach which will bring together the photographers, photographic historians, photographic curators and photographic critics of the future with present and future social scientists, poets, psychologists, doctors, dancers, musicians, mathematicians, physicists, and sculptors, in order to stimulate an interchange and correlation of ideas and a cross-fertilization of perception.

The age of specialization may turn into a permanent cultural status quo, but that is

scant excuse for continuing to teach photography as though it were entirely unrelated to the culture(s) in which it exists, nor for teaching other subjects as though they related to a nonphotographic culture. We must face the fact that we are now — and will be for centuries at least, if we survive — living in a social system utterly dependent on the printed word and the photographic image.

The time for the change this recognition makes imperative is now. We are the "illiterates of the future" Moholy warned us about; and our children will be the illiterates of an even more hopeless future unless we transcend our current fantasies about photography education and align them at last with the higher realities of our time and place.

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