
Post-Visualization

Jerry N. Uelsmann 1967

Edward Weston, in his efforts to find a language suitable and indigenous to his own life and time, developed a method of working which today we refer to as *pre-visualization*. Weston, in his daybooks, writes, *the finished print is pre-visualized complete in every detail of texture, movement, proportion, before exposure-the shutter's release automatically and finally fixes my conception, allowing no after manipulation*. It is Weston the master craftsman, not Weston the visionary, that performs the darkroom ritual. The distinctively different documentary approach exemplified by the work of Walker Evans and the *decisive moment* approach of Henri Cartier Bresson have in common with Weston's approach their emphasis on the discipline of seeing and their acceptance of a prescribed darkroom ritual. These established, perhaps classic traditions are now an important part of the photographic heritage that we all share.

For the moment let us consider experimentation in photography. Although I do not pretend to be a historian, it appears to me that there have been three major waves of open experimentation in photography; the first following the public announcement of the Daguerreotype process in 1839; the second right after the turn of the century under the general guidance of Alfred Stieglitz and the loosely knit Photo-Secession group; and the third in the late twenties and thirties under the influence of Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus. In each instance there was an initial outburst of enthusiasm, excitement and aliveness. The medium was viewed as something new and fresh possibilities were explored and unanticipated directions were taken. Unfortunately, these initial creative outbursts were not sustained. As certain forms of experimentation met with tentative success, formulas developed which in turn discouraged the constant revitalizing of thinking necessary for the experimentation to continue along fresh paths. Perhaps the comforting security of a formulized approach will always cause experimentation in photography to follow this cycle.

It is interesting to note that much of the experimental photography that we revere today has been done by individuals whose commitment to photography is but one aspect of their commitment to art. This seems to be true for such workers with the medium as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy, and Frederick Sommer. It is of further interest to note that with the possible exception of Alfred Stieglitz, who championed all art with his words and deeds, these gentlemen are multi-media artists. In addition to photography, they are concerned with painting, design, graphics, and sculpture. Perhaps it is because they are accustomed to the creative freedom encouraged in these other areas that they have intuitively challenged the boundaries of photography.

Since the turn of the century all other areas of art have undergone a thorough re-investigation of their means. The contemporary artist, in all other areas, is no longer restricted to the traditional use of his materials or to the exclusive use of traditional materials. In addition, he is not bound to a fully conceived, pre-visualized end. His mind is kept alert to *in-process discovery* and a working rapport is established between the artist and his creation. Today the work of art has become a more complete and involved extension of the artist.

Our predilection for the straight photography is perhaps a natural one. Certainly pre-visualization with a prescribed darkroom ritual is the most widely practiced approach in photography today. The popular expression *taking a picture* implies this approach. I do not wish to minimize the importance placed on the act of seeing which this approach requires. I do, however feel that the general attitude of unquestioning acceptance of a prescribed darkroom ritual, which this approach requires, has kept us from important visual discoveries and insights. While it may be true, as Nathan Lyons has stated, that *the eye and the camera see more than the mind knows*, is it not also conceivable that the mind knows more than the eye and the camera see? Cannot the mind, when introduced to the possibilities of in-process discovery, stretch the boundaries of the preconceived image? George D. Stoddard, Chancellor of New York University, in his essay *Art as the Measure of Man* states:

"We should not over-emphasize the technique of vision. We cannot think with our eyes, and we may think without them. Vision brings in the data, the raw materials, and the cues that guide our steps. The eye is an invaluable sense organ, a true part of the brain through its optic nerve, but the frontal lobes preside over the problems created and they are not to be denied. The artist is a man seeing and thinking both at once; his cunning is in his brain".

It seems to me that for the most part young photographers are encouraged to use their minds and eyes for the purpose of making important aesthetic and technical decisions only at the beginning and end of the photographic ritual. With the squeezing of the shutter the

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creative consciousness is put to rest, only to be resurrected when the finished print is ready to make its debut. That many photographers avoid that darkroom as much as possible may perhaps be due in part to the fact that the mind is relegated to basic technical decisions. Some are even hostile towards it. Walker Evans has said, *Cameras...are cold machinery, developing chemicals smell bad and the darkroom is torture*. An indifferent attitude toward the darkroom is further reflected by the fact that many distinguished photographers do not do their own processing and printing. I would like to encourage more young photographers to get off the street and back into the darkroom. It is my conviction that the darkroom is capable of being, in the truest sense, a visual research lab; a place for discovery, observation, and meditation. To date, but a few venturesome souls have tentatively explored the darkroom world of the camera-less image, the negative sandwich, multiple printings, the limited tonal scale, et cetera. Let us not be afraid to allow for post-visualization. By *post-visualization* I refer to the willingness on the part of the photographer to re-visualize the final image at any point in the entire photographic process. Let us not delude ourselves by the seemingly scientific nature of the darkroom ritual; it has been and always be a form of alchemy. Our overly precious attitude toward that ritual has tended to conceal from us an innermost world of mystery, enigma, and insight. Once in the darkroom the venturesome mind and spirit should be set free- free to search and hopefully to discover.

The criterion for art is no longer just the visual world. One of the major changes evidenced in modern art is the transition from what was basically an outer directed art form in the nineteenth century to the inner directed art of today. The contemporary artist draws upon new levels of consciousness, creating a span of aesthetic that is without precedent. To date, photography has played a minor role in this liberation. We have kept blinders on our eyes, restricting the potential imaginative freedom that photography is capable of. Edward Weston, commenting on his own creative freedom, states, *I never try to limit myself by theories. I do not question right or wrong approach when I am interested or amazed, - impelled to work. I do not fear logic, I dare to be irrational, or really never consider whether I am not not. This keeps me fluid, open to fresh impulse, free from formulae. He further states, I would say to any artist—don't be repressed in your work- dare to experiment—consider an urge—if in a new direction all the better.*

It is disturbing to discover the number of leading figures in photography today who believe the *decisive moment* or slice-of-life form of photography to be the only natural form, all other approaches being somehow affections. In this rapidly changing world of our there is a real need to free the teaching of photography from the long-standing dogmas which tend to restrict rather than encourage growth. The serious photographer today should constantly be seeking new ways of commenting on a world that is newly understood. Constant creativity and innovation are essential to combat visual mediocrity. The photographic educator should appeal to the students of serious photography to challenge continually both their medium and themselves. The visual vocabulary of the young serious photographer should allow for a technical and imaginative freedom that permits him to encounter our complex transitional world in a multitude of ways. Let the inner needs of the photographer combine with the specifics of any given photographic event to determine for that moment the most applicable approach; be it straight, contrived, experimental, or whatever. Furthermore, let him feel free, at any time during the entire photographic process, to post-visualize.