

HOW BRITISH PHOTOGRAPHY FOUND ITS VOICE

by Paul Hill

The 1970s was, in my opinion, photography's most important decade of the 20th century. During this period its traditional practices were questioned – even undermined – its profile as a medium of creative self-expression was raised immeasurably, and the teaching of the subject changed beyond recognition.

This is *my* view – partial and self opinionated – but at least I was there, hopefully providing the researchers of today, who have no particular axe to grind, with primary material to help them analyse this exciting era with critical detachment and insight.

I want to stress the importance of education and dissemination during this period. The products were good and the message worth listening to, so let the wider public, as well as the cognoscenti, know about it. No one will be beat a path to your door until they know your address. Promoting debate, as well as confronting cliché-ridden photography and out-moded custom and practice, was crucial, and via various avenues, including academics, who had up to then viewed the subject as a purely vocational one, photography found a new position on the cultural and artistic map of Britain.

Of course, there is a personal pre-history, and mine is similar to that of many who joined the cause – unusual. I became enamoured of *personal photography*, as we called it then, through journalism. I was a newspaper reporter before I decided to make one of my hobbies – photography – my career when I became a freelance in 1965. Although news photography was my mainstay, I began to appreciate other sorts of image making, and was particularly influenced by Bill Brandt's *Shadow of Light* in 1966. It opened my eyes to exciting new ways to make photographs, and probably changed me more than I realised at the time. When I was working for the *Financial Times* a year later, I was given a copy of *Creative Camera Owner* (later *Creative Camera*) by the picture editor and started to understand what self expression in photography meant. An *FT* reporter friend became features editor of the *Telegraph Magazine* and invited me to meet their new picture editor, the inestimable and controversial Bill Jay, who had just been sacked as editor of *Creative Camera*. He gave me a few assignments and lots of anecdotes about my heroes, like W.Eugene Smith and Brandt, and the new kids on the block: Tony Ray-Jones, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, amongst others.

I also accompanied Bill when he visited the Sir Benjamin Stone archive in the Local Studies section of Birmingham Central Library (I lived in nearby Wolverhampton at the time), and sought him out one or two estimates from printers for his new magazine, the highly regarded *Album*. I have many stories about Bill, and visits to the magazine's tiny offices and his friend and advisor, David Hurn's London flat, that would graphically illustrate the eclectic mix of photographers that emerged from the 1960s. I would characterize most of them as buccaneers and mavericks who wished for photography to be regarded as an art form, although they themselves were largely self taught and had only a sketchy knowledge of the history of photography, let alone art history. The optimism and pizzazz of the sixties had given them self-belief and confidence to challenge the establishment and change the status quo.

2.

But there were other emergent photographers, equally determined to alter things - but politically - who also employed photography – the socialists and militant marxists. They championed socially concerned photography, and thought ‘art photographers’ (a new designation then) were navel-gazing, self indulgent wankers. It was thought by many that ‘real photographers’ were macho hunters who *shot* pictures and *captured* actual life. Although the agendas were different, the two camps rubbed along together quite well, with occasional ideological skirmishes, as outlets for personally driven work were few and far between, with no specialist galleries and only one or two British photographic magazines (except *Creative Camera*) prepared to infrequently publish experimental work.

Frustrated by the increasingly trivial photographic content of newspapers in the early 1970s, I decided to try my hand at teaching. After a spell at North Staffordshire Poly in Stoke-on-Trent, I was invited to become a part-time lecturer at Trent Poly in Nottingham. Bill Jay taught there part-time, and he recommended me to the head of photography, Bill Gaskins, who was also to become chairman of the recently established Photography Committee of the Arts Council. Gaskins wanted to start a new kind of photography course that encouraged experimentation and placed the medium in a wider cultural and historical context.

One of our students, Diane Lyons (later of *Aperture*) went to work for *The Photographic Journal* and invited me to write a piece for that august RPS monthly magazine. Reflecting my disenchantment with my former career and wanting to wave the flag for photography as art, it was entitled: *Photojournalism – The British Obsession*¹. Despite its controversial tone and content, the membership failed to put pen to paper, unlike the response I received to an article I wrote for *Camera* three years later. British photography seemed to me to be largely in a state of torpor then. But my depression was partially lifted that same year (1973) when I was invited to exhibit in the first major show of contemporary British photography at the Arts Council’s Serpentine Gallery in London. Called *Serpentine ’73* and curated by Peter Turner (of *Creative Camera*) and Sue Grayson, it drew large audiences and many newspaper and magazine reviews, which, predictably, dragged up the then frequently debated question: ‘Is photography art?’ Thankfully, the public loved it and it proved an inspiration to many photographers and students who were delighted to see their medium in the art spotlight at long last.

Although social documentation and studio practice were in the new Trent Poly course curriculum, making photographs that were artworks in themselves was encouraged more enthusiastically. Creative imagination and chance taking were valuable attributes whether the student wanted to work as a commercial photographer or fine artist. The craft of printmaking was also taught as the collector of fine prints will always want hand made, archivally processed work. This was a new market for photographers and when we submitted our proposal for a diploma course in Creative Photography, in conjunction with Derby College of Higher Education (Gaskins was

¹ Royal Photographic Society, London, Vol. 111, November 1973, Page 536

head of photography there before moving to Trent), we built this component into it. The course was unique, and because of this, it attracted talented students from around the world as well as the UK, and the top names in photography as visiting lecturers.

In 1974 I was made a full-time lecturer and moved to Derbyshire, where I would later set up The Photographers' Place with my late wife, Angela. That same year Gaskins asked me to organise a summer school, which, I thought, should be primarily aimed at photography lecturers, many of whom were eager to see at first hand what *personal photography* and *art photography* were all about. Run in conjunction with the Society for Photographic Education (now defunct), it ran for two weeks in Nottingham and was called a *workshop*. I invited David Hurn, who had recently started a course in documentary photography in Newport, Gwent, and Peter Schlessinger of Apeiron Workshops in the USA, to lead the teaching, aided by an American member of the Trent staff, Thomas Joshua Cooper. There were contributions from Chris Killip, Gilles Peress, and Raymond Moore, who later joined our photography department at the polytechnic, amongst others.

The Trent/Derby students were soon getting noticed through exhibiting in places like the RPS in London, and via their final diploma shows in Nottingham and Derby. Because their photographs 'showed a maturity which made it difficult to believe that it was the work of students'², the course attracted attention and envy. By now Tom Cooper and I were firm friends, as well as teaching colleagues, so we decided we needed a credo. In the same year as the summer school, we wrote the polemic: *Can British Photography Emerge from the Dark Ages?* and sent it to *The Guardian*, together with a selection of our students' pictures. The arts editor rejected it and sent the article back minus the pictures! Eventually they paid for the lost work, so the students at least got something. Peter Turner heard about this episode and asked if he could put the piece, with new pictures, in *Creative Camera*³. The article and illustrations attracted attention (and more student applications) and writers and reviewers came to Nottingham to see this 'new' photography. This was decades before Damien Hirst and his fellow art students at Goldsmiths College in London created a media buzz around their *Frieze* exhibition. Unfortunately, the students did not get their work back from *Creative Camera* either. The editor had spilled coffee over it! But sacrifices have to be made if you want people, particularly the media, to take notice. The students were not entirely convinced, but we told them that those who choose a career in the media – and many did - would at least make sure they valued the work of contributors better than theirs had been.

Outside formal education other exciting initiatives were emerging, like the *Real Britain* postcard project, Co-optic, and the community orientated Half Moon (later to become Camerawork) and Cockpit workshops in London, and Midland Group Photography in Nottingham. It started the annual Midland Group Open Exhibition in 1972, which attracted photographers from all over the world, including Robert Mapplethorpe, amongst others. Each show was selected by eminent curators, critics, artists and photographers, like John Szarkowski and Ron Kitaj. Earlier in the 1970s,

4.

² *British Journal of Photography*, London, 27th August 1974, Page 727

³ *Creative Camera*, London, No.123, September 1974

the most important events was probably the opening of The Photographers Gallery in London (1971), to be followed by Impressions in York. One of my proudest moments was having a show at the old PG in 1972. This was somewhat diluted when they left my name off the poster announcing that month's exhibitions. This omission only served to spur me into sending my own press release to the media, and to make sure that in future I would closely monitor marketing and publicity as well as hanging the work!

Like many others at the beginning of that decade I was pretty ignorant of a great deal of the history of the medium. But through my friendship with recent American graduates who taught at Trent Poly, like Tom and his predecessor, John Mulvaney, I found out an immense amount as they were taught by the best around at the time – Van Deren Coke and Beaumont Newhall – at the University of New Mexico, where Bill Jay became a student after *Album* and the photography study centre he started at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London folded in 1972. He was followed by Valerie Lloyd, who later became the RPS Curator when the society moved to Bath. I was on the Arts Council Photography Committee in the mid 1970s when the RPS applied for financial help. We all thought that the best thing about the society was its fabulous collection. Van Deren Coke was commissioned to examine it and report to the council. He was scathing, and concluded that the collection should be properly catalogued and conserved as soon as possible as it was in peril. We recommended funds be given to the RPS for 3 years for this to be done, and Val was employed as a cataloguer. But she soon referred to herself as 'curator', and job creation funds were found to take on workers – often former photography students – to start the cataloguing, which, I believe, went on for the next 20 years!

My photographic education was further enhanced when Tom and I decided to interview some of the 'movers and shakers' of 20th century photography, from Ansel Adams to Man Ray, Cartier Bresson to Cecil Beaton, between 1974 and 1978. Originally published in the tri-lingual monthly magazine *Camera*, the 22 interviews were compiled into a book, *Dialogue with Photography*⁴, which has never been out of print. It was extensively reviewed around the world, and *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer thought parts were 'essential reading' for those interested in photographic history.⁵ We mostly funded what turned out to be a complex and lengthy project, through the reproduction fees for each interview we received from *Camera*. In 1976 the editor, Allan Porter, asked me to write an article on photographic education in Britain⁶ to accompany portfolios of my photographs and those of Raymond Moore and John Blakemore. All three of us taught on the Trent/Derby course at the time. My piece was deliberately hard-hitting and critical of the educational establishment. Although very similar to the 'Dark Ages' and 'British Obsession' polemics⁷ in tone, this time, two and three years on, there was a reaction, with numerous letters to the editor of the *British Journal of Photography* and a very trenchant and vitriolic response from the well-known photographer and educator, Walter Nurnberg⁸.

5.

⁴ *Dialogue with Photography* Paul Hill & Thomas Cooper, New York & London 1979; Stockport 2005

⁵ *New York Times*. New York, 8th April, 1979, page 40

⁶ *Apropos Great Britain*, *Camera*, Lucerne, No. 8 August 1976

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Apropos Great Britain – a response*, *British Journal of Photography*, London, 5th November, 1976

A benefit of having connections with the Art Council and the Photographers Gallery was being able to know what exhibitions were being planned and what photographers were visiting the UK. In 1976 I learned that New York-based photographer, Ralph Gibson had been commissioned to do some work in England. This gave me the opportunity to ask Ralph, a seasoned workshop leader, if he would do one for me in Derbyshire whilst he was over here. Angela and I had been considering the idea since the Trent summer school 2 years earlier as our rural location was most suitable – if a little cosy – and had been successfully used by my poly students for field trips. He agreed, and The Photographers' Place, this country's first residential photography workshop, was born. Teachers, students and helpers who participated over the next 20 years are too numerous to mention, but they included youngsters, like Andy Earl, Tom Sandberg, Debbie Baker, Paul Graham, Greg Lucas, as well as big names, like Paul Caponigro, Fay Godwin, Thomas Cooper, Raymond Moore, Lewis Baltz, Hamish Fulton, Aaron Siskind, John Blakemore, Cole Weston, Charles Harbutt, Martin Parr, Jo Spence, and many more.

One of the most comprehensive accounts of this period was written by William Messer, whose article *The British Obsession: About to Pay Off?*⁹ took up most of the 1977 issue of the prestigious *U.S. Camera Annual*. This indicated that, as well as the rising profile of photography in this country, there was, by the mid 1970s, increasing interest abroad too in what was happening here with our publicly funded support schemes for photographers, the rising number of specialist galleries and community workshops, and our innovative photography courses and publishing ventures. Broadcasters were also taking note. I had been involved with Tom Cooper and David Hurn in a TV piece for *Arena*, the new BBC 2 arts programme. In conversation with the producer afterwards, I suggested that the BBC should make a series on photography. He asked me to send him some ideas, which, after a few more meetings became *Exploring Photography*, a six-part series written and presented by an old friend and former newspaper colleague, Bryn Campbell. It was accompanied by an excellent publication¹⁰ and the series was often repeated over the next 10 years.

Another indication of the new enhanced status photography was acquiring within the arts establishment was best illustrated by the Arts Council's premier gallery, the Hayward on London's South Bank, agreeing to a major exhibition of contemporary photography on the lines of the gallery's famous (then) annual art show. At an Arts Council Photography Committee meeting, one member, Victor Burgin suggested the exhibition should reflect different perspectives of British photography. The first (and last) one - *Three Perspectives on Photography* – was in 1979 and the 3 sections would focus on socialism, feminism and modernism. The curators were John Tagg, Angela Kelly (a former Trent/Derby photography student), and me. I was able, in my selection, to not only articulate and illustrate my ideas (via the catalogue), I was also able to introduce relatively unknown photographers, like Martin Parr, Brian Griffin, Graham Smith, Raymond Moore, Thomas Cooper, and Roger Palmer to a wider non-specialist audience. 'Compared with John Szarkowski's *Mirrors and Windows* at the 6.

⁹ *U.S. Camera Annual 1977*, New York, page 58

¹⁰ Bryn Campbell *Exploring Photography*, BBC, London 1978

Museum of Modern Art, New York last year, there was an air of freedom and confidence,' said one critic¹¹. The exhibition attracted much attention, but there is not enough space here to go into the many interesting and controversial issues that were raised by it.

It was strange to curate an exhibition of British photography in the same building where, at the beginning of the decade, I was marvelling at a major show by Bill Brandt, a person who had influenced me more than anyone else. The South Bank Centre did not organise the 1970 Brandt show themselves, preferring to hire it in from MOMA, New York.

The mounting of *Three Perspectives* was an indication of how things had moved on in a few short years. Another was the increasing number of auction houses selling vintage prints and commercial art galleries beginning to hang photographs on their walls. In 1978, the Robert Self Gallery, which had in its stable of artists, Gilbert and George, Boyd Webb, Victor Burgin and Hamish Fulton, gave me a one-man show in their new Covent Garden space. And I actually sold some prints too! But the best moment for me was Bill Brandt spending over an hour going round this show of my new work, looking intently at each piece, and most politely thanking me, in his whispering voice, for inviting him.

What a difference this decade made for photography – and for me.

(Birmingham Central Library acquired The Photographers' Place/Paul Hill Archive in 2004 and will mount a major exhibition *Paul Hill: His Life in Photography* in the new library building in 2013)

¹¹ Reviews *Artscribe* New York, Summer, 1979