One bridge, two Williams: Photographic integrity in the age of ubiquity

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Reflecting on the topic of photography and integrity I'm reminded of two BBC documentaries, which profiled the careers of William Klein and William Eggleston. [1] These programmes clearly showed that at this point in their lives, their first names were the only thing they shared, their working practices being very different. The former, far from his brutal sharpshooting younger days, casually sauntered through Harlem chatting to people, making jokes, calling people by their first names. When he eventually takes a photograph it is in rhythm with his calm countenance and this mutual flow of exchange, and the click of the shutter is often in the midst, not at the end, of the exchange. If he didn't know the person before, he is more acquainted by the time he winds on his camera. Eggleston is a different animal, stalking through Memphis with wide eyes looking for his next shot. A hunter/gatherer, Eggleston sees, shoots, and darts off to his next target. His method is the same no matter whether he's capturing objects, people or places. For as much as I love the work of Eggleston, in context of these representations of them today, I know I would rather be a Klein, using photography as a bridge to venture further into the world and make connections, where the subject is included in the dialogue, even if at the point of capture they were unaware. Not a one-way bridge distancing us from the scene, running away clutching prints to "*thicken the world*" [2]. To be clear this is no crass judging of Klein as good and Eggleston as bad [3], it is far more subjective than that, it is about how I want photography to feature in this point in my life and add value to my sense of self.

Photographer and curator Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie tells a story about how she sees certain portrait photographs in the context of her Navajo heritage [4], which shines a light on the type of photographer I do not want to be. Seeing the formal portrait of a native American girl, taken in 1907 by Edward S. Curtis, rather than simply seeing the representation of the young girl, she sees the memory of her younger self. Flashback to young Hulleah and her brother confronted by tourists with cameras, sometimes offering them money, sometimes not, always capturing their portrait. Steeling her gaze towards the instamatic Kodaks, in her mind she was thinking just one thing. "*Take your photograph and….!!*" [5] It does not need much imagination to work out what the next words are before Hulleah's voice trails off. So where does the integrity in photography reside; in the taking, sitting, viewing or exhibiting? As with most of these conundrums it is a mixture of the above, and it is these multi-faceted dynamics of the ethics of photography in the contemporary era that emerging professional photographers have to contend with. It is the challenge of the ubiquity of photography in a visual world that is becoming increasingly, according to Will Self, '*post-image*'. [6]

Candid captures and spontaneous street photography approaches are still celebrated, and I still occasionally do it myself and recognise some of my best work is in that genre. (What are humans if we are not all hypocrites?) Though as someone who has worked with and thought about photography for over 20 years, I am no longer solely satisfied with the answer given by Garry Winogrand when asked why he took photographs. "*I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed.*" [7] That answer was fine in the 1970s but now with the ubiquity of photography, where there's likely more photographs of food than there is food in the world, I feel even though Winogrand's is a great answer, there's now a lot more that needs to be considered. I believe the elements that separate People With Cameras from Professional Photographers, are an eye for detail, competence, awareness, and a plan.

I'll break those down. The first two are relatively straight forward. As with Eggleston and Winogrand, photographers need to have an understanding of what would look good photographed,

whether through instinct or planning, preferably the ability to do both. Competence (and confidence) to use the camera equipment and other tools of the trade needs no further explanation. Awareness is about being informed regarding how our photographs represent the subject, what it communicates, who benefits from the photographic exchange, and how it might be received? Awareness is engaging in the discourse of photography and comes from research, whether prior to, or after, the point of shooting. Planning comes with being able to look critical theorists such as Sontag in the eye (if she was still alive), and explain why we are thickening the world with yet more images. What are we going to do with them? What is the point? What is our plan? People With Cameras need not burden themselves with such responsibilities, professionals do.

I propose that these elements combined contribute towards what constitutes a photographer with integrity in the contemporary context. It is a process rather than a fixed set of methods. However there is no toolkit we can borrow from or simple checklist to say we now have the integrity stamp of approval. Eggleston has no less integrity than Klein as he is fully aware of what he is doing. Photography is a broad church with many approaches to worship, though practitioners need to be aware of the discourse of their chosen genre and the related ethical considerations. For example, the discourse of photojournalism has a different set of integrity criteria than fashion editorial, so any attempts of a homogenised fixed set of ethical arguments which addresses photography in general terms is futile and damaging to creativity, (and we have to be mindful of this when teaching photography). The consideration of these dynamics is again what separates People With Cameras from the Professional Photographer. An eye for detail and competence are relatively easy attributes to acquire (with hard work and confidence), however an awareness and a plan is about our 360 degree understanding of what it is we are doing and a reflexive view of our motivations. Awareness and planning are about our attitude and the way we relate to others, and will help keep us grounded and personally connected to the work we do.

Integrity in photography is not simply about a set of practices or even fixed principles, such as being 'community based' or 'socially engaged', it is about how considered we are in our undertakings, the thought processes of our practice and the (attempted) legacy of our interventions. Telling Sontag and Tsinhnahjinnie what conversations and further interactions we are willing to engage in, for mutual benefit, as we saunter back over the bridge, away from the scene, clutching the camera under our arm.

Endnotes

[1] Both documentaries were part of Alan Yentob's BBC1 Imagine series. '*The Many Lives of William Klein*', first broadcast 20.11.12 and '*The Colourful Mr Eggleston*', first broadcast 14.7.09.
[2] Sontag, S . (1977) On Photography. Penguin, London. P.p. 3
[3] As with all practitioners their approaches are fluid and not fixed throughout their careers. Klein has taken a large amount of 'sniper' street photographs in his time.
[4] Tsinhnahjinnie, H. J. "When is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Words?". In: *Photography's Other Histories*. C. Pinney and N. Peterson (Eds.) Durham: Duke University Press, 2003: 40-52.
[5] Tsinhnahjinnie quote from the above title, page 48. She is fully aware of the subjectivity of her reading of this photograph, (and all readings of photographs), saying, "Perhaps I'm projecting, but isn't that what it's all about?"
[6] *Self, W. (2015)* A Point of View: Has the world become too visual?, BBC Online, *http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31656672 (*Last accessed 9 May 2015*).* Self's stance on being post-image is, "I've reached a point in my life where I can no longer accept uncritically any image whatsoever."
[7] Garry Winogrand quote from '*Image Magazine', George Eastman House – Vol. 15, No. 2, July, 1972*