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Photography Festivals: An Opportunity Repeatedly Missed?



I have never looked ‘down’ upon the commissioned image or venerated the ‘art’ image purely because of the status placed upon it by others. I am not interested in the ‘Is photography an art form?’ discussion or debate. My love is for all areas of photography and I respect and admire successful images wherever they come from, whoever created them and whatever their provenance.

It is from that perspective that I write this post. Over the last few years I have attended a large number of photography festivals created by passionate and hard working individuals dedicated to the photographic image across the United Kingdom. There has been no shortage of festivals to visit, as the photography festival has become as essential to a town or city's cultural offering in recent years as an out of town retail park was in the Nineties. Yet despite their proliferation and independence, varied geographic locations, different themes, curating agendas and exhibiting programmes a dark cloud has hung over each of those I have visited.

I once wrote for a magazine I edited of my belief that the influence of the Dusseldorf School practitioners had killed photography. An oversimplified comment if taken purely at face value but if you read the piece I think you will see where I was coming from with such a contentious stance (just Google ‘Did The Dusseldorf School Kill Photography?’ and it is easily found). I now feel that it is time to adapt that stance and add another accessory to the crime and the word ‘Festival’ to the name of the deceased.

The idea of a photography festival should surely be to celebrate all areas of photographic practice. To show work that is informative, challenging, engaging and inspirational to both an engaged and a non-engaged audience. Unfortunately, too many of the festivals I have visited have failed to achieve that final requirement to reach out and engage with the non-engaged through the images exhibited.

I blame this on the dominance of work exhibited at these festivals created with the heavy hand of both the 'Duseldorfers' and the 'New Topographer's' on the shoulders of photographers desperate to be taken seriously by a self-appointed establishment of 'taste makers' closed to the broader world of photography and only open to the introspection of the personal and 'serious'.

Discussions of post-photography and deconstructed photography leave me cold and confused so how must they appear to the disengaged? Those who have not read devoured and memorized the hallowed writings of those photographic theorists we are expected to venerate and never question. I have long believed that in this world of photographic pretension that the emperor is only barely dressed; that clothing is to my mind looking even more depleted with every festival I see that places that emperor on an ever higher pedestal.

I know that I am not alone in these beliefs. I have had many conversations with people involved with festivals bemoaning the insular nature of such events and the reality of the same small but dedicated audience appearing at each and every one. Of course I am using a broad brush here and every festival has highlights that contradict my stance here but which of the UK based photographic festivals that have been staged over the last few years have offered a platform for sports, music, food, fashion, editorial or advertising based images? Which of those festivals have put a smile on your face through images that accurately reflect most people's everyday touch-points with photography?

Can a photographer only be judged to be serious about their work if in turn the images they create are serious in nature, tone and creation? Funded and not commissioned? And in turn can a festival of photography only be perceived as serious if it includes these images? If you answer yes to these questions you are disrespecting and ignoring the photographers creating work that is shaping our world by informing the decisions we make on what we eat, what we watch, how we live, what we buy and how we dress.

Commissioned photography is largely ignored by these festivals and yet the festival curators seem happy to turn a blind eye to Martin Parr helping to sell Birds Eye frozen products, the popular success of show's by Avedon, Bailey, Penn and Testino at the National Portrait Gallery and the critical and commercial success of the Horst P. Horst show currently at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Photography is commercial across all genres, all of which require a client to support the creation of future work. That client may buy a print, a book, supply a bursary or funding or present a commission. The client is the enabler so why the dismissive attitude by some many of the festival organizers and curators to commissioned work?

The UK interpretation of the photographic festival has I believe become narrow focused, insular and obsessed with how they are perceived by a small but powerful cabal who are then asked to speak and present workshops at those same festivals. This may be influenced by the need to secure funding from arts based organizations or through academic research funding,

if so the impact this is having on the perception of photography by the populace is achieving the opposite result to what these organizations claim to be their goals.

Glastonbury is a great festival because of its eclectic, open-armed, open-minded approach to all genres of musical performance. It attracts a similarly diverse audience eager to experience what they know and what they stumble upon from Beyonce to Royal Blood. This for me is the essence of a festival, an event that is inclusive not exclusive, that shares but never preaches, that promotes but does not judge.

It is such a shame that the UK photography festival cannot adopt a similar approach to attract a similar audience. That would be a true photographic festival that would truly reflect photography as the global visual language it is today.