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Scott, Grant ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2882-1380> (2016) Transformations and Convergences: The Tectonic Plates of Photography. Viewbook Online Journal.

Official URL: <http://viewbook.com/articles/transformations-and-convergences>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/4481>

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Transformations and Convergences: The Tectonic Plates of Photography

Grant Scott

For many years when photographers approached me for advice as to how they should develop, progress and evolve their work, portfolios and careers my response was the same. It was a response based upon an established process of commissioning, that understood the role of the photographer, their skills, their experience and their motivations. But that was then and this is now.

Digital innovations, software developments, an increase in broadband width and availability, Wi-Fi, smartphones, tablets, digital platforms, moving image functionality in stills cameras; the list of changes to a photographer's practice goes on and on and on. But what does this all mean? How has it impacted on what we perceive to be the role of the professional photographer and how we are perceived? And perhaps more importantly how have professional photographers adapted and evolved their practices in response to these transformations and redefined the role of the professional photographer in 2016?

Of course there is no one answer to any of these questions and I hope that the days when people were looking for an all compassing solution are now finally over. But where are we today? Well, let me try to bring some understanding and context to all of these questions and concerns.

I think that we have to accept that from a creative perspective we have never been in a more exciting position. The tools available to us to create and tell stories through images have never been so available, affordable and efficient. We are in a similar position when it comes to sharing and in turn marketing our work and our practice. We can join and engage with like-minded communities on a global perspective, learning from and supporting others with whom we have shared creative experiences. We have transitioned from the local darkroom as a meeting place to a global forum of discussion and in doing so embraced the associated creative arts of self-publishing, writing and designing our outputs and photographic artefacts. We are now in control of our own destinies in a way that we have never been before.

And yet that new responsibility has bought with it new pressures and demands with no rule book or manual to support us in navigating our journey through the new landscape. The reality is that the role of the professional photographer today is one built of convergence. A convergence of skill sets, creative practices and possibilities.

"We are all photographers now!" was and perhaps still is an often heard claim to provide some kind of context to the landscape professional photographers find themselves in today. This may be true but just as the Kodak Box Brownie democratized photography at the beginning of the last century, the smartphone and digital capture has provided a similar democratization of image making today. In my opinion "We are all photographers now!" should be re-written to read "We are all publishers now, but we are NOT all professional

photographers!”. The addition of the word professional is of course an extremely important addition to the statement. But in turn that addition forces us to decide upon a clear and accurate explanation of the word ‘professional’ when applied to photography.

By using the word ‘professional’ and by avoiding terms such as ‘commercial’ or ‘artist’ I believe that it is possible to provide a useful ‘catch-all’ role definition for those for whom photography is their principle area of creative expression and/or income generation whatever area of photographic specialization they may be involved in. This is even more important today with the transition of traditionally recognised areas such as editorial, advertising and contemporary art photography to a point of total convergence providing opportunities for photographers to move between these areas of income and personal expression with traditional prejudices against art as commerce of little if any relevance.

But back to defining the role of the professional photographer. In an Instagram world of the single image, the qualities that need to be emphasized by the professional photographer to identify the points of difference between themselves and the non-professional are I believe those of consistency and narrative. The ability to consistently create images that form a body of work with a unique visual language cannot be under estimated and neither can the time, experience and commitment that needs to be given to creating that body of work.

The ability to create narrative, to tell stories within and with a series of images is similarly challenging to any photographer. Narrative is the foundation of all commissioned work and fulfilling a client’s brief just as it is the impetus behind personal expression or documentation within self-initiated projects. It is therefore an essential component in the understanding of the role of the professional photographer but I question how often this is identified and vocalized by a photographer explaining their work particularly within the commissioned environment.

I have spoken of the transitions and convergences that have led us as professional photographers to a point at which many of us feel the need to question and re-boot the ways in which we respond to the new photographic landscape we find ourselves within. But the title of this article also speaks of tectonic plates and it is this metaphor for change and uncertainty that I want to use to explain how that landscape is continually and unexpectedly changing.

As I stated in the first paragraph for many year’s things didn’t change that much for the professional photographer and the technological changes that did occur happened at a pace that could be absorbed and reflected upon before any change to a photographers practice was implemented. Today, those changes are coming at us at an incredible pace and from multiple destinations. We are therefore in a landscape that is shifting beneath our feet, forcing us to be re-active to developments, opportunities and situations rather than pro-active. This can create a sense of unease and anxiety which is completely natural but inevitably negative to our decision making process in making work and building careers. This sense of anxiety and unease is also often shared by commissioners and enablers within a similarly uneasy social and economic climate. In this case they are looking to the photographer for the confidence and re-assurance they need. Within the commissioned environment photographers have long been seen as visual problem solvers but increasingly

they are having to explain that role to those commissioning from a position of inexperience and/or fear of decision making.

The solution to this is of course to develop an informed practice with strong foundations that allows you space to be pro-active in your decision making whilst not being blinkered to the shifts that occur. This is of course the basis to any successful business which is another transition photographer's need to understand about their role as a professional photographer today. In an ever increasingly competitive marketplace the professional photographer is the creator not only of their own business strategy but also of the areas of business they wish to partake in.

I know that this use of the word 'business' will not sit comfortably with some people but if the changing landscape of the past few years has taught us anything it must surely to be open to the changing semantics of our area of creative practice. Just as the term 'professional photographer' is no longer a label that describes a narrow area of expertise, so the labels attached to those with whom we collaborate have become increasingly nebulous. Curators, photo editors, art directors, creative directors, art editors, stylists and designers are all responding to the new creative landscape by expanding their opportunities for creative expression, their roles and their areas of expertise unencumbered by the label or position they hold.

The role of the professional photographer and the expectations of what that role is has changed and will continue to change, to evolve. But the essence of what constitutes successful and important work remains the same today as it has always been. The ability to tell stories, to capture a moment that transcends the one-dimensional, that engages, affects, informs and questions the viewer, these are the essential truths of photography. In my opinion the challenges we face are in how we choose to make and disseminate this work but as long as we are aware that as in all areas of photography two and two has never made four we will be open and fleet-footed to whatever transitions, convergences or shifting sands are ahead of us.

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