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What Is the Role of the 21st Century Post Digital Photographer?

By Grant Scott

"Within the limits of his medium, without resorting to any method of control that is not photographic (i.e., of an optical or chemical nature), the photographer can depart from literal recording to whatever extent he chooses."
Edward Weston, (1964) 'Seeing Photographically', *The Encyclopaedia of Photography*, Vol.18

Whilst researching a book I am currently writing I have been looking at the language that was being used concerning photography in the earliest days of digital image making. The words written by those commenting on the supposed death of 'true' photography and the birth of a new dawn of image making most often referred to as 'electronic imaging' or unbelievably now 'post-photography' share an apocalyptical view of what was to come. Interestingly the prime concern was the end of the truth within the analogue photographic image and the beginning of a new falsity of image manipulation encouraged and enabled by digital capture.

Of course, to believe that all analogue photography was unadulterated truth would be to completely misunderstand the nature of the photographic image and the different contexts in which it is has and continues to be used. Image manipulation did not begin with Photoshop. Dodging, burning and spotting work with dyes and a lick of a brush were the stock in trade of any photographer taking personal care with their analogue prints.

Despite this the fear of manipulation and the process of manipulation within digital photography remains a contentious and relevant discussion point even now that digital capture has been established for nearly three decades. The decision on why, how and if a photographer chooses to work on their images remains the responsibility of the photographer as has always been the case but the ease by which this manipulation can now be carried out raises the importance of that responsibility to an everyday decision making process. Post-production can be a seductive mistress and the decision to base a photographic 'style' on a series of post-production plug-ins and effects can quickly become a poorly judged fashion based cloak for images to be dressed in.

Similarly, the decision to corrupt images to achieve a result not captured in camera creates a body of work without either integrity or truth that is too easily revealed if put under even the slightest interrogation. The resultant work in this case is closer to a form of 'magpie' collage than a photographic language unique to the photographer.

The responsibility for establishing a personal visual language for your work is perhaps the most important aspect in creating an honest and substantial foundation for a photographic practice in the 21st Century within an over populated market place. But that practice cannot even begin until the role of the photographer today is understood.

A photographer today is a conduit, a publisher, a writer, a marketer, a filmmaker and perhaps most important of all a storyteller that can fully utilize all the tools available to them to find, tell and disseminate their stories. In a digital age these tools are more powerful than ever before but require skills previously less relevant to the photographic medium. The role of the photographer today is that of the publisher of yesterday and as such the responsibilities of the publisher must be understood and adopted by the 21st Century photographer. As such the role of the photographer has changed from that of creator to creator and disseminator and it is in that dissemination that the

photographer has inherited the power of communication that they have for so many years cried out for.

However, this power comes with previously unconsidered realities of legal implications and international sensitivities as the photographer utilizes the new online publishing tools at their disposal. As Edward Weston commented in a pre-digital world each moment in the process of creating a photograph remains in the control of the photographer from the camera position to the choice of camera, lens, ISO, filters and use of light; the documentation of the subject is their interpretation of that moment in time. But today once that image has been created the photographer must be aware of how it is going to be viewed and consumed within the context that they choose to place it within, considerations previously taken by a publisher. Considerations not to be taken lightly, as the photographer must accept a responsibility not only for their work but also to the people involved within the images and potentially within the image creation.

These images may be shared on a website, within a social media platform, an exhibition space or a competition environment. The context is not important in today's multi-platform publishing environment. By sharing images, they are adopting the role of a publisher and therefore must accept the outcomes that may result from irresponsible and ill-informed publication.

I recently posted about this new role for the photographer within a social media platform and was met by several photographers claiming that they were photographers and therefore could not also be publishers. I explained that just by responding to my comments they were in fact publishing their thoughts on the subject. The response to this was as you would expect both muted and accepting.

The genre of photojournalism has long been the subject of critical debate concerning 'truth'. The idea that the photographer is the author of their work and that the veracity of that author is founded on the reputation of the author and the institutions they are associated with is well established. However, recent times are littered with examples that draw this simple equation into question. The reality is that it is no longer possible for the 21st Century photographer to remain purely as an author dependent on others to provide the foundations for their practice.

It is time for photographers to accept the realities of their new responsibilities and to embrace the possibilities of their new role in visual storytelling. Photographers have a personal and ethical responsibility to address the issues of unscrupulous and deceitful image creation and publication as do the institutions that they previously looked to too provide authenticity. It is no longer acceptable to play the ignorance card.

The role of the 21st Century photographer has changed and it is constantly evolving, it is the responsibility of the engaged photographer to understand that reality and to respond to those changes. Not purely in word but also in deed.