

Photography Is Finished. Stick a Fork in it, Turn it Over, It's Done.

Back around the turn of the century, I think it was 2001, Kodak announced that it was no longer going to invest in researching new film products, a small but significant signpost of the end of more than 160 years of obsessive technological development, in a medium whose *raison d'être* seemed at times to be the astonishment of the public's eye through technical innovations.

The invention of photography and the birth of the modern era coincided and reinforced each other in ways that from our vantage point make them seem inseparable. Along with the invention of the steam engine and the telegraph, industry set out to annihilate the obstructions of time and space. As the giddy euphoria of successes in the nineteenth century took hold of the public consciousness, technological progress became the test for the relevance of all creative endeavors. Faster, newer, stronger and stranger became the habitual expectation of the public as the twentieth century progressed, and photography was always there to provide the media with easily distributed images that demonstrated how different the world was today. Different than it was even just twenty-four hours ago. In the midst of the rapid changes of those times even a few years could distance us from the past in ways that seemed irrevocable. We were hurtling down the rapids and leaping across Rubicons towards our inevitable destiny, the future.

The historians were on the spot, too. Barely waiting for the ink to dry on the morning paper before deciding how the latest invention fit into the accepted historical narrative and how the last chapter had closed and the next had begun. The ranks of the *avant-garde* grew crowded with individuals convinced that brandishing the latest cultural widget would be sufficient to insure membership and, perhaps, immortality.

Ahh, the good old days. Habits of the mind die hard, and much of society is still coasting on the vapors of that vanished world. There is always promise in the future, but the future ain't what it used to be.

Getting back to photography, which is what this essay is about, before I forget. The technological cycle of photography now stands complete. The fastest photograph has been taken, the largest photograph has been made, as has the smallest. The world in color and black and white, as well as the invisible spectrums have been revealed. Some might complain that digital technology has opened new paths for further progress, and I would agree, but not progress in photography. It is the digital realm which will be explored and photography will just be the old man in the back of the boat, along for the ride.

For the photographer, the artist who has something to say, this is the moment full of promise. It has been said that a medium can't really become art until it has lost all utility to the world around it. As the culture moves forward, photography will eventually be displaced by newer methods of communication. The art of photography will be reinvented and made new, but this is not to say naive. The history of photography has been rushed through, barely a pause taken before the availability of some new technique compelled new styles, but the residues of all those past images linger in the visual subconscious of

the culture. Those styles have acquired meaning and significance. They are codes (apologies to Barthes) which can now be used by artists to communicate subtle states, historical contexts and emotional tones which can serve to reinforce or contrast with the more obvious visual content of the image. The viewer today knows more than they are conscious of about the history of photography and the visual culture we all take for granted. This knowledge is a huge resource for photographers and it can be tapped into by carefully considering the appropriated material to carry the intended message. The method can become the metaphor.

What I am I'm discussing here is nothing new. These approaches have been commonplace in painting, sculpture, literature and film for decades. Somehow photographers, for the most part, have ignored these resources until very recently. Perhaps it is a symptom of the medium's short history that it is only now entering its self-conscious stage.

I'd also like to say, in the interest of making my position clear, that when I mention historical processes and techniques I am referring to the entire history of photography, not just the nineteenth century. Choosing to shoot with a 35mm Leica on black and white film, a view camera with color film, in a studio with electronic flash or with a medium format camera from an airplane, are all just as loaded with cultural histories and aesthetic potential as working with the wet plate process in the mountains of the west or making daguerreotypes in the cities of the east. My point is that all photographic techniques have an established position in the collective unconscious of society which must be accounted for if any future work is to live up to its communicative potential.

For photography there is nothing new under the sun, but the sun still shines. The techniques quickly dropped in the mad dash to the next big thing and the methods rejected because of shifts in institutional fashion are still richly evocative tools. The artists presented in this show are all willing to grapple with the complications of neglected processes and take into consideration their histories and psychological effects so that audiences can be reintroduced to visions once seen only peripherally and now brought fully into the light.