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HOCTOK
THE ORDER OF THINGS

By Accra Shepp, March 5, 2018



Dear Accra Shepp,

Why does art matter?

Culture is the storehouse of information by which all peoples define themselves. Artworks, images, sounds, architectural structures, the body in motion and the body at rest, these are the ways in which culture is encoded. It is thoroughly inescapable. No one exists outside of culture, it permeates everything.

The record it forms tells us who we are. It permits us to define such basic states as being human, being conscious, our relationship with others. And because it has the ability to remain, to last longer than we do it tells us about who we were and who we used to be. From this it is possible to infer what we might become or at the very least what we might hope to become or fear we are becoming.

Why does photography matter?

Picture

Photo by: Teresa Simao

I never cease to be amazed at the relevance of photography. Who could have imagined in a moment when video and virtual reality and 3-d printing are so available that it is the still photographic image that reigns supreme. Every day literally billions of still photographs are created. But, it is not just a question of numeracy and scale.

Essential to the photographic process is its instantaneity. It happens all at once, literally at the speed of light. And then it's done. Complete. We have an image, and at times it feels miraculous. The most common form of photography is the one that reinforces cultural rituals, weddings, birthdays, vacations, all events of note. This forms the backbone of our common understanding of the medium.

However, the practice extends far beyond this. Photography by virtue of its ubiquity has the ability to comment and critique in a way available to no other medium. What's more, its familiarity gives it a cultural acceptance accorded no other medium. No one feels at a loss to be in the presence of a photograph.

How does New York City affect the feelings and colors you depict in your photography?

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New York City is where I was born and I feel a close attachment to it. It's a city of grays - concrete, steel, and asphalt. In the winter months, it is nearly entirely drained of color, and yet, no one complains of being bored in New York. It is a city dedicated to movement and fascinations of all sorts. Where the cityscape is a hard-edged study in black and white, the people explode with color and sound.

And of course, the City does give way to areas nature. It is after all a city made of islands – over forty of them. So, there are numerous waterways and an abundance of nature tucked into hidden corners, that are often closer at hand than one might realize.

My work, “The Islands of New York”, reflect this ironic and generally unseen relationship.

What are some of the themes you never get tired of exploring?

My main focus is the environment, in particular our relationship with the landscape. In addition to the aforementioned “Islands of New York”, I've also explored this topic in my artist's book “Atlas” that meditates on the relationship between the body and the landscape. It's available for viewing at both the Whitney Museum and the New York Public Library.

I'm also interested in our relationship with each. I've explored this most notably in my project “Occupying Wall Street”, a series of over 400 images made over the course of 11 months of the Occupy Wall Street protest.

Who are the people you are most interested in depicting in your work?

I'm not concerned with any specific group of people or type of person. In general, I find the individual to be the most fascinating. It is the particular and the idiosyncratic that I find captivating.

When approaching a subject for “Occupying Wall Street” or any of my portraits I look for sincerity in all its modalities.

Can you share with us an example of a meaningful collaboration with another artist and how that has affected your artistic choices?

I collaborated with two artists, Wendy Ultan, a musician/composer, and Daniel Paluska, an engineer/artist on a multimedia installation and performance titled “Crowd Piece” The work explores our fraught relationship with technology and re-invents a context for it in which humanism and person-to-person relationships come first and are supported by a host of participatory installations driven by technology.

Working with these two brilliant artists with their different ways of thinking helped me learn to listen in a whole new way. The experience challenged me to extend my world view beyond the photographic into realms I had not before even considered. The process freed me to explore the world in a brand new way.

Should contemporary artists focus more or less on today's socio-political discussions?

Artists must always address the context in which they live and work. It is an important responsibility. This most definitely includes speaking to the social and the political. However, each of us can only speak in the voice that we already possess.

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That is to say, those whose work investigates interior states of being will necessarily approach such topics differently than someone whose work explores more public topics.

Why?

As I mentioned earlier, culture frames all human activity. An important, if not essential human endeavor is political expression.

It is essential to note that culture is one of a few ways to organize our understanding of human activity. There are those who would position the political as the fulcrum about which all turns. This shift in context permits different relationships to be emphasized or diminished. One might likewise use a biological context to explore human action, using genetics, Darwinism, and psychology as the prism through which to refract our history. In the same way, new relationships would be highlighted. No position is privileged above the other. The largest understanding would necessarily be a synthesis of these multiple points of view.

Is there a place, other than NYC, that you consider to be the IT place for the arts?

I hesitate to use the term "It place" as it reduces a complex city or region to a commodity that becomes part of a market driven system of consumption.

However, that being said, there are several exciting places for young artists to go. It saddens me to talk about this, but the current political climate has made my home town New York very inhospitable to young and emerging artists. Previous mayors sought to reposition Manhattan as a place for only the wealthy and relegating all others to the outer boroughs. It is truly a short-sighted and limited view of New York City, whose vibrancy and innovation springs from the serendipitous mixing of high and low, commercial and residential, and so on. This process has been exacerbated by Federal and State politicians who all profess a love of the City's culture but attack its people and their way of life.

New places that have emerged include the nearby Philadelphia, about which I hear wonderful things. Then of course there is also Berlin in Germany, which has been attracting New Yorkers consistently now for many years. Both of these cities require less money to live and work as well as offering a number of other supports necessary for the arts. That is not to say they are without deficit, but there are drawbacks to living anywhere.

What makes you feel hopeful?

Young people make me feel hope. It's in desperately short supply at this moment. And I do everything in my power to help sustain their sense of possibility and celebrate their agency, while at the same time not minimizing the challenges that confront us all.

What's the advice you give your students who aim to build careers in the arts?

I always urge them to be themselves. We all come to our respective careers in the thrall of those who inspire us. When we are young it is too easy to lose ourselves in this relationship, emulating what we find most attractive. I remind them that their experiences, their ideas, are not just unique but the very stuff that they might contribute that no one else can provide. I remind them that ideas that seem too obvious and too easy only appear this way because the ideas spring from

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their own minds. To any another person there would be nothing obvious or simplistic at all, but perhaps something even revelatory.

Do you have any upcoming shows or exhibitions you'd like to share with our community?

Yes, this April the National Library of Luxembourg will be hosting my project, "Windbook". It will run for a calendar year. The project was the result of a collaboration with a local high school in Luxembourg. I worked with the students to explore ideas ethnicity and national origin by making portraits and collecting personal narratives in the public square of the capital. I took these images and texts and wove them together with my own to create a series of images and corresponding narratives that expanded upon what was collected.

The book is approximately 900 pages and opens to two feet wide. It will be installed outdoors for the wind to turn its pages, thus its name. When it rains it will get wet and when it is dry the pages will turn without the need or interference of the human touch. It thus subverts human agency and demands us to be observant. The book will weather over the course of the year until, towards the end of that time period, it ceases to turn freely and becomes fused into a solid object. It will then go on display inside with a selection of images reprinted from the book.