

NATHAN LYONS SPEAKS  
BY ROBERT HIRSCH

*The following is a continuation of the interview "Nathan Lyons On the Snapshot," published in the Winter 1992-1993 CEPA Journal. This interview covers diverse topics affecting contemporary photographic practice. The original discussions have been augmented through additional conversations and correspondence.*

The first interview was distilled from our talks in conjunction with The Point and Shoot Exhibition at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, NY (November/December 1992), curated by David Harrod of Drexel University and myself. For a copy of the first interview, send one dollar and a legal-sized, self-addressed, stamped envelope to CEPA.

RH: Looking back at the 1960s, how would you describe the dialogue about photography during that time compared with today?

NL: During the late 1950s and early 1960s many people were extolling the virtues of different ideological camps, like street photography, the west coast tradition, or the east coast tradition. Few were trying to think about the medium in the broadest possible sense and question things in ways that are certainly being questioned on more elaborate terms now. There were many clichés being bandied about, myths were being perpetuated. There was a real sense of challenge and confusion. Everything seemed wide open. To me that was the real excitement about coming to this field from the tradition of literature.

RH: In our previous interview we discussed how literature affected your approach to photography. How has your interest in poetry transformed the way you look at photographs?

NL: In poetry one understood something about the craft of poetry. Much of what I was experiencing about photography was a series of formulas based on trying to satisfy a series of preconditions about what a photograph should look like and what it should be about. These are the two central ideas I have kept open. The photograph can be about most anything, and one photograph can look very differently from another.

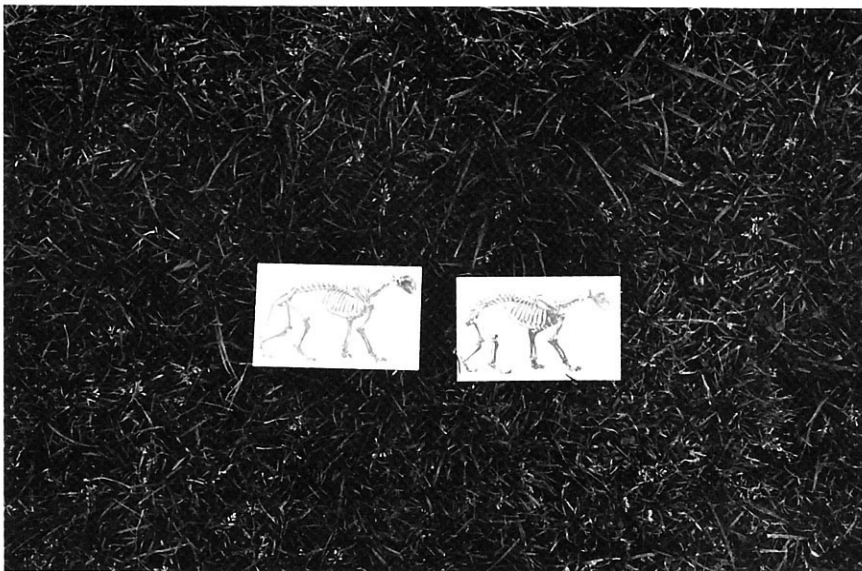
RH: How does this impact the way you view the tools of photography?

NL: Addressing the concept of tools as ends in themselves is misleading. I am interested in what we are trying to communicate with the tools rather than the tools themselves. I am sympathetic to not nailing things down but opening things up, which was characteristic of many people working in the 1960s. People weren't accepting conditions, they were questioning, learning, and expanding the vocabulary.

RH: What were some of the things that got so many people fired up about photography during the 1960s?

NL: During the 1960s many people had a free and spontaneous regard for looking at anything and everything, and photography was part of it. Photography caught hold in the imaginations of people then because it is not a prescriptive medium. People who felt constricted by other things saw its potential. The critic A. D. Coleman made the observation about the academization of photography due to the expansion of educational activity. I am not worried if this helps to keep things open, but if it is to prescribe and regulate then I am concerned. If you say to students this is a marvelous tool, explore it, it is one thing—as opposed to saying this is how you use this tool. This is where you have to be careful if you are concerned about creative and/or expressive issues.

RH: Previously we discussed the influence of the snapshot on contemporary practice, what are other major sources influencing today's imagemakers?



NL: Today the sources have more to do with advertising and television. Much of television is visually boring, having a kind of static property that many people are making use of today. The only challenge to the vocabulary has to do with advertising or in films.

RH: Do you see any relationship between the snapshot and what is happening with "underground" cinema and video?

NL: There are absolute parallels. An earlier generation of artists discovered 8mm and 16mm film and went out and rediscovered the vocabulary of film as part of that whole movement.

RH: What are some of the factors prevailing upon our current ideas about what a picture is?

NL: In terms of patterns of influence, what begins to happen in a television frame affects the sensibility of people responding to a picture environment. As color television began to spread during the 1960s, it produced a shift in the painter's palette. The color television palette has affected our notions of what we accept as "naturalistic" color. Many subtler interactive factors have affected what we grow to accept as a picture; the difficulty is that we often lose track of what their origins might have been.

RH: In the previous interview you said: "You almost get the feeling photography redefines itself every six months." How have television and video contributed to this phenomenon?

NL: It is numbers and facility, it has to do with the production of images. It is not only photography but also television that has had a dramatic impact upon our perceptions of the world because of recurrence, of what seems to be the same newscast every evening. Although there are different events, the structure gives one the feeling that it is the same event and not different events going on with different implications. It has become so formatted, so prescribed.

RH: How has this prescribed format intruded upon the way we receive information?

NL: Our newspapers are becoming the same way. *USA Today* is a television format. It is a publication with compressed news segments, lacking any real substance from the standpoint of the background of the story. The context is lost. We cannot look for a "Reader's Digest" solution because it loses the flavor of what is going on. We do not have

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**Dyptych from the series: Riding First Class on the Titanic**  
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enough time to be informed, and that leads us into what Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding Media*, 1964) referred to as being massaged.

RH: What is the danger of being massaged by the media?

NL: The danger of the media massage is being lulled into something without being engaged or thinking about it. We can popularize issues more readily, like H. Ross Perot's town meetings, but I am not sure we understand any more about them. Government is such an important aspect of our collective lives that how we engage has to be re-addressed as something that is incredibly important to our future.

RH: People seem to play a rather detached role with all the information that is already available. Can education raise the level of participation?

NL: The real challenge is to make people function in a more active way. People need to understand what the resources are, how to gain access to them, and how to perform interpretive strategies around those resources. We have a generation who have absorbed these new facilities and tools, and we are not there with any substantive resource for them to work with. This causes the whole thing to fail. It's a glorious, ultimately democratic system (laughter) that collapses because nobody is engaging the issues or ideas.

RH: How has the notion of prescriptions affected photography?

NL: Prescriptions can result from looking at issues as a closed system. Within any discipline there are certain prescriptions that become part of the folklore of the tribe. The question is to challenge what has become prescribed. The issue is not photography but imagemaking. I see rich possibilities of a cross-disciplinary nature, rather than seeing photography as sacrosanct. Photography is part of a larger, growing vocabulary that incorporates film, video, computer imaging, and animation. As educators we often say: "This is how we should see, this is how we make a print," which is very prescriptive. What were the circumstances that defined what we have come to think of photography as being? I am not sure that we, a public, reflect that level of understanding.

RH: What would you like to see investigated in the current discourse about photography?

NL: I do not think the notion of "effect" has been studied in different periods of time in relation to the absence or presence of other media sources. We are so confused by

market value practices we do not have a grasp on what effect visual stimulation has on our lives.

RH: How should someone who is studying photographs from another era try to establish their possible meanings?

NL: We have set up a linear mentality about evaluation. The issue is not the artifact. The issue is what the viewer is bringing to the experience. To have only a singular point of view towards a past is to limit what that past might reveal. We tend to impose our current preconceptions on a past. Often we don't explore the sensibilities that the photograph reveals. We need to ask: "What was the mindset of that period of time and is it possible to determine such a thing?"

RH: How is it that we have become so limited in the way we evaluate things?

NL: It has to do with whether people opt to be challenged or not, and what other pressures or priorities are in their lives. It is important to keep our options open and not assume that we know everything. We have tendencies that lead us towards the status quo rather than finding other approaches. The burden of the past is enormous. Take a 30 year period of time between 1950 and 1980 and ask: "Did one have to carry around more information about the world than someone in the 1600s?" Is this something that is equatable? Are there more areas we are asked to be informed and aware about? It could have been as complex, but it wasn't as ever-present as the information load is today.

RH: How has the amount of information altered the way people are thinking about the visual arts?

NL: The new tools (digital computers) are beginning to address how we handle vast quantities of information. We need to reexamine how historians have regarded visual information as just being illustrative of text. Visual information is text, and our reading of it has been very limited. I think we are going to see new approaches in managing and representing the density of information. It will involve multi-media issues and be able to offer a number of different sources in an accessible fashion.

RH: How will this affect the way people will be dealing with images?

NL: We will have more fluid access to images. Regulated access is built around prescribed programming issues. Fluid access would allow you to see every image made by a specific artist in world-wide archives. You would have access to images excluded from the popular press which might help to reshape your thinking about a given event.

RH: Do you see any correlation between the amount of snapshots being produced and their use as a method to assimilate information and create new avenues of expression?

NL: This phenomena is not relegated to the snapshot. Look at amateur movies. The syntax of film was affected by the advent of the 16mm camera. Artists got into film and began to expand the vocabulary of filmmaking based on the actual experience of film, and not just out of the skills of making film. Now the issues center around television, with video being the equivalent of Super 8 and 16mm film. There is a wealth of image-making attitudes being formulated there, and looking ahead is computer animation.

RH: How did these developments modify the visual vocabulary?

NL: Ultimately, it's a formatting issue. The techniques used by filmmakers like Richard Lester in the Beatle's films *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help* (1965) had to do with nervous and jerky amateur film effects such as trailing off, askew angles, or perfor-

mance activity within a very frenetic kind of film action. Photography and film vocabulary were both caught up in the same formalist tradition. At various times, photography was influenced by film, which helped to determine the makeup of the frame.

RH: How important is it that you have served as a picture maker, an educator, and a curator?

NL: I have always functioned as a photographer, so I ask questions in a way that might be different than my counterparts in the traditional curatorial community. What artists have to say about art has always interested me—more than historians, theoreticians, or scholars, but I don't discount what they have to say.

RH: Do you think there has been a reluctance on the part of photographers to seriously talk about the medium in a manner conducive to further development of its own vocabulary?

NL: Yes and no. I could not have done *Photographers On Photography* (1966) if photographers did not talk about photography. I wanted to identify the viewpoints that were having an effect on how we thought about photography by individuals who were not historians or scholars. Up to that period of time, it was rare that one encouraged the voice of the photographer to come forward. Edward Weston, Minor White, Ansel Adams, and Henri Cartier Bresson tried to formulate what their concerns were about. Then there were those who remained relatively silent. I think it has to do with a more recent phenomenon in which many people came to photography because they did not want to develop their ideas through language but through images.

RH: What role has the increased monetary value of the photograph and the gallery scene which fosters this play?

NL: We are in a period in which the photograph has become a valuable object, which does not necessarily mean a valued cultural object. We have a notion things will gain in some monetary value, but not necessarily philosophically or spiritually, and there is a whole dynamic that supports this activity. I am pragmatic about the issues of earning a living as an artist. It concerns me if the only option a photographer had was to perform in that arena. We need to create other arenas. I am almost apprehensive about images that I make being considered as objects. I am more interested in the contextual relevance of the images I make than any singular image. Having committed myself to an extended form, the book model is basically what I prefer to work with. I am interested in the gallery as an arena for contextualizing something rather than necessarily selling work.

RH: What might some future arenas be?

NL: The interactive systems are going to redefine what we think. It is setting a tone in a way that my going to a Saturday matinee created another kind of world of impressions for me as a kid. We can deal with the more obvious aspects of it, but what we don't know is the subtlety of effect.

RH: How will the new technologies influence us?

NL: Its going to affect the order and nature of information and experience. It will impact on physical forms and presentational forms, whether it's exhibitions or a gallery mechanism. Video never made it in the galleries. Now we have the VCR, which is the publishable form of video art. The VCR gives an artist accessibility to a larger audience. Video made film a collectable entity. We will see other extensions forming. The gallery will play a part, but there will be a more independent publishing mentality. The spirit that produced the little poetry magazine on a mimeograph machine will prevail. Independent, maverick activity, not corporately produced or generated, will be part of this new electronic age.



RH: What effect has video had on the type of images people want to capture?

NL: Now that we can document voice as well as image, what are people saying? The audio area of documentation has hardly been looked at. Are we setting up another kind of scrapbook or snapshot album of verbal cliches to induce people to perform for the camera? One thing that was always interesting to me was trying to figure out whether it is a performance for the camera or whether the camera in some way was performing, and what might be the relative characteristics of each kind of image?

RH: How do the tools we use to create pictures transform the way we deal with information?

NL: In relation to how complex relational issues are becoming, in kinds of information we are trying to integrate, assimilate, and display, the tools are now in a much better position to do that than ever before. Writers tell us they don't know how they wrote before they had a PC (personal computer). Of course someone today could sit down with a quill pen and write a brilliant novel. But what would happen if you take that same mind and give that person the potential of the new tools?

RH: How important is facility?

NL: Facility is one aspect, but whether there is another dimension affecting how one might think or organize something is obviously part of the new technologies, this is the issue. The thing that is interesting about trying to figure out anything is the issue of complexity not simplicity. Consider the poetry of T. S. Eliot. He had a referential structure about poetry and the history of literature within his poetry. Now you have computers that can give you multiple windows, providing levels of information that you can track through a series of different progressions, reaching other levels of information. This is not unlike the ability to construct an effective, complex, extended metaphor. In the late 1950s, I would speak with people whose position was that the only thing that has changed about photography was the issue of facility. Photography still makes essentially the same kind of picture in terms of its basic characteristics.

RH: How will these systems recast the artist?

NL: It is intriguing to look at the beginnings of any new technological system and enumerate the salvational language that comes out. By salvation, it could have been the

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implications, rightly or wrongly, about the death of painting. There have been shows recently paraphrasing that, and now we're talking about the death of photography. Obviously painting is not dead. Maybe the artist of the future will be less media specific.

RH: Will there be more crossing of boundaries and what will be its effects?

NL: Definitely. If there is any future manifestation about the notion of making things, it will be less media specific. I do not know whether we come out the other end saying that someone is an imagemaker. Maybe we will stop using the term artist. Their role will be to manage and enhance complex levels of activity in imagemaking. Look at the history of literary production and see what has been required to transmit the word within the culture. Presently the reason why things have accelerated is because we have found better ways to transmit images.

RH: How is this transforming the teaching of visual arts?

NL: Most art departments are still very departmentalized and media specific. Yet they have been hosting many curious activities, such as film, video, photography, and photo-printmaking in their midst. How implications cross or how you might take one thing and apply it to another or how something might exist in a more direct state are the things photography does in a way that needs to be understood.

RH: How will the computer affect this crossing of boundaries?

NL: Look at the vocabulary of the computer in terms of the programs being generated like Paintbox and PhotoShop. We do not seem to be challenging their implications or analyzing what the stage of any new technology represents within the culture. I can watch someone do something on the computer that might take five minutes manually, and they're spending three hours getting the computer to perform it. We need a real-time relationship with thought and the functioning of the computer, in the same sense video gave us a real-time relationship that was very different than film.

RH: What implications does this have on the structure of moving pictures?

NL: We are looking at artist video which has been around only since the early 1970s. There are vestiges of manual activity because we move things around in that space, but the surface of the TV screen is in effect the new page. We are just beginning to figure out ways to respect its value. From an educational standpoint the real challenge coming

will be to find a way to merge a communications department and an art department.

RH: How would you like to change the way fine-art photographers are trained?

NL: I would like to see photographers more imagistically trained and not simply art-trained. I accept what I think you're saying, but my history has been one of trying to question what we even mean by art training. Art training that reveres the past exclusively is not art training. There has to be a relationship between what the past in art-making was about in relation to the present and its implications to the future. That is art training or artfully trained (laughter). I think the general trend is towards change. The broader issues include issues of censorship and who is going to have access and how are we going to empower people with the new tools.

RH: What would you do to encourage greater access?

NL: I would encourage an open-minded vision in terms of possibilities in the training of photographers because I tend to see photographers as people who are interested in images. The issue is the training of imagemakers and what options they may have with that base of

interest. I think it is terrific when someone comes in and embraces the skills and goes off and works very differently than they had assumed they were going to because there is a different challenge out there for them. Education need not be constituted in the same sense as trade schools, where their obligation is to give a student very specific skills and tasks within a commercial environment. Have we fallen down in training people by perpetuating romantic notions about the charge of higher education? I am not opposed to tradition, but I am opposed to tradition when it limits possibility.

RH: What other areas would you like to see examined?

NL: I would like to see more work being done concerning the interrelationship of literature and photography; the affect of literature on photography and photography upon literature. There is a wealth of information that begins to suggest that writers began to shift their strategy in the area of description based on how photographs were describing things. The other area is the issue of effect. How do images affect people, outside of the historic constraints or parameters established by aesthetic discourse? We have talked about images only in certain prescribed ways. There are more ways in which we need to begin to discuss and evaluate them. A third area is access. We ask our children to become acquainted with dead societies but we do not provide them with the opportunity to access the culture they live in. What are the correlations between other societies and our own? The ultimate question might be: "Are we as a result of this activity contributing to the decline of this society rather than the enhancement of it?"

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