

Interview: Martin Parr

Boundaries Merely Exist in People's Minds

On the 25th of October of last year, Magnum photographer Martin Parr was a guest at the *Profiles* event at the Antwerp FotoMuseum. He gave a reading and participated afterwards in a roundtable on the 'Photographic Magazine as Medium.' FotoMuseum EXTRA Magazine had the chance to talk to him earlier that day.



academic approach to photography. But whereas his own visual work is quite often tongue in cheek, he provides a much more nuanced perspective as curator and editor. Martin Parr seems to be on a mission. He puts all his weight behind photography in general by making it more accessible to a wider public. According to Parr, it is in this light that his participation in *Idols for Photographers* should be viewed. He gave in because he maintains that "the photographer's art isn't valued in Britain in the same way it is abroad." In Parr's own words, photography should crawl out of its ghetto and explore the limits of the medium.

EXTRA: As a documentary photographer, you don't seem reluctant to get involved in the commercial scene.

MARTIN PARR: No, not at all, photography is a commercial activity. Even high art photography wants to be commercial, because everyone wants to sell prints. I mean, the wealthiest photographer in the world is probably no longer fashion photographer Steven Meisel, but Andreas Gursky, who is at the top end of the art market. So it is interesting that the art market, financially often regarded as the poor cousin of commerce, is now way ahead of the commercial fashion industry. You can ask any photographer what he or she wants and they'll probably answer: I want to do my own work, I want to sell my work as prints. Ultimately that is a commercial goal. So we'll never be far away from the notion of commerce.

But don't you think you can react to this dominance of the economic in the arts by rejecting it?

I don't see why you would want to reject it. Commerce makes things happen. One doesn't want to be in the publicly subsidised ghetto, speaking to one percent of the population. Photography has the ability to be democratic, promiscuous and easy to digest. If you get out of the ghetto you have to get involved with the commercial end. With fashion people, advertising, posters, billboards. These are of course also ghettos. It's just a bigger ghetto. You could say that visual culture is a ghetto, but that we're surrounded by it. If you live in the western world nobody is exempt from that. Whether it's advertising

or family snapshots, we are surrounded by images. Everyone is a photographer now, remember. That's the great thing about photography. Its audience should be growing all the time and as soon as people start using photography, why not apply some intelligence to it.

A lot of these 'image flows' are clichés or, a word you often use, propaganda. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Most of the images we see are a form of propaganda because they have an agenda. Although all photography has an agenda, photography in the advertising and commercial world in particular is only good for selling an image. Or in case of a family snapshot, it is to sell the notion of the perfect family. I am not saying that independent photographers don't have an agenda, because they certainly do: you can send two photographers to the same city and they would come up with entirely different pictures. One a very positive, one a very negative.

So do you think it's important that independent photographers go through this fashion or advertising area, because it could give them a different point of view?

No, I am not telling people what to do. But when I look around I feel it is all too safe and predictable. And part of the fun and enjoyment of photography is the ability to push ideas and boundaries. Most people are quite comfortable in their little niche, and do not play with boundaries. Good for them, but I think a photographic community should have more ambition. It's our job, if you like, to make photography more accessible and to expand the audience. And the audience is there. Photo sharing sites on the Internet for instance have millions of subscribers who want to approach photography differently. Flickr is only two or three years old and, in the UK, two million people have subscribed and are discussing their work in an intelligent way. That's quite an achievement. So, the potential audience – I don't know how big Flickr is in Belgium for instance – is huge. What's more, nowadays everyone has a camera on their phone, so everyone is a photographer. That is why photography is in such a healthy state, because more and more people are joining in and are becoming fascinated with photography.

Do you consider these changes in photography today as the beginning of a new medium?

No, it's all the same. Photography's central role is to be the absolute medium of the day. It is fantastic that there is no longer any technical intimidation. When I first started learning how to take photographs, you had to spend the first six months figuring out what

an f-stop was. Now you just go and take pictures. Nobody thinks about technical issues anymore because cameras or camera phones take care of that automatically. On the other hand, you still have the option of controlling every technical aspect. It's the most accessible, democratic medium available in the world. This has to be celebrated, and we must continually remind photographers of this.

Speaking of digitalisation, behind the backdrop of the Internet and the way photography is currently undergoing such profound changes, it struck me that, at a time when the image is becoming increasingly nonmaterial, you focus on the photo book, i.e. the photo in its printed form. Is that a kind of reaction to this new, immaterial character of photography?

No, they are only slightly separate as today everyone can print a book with the help of new technologies. It is truly amazing: for forty Euros you can send your pictures to a company and they'll send you back a book. Isn't that fantastic? I love and collect photo books and I've been trying to compose their history, because their position has always been somewhat underrepresented in the history of photography while I think they are essential to its contemporary practice. With *The Photobook: A History*, I tried to redress that and I think the book succeeded to a certain extent. Although there are more books published now than ever before, the problem is that they tend to stay inside this photo ghetto. It is possible yet extremely difficult to find books that have a wider appeal, so in that regard it is very encouraging to see that Stephan Vanfleteren's book *Belgium* has gained a wider audience. He has touched a nerve, and although he presents a very nostalgic view of Belgium that I don't particularly like, it is great to see that his book is able to draw a crowd. I applaud him for making photography more accessible and it are these rare moments of triumph that show you that photography books need not indulge in high art. There is a slight contradiction in what I am saying here. I'm asking photography to get out of its ghetto, but at the same time I'm professing my love for the photo book, which is entrenched in that ghetto. But I am very happy to be a hypocrite (laughs).

Which photo books do you consider to be your personal favourites then?

I would like to mention two books. To my mind, the most influential and radical photo book published in the last century was William Klein's *New York*. Unlike Robert Frank's equally influential *The Americans*, Klein succeeded in changing the way photographers created books. His radical approach to design, his ability to capture energy and dynamism in his photography, all the effects of his work rippled





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across the world; you could see it in Argentina, in Portugal, all the way to Japan. During the sixties and seventies, while Europe stuck to the conventions of the photo book – with two white pages and a picture on the right, such a hallow, respectfully beautiful format – Japan was throwing out those rules. Japanese photographers adopted Klein's spirit and used it to change the way of presenting books entirely. Daido Moriyama's *Bye Bye Photography* for example was as radical as Klein's *New York* because he tried to tear up the rules of conventional photography. He threw away his negatives, he scratched them and made this energetic book, which took Klein's idea one step further. So *Bye Bye Photography* is probably my favourite photo book. But we should always keep in mind how radical Klein's book was in 1956, and how radical it still is today. It forever changed the way photographers make books.

There is another way in which you seem to turn to the past. You have worked with image archives, like the Lotz ghetto album or the Ed van der Elsen archive, found images and traditional genres like the self-portrait in commercial studios. In other words, in this digital era you are focussing on the photographic tradition and its specificity.

I always look back to work from the past because I feel its contributions have been overlooked. By virtue

of this platform I have, I feel it's my duty to help promote neglected bodies of work. The history of photography is very subjective, and it is also, if you look at Beaumont Newhall for instance, very rigid. It just needs a bit of lightening up because certain people had a very narrow view on what photography should be. Today, we all acknowledge the contribution of things like vernacular photography which has become mainstream over the past twenty years. Previously, just like with colour photography for instance, it had just been sidelined. So we constantly have to reinvent and revise the past because there is no such thing as a 'true' history of photography. So when looking back at the past, I am just taking part in that ongoing process. Of course, my fascination with the past has as much to do with promoting upcoming photographers.

Do you think that your different positions in the field enrich each other?

Yes, they feed off each other. It used to anger me that a lot of photography curators are so lazy, and just wait for things to be handed out on a plate: they hardly travel, they aren't restless, they aren't on the lookout for the new. Then it struck me: why not curate myself? That's how I started. Like all the other projects I've done I just think: well, if I don't do it, no one will. The same holds for curating: I have to do it, because

if I don't, things will not get a platform or receive the oxygen they need.

So you see curating also as a way of communicating?

Yes, it's like filling a gap. You look at what's going on and you suddenly realise it is insane that this or that has received no attention. For example, I did a show this summer called *Colour Before Color* for a New York gallery, with 'colour,' in the British, hence European spelling, and 'color,' reflecting the us spelling. The exhibition examined European colour practice during the seventies, which had been largely ignored. The history of photography always taught us that American photographers such as William Eggleston, Stephen Shore and their generation pioneered colour photography. So my theory was simply to look at things in Europe and to focus on six European photographers who were also working in colour during the seventies. But because they worked in isolation and had no institutional support, they were largely ignored. So I formulated a counter argument to what is now accepted as received truth. Of course I am not trivialising the developments in America during the seventies with the MOMA show and William Eggleston's efforts, but this is not the full story. It's much more complicated than that. So part of my idea behind this is to single out anomalies and make a small contribution in correcting them.

You will also be curating a show at the New York Photo Festival. Can you tell us a bit more about it?

The exhibition is entitled *New Typologies*. The working title was *ConDoc*, which stands for 'Conceptual Documentary'. To me, it seems to be one of the emerging genres. Some of it is typology, some is not. We live in a chaotic world and the rigour of the analysis that conceptual documentary brings can help make sense of the chaos of the modern world.

Like Hilla and Bernd Becher's work for example?

Yes, of course. They have been very influential in steering European photography more towards this dry way of looking, which seems entirely appropriate. So we have to give them credit for starting out on this path.

Lately you've been travelling to Latin America. Judging from your Magnum blog, you seem very enthusiastic about photography over there. Why is that?

I actually just came back from the Latin American Photo Forum where I saw lots of books and magazines. Surprisingly, a country like Brazil has a very healthy publishing program since there is this law stipulating that companies must reserve five percent of their profits to endorse cultural projects. This

money mostly goes towards the publication of books, but the downside is that they tend to incorporate safe images and ideas. If you have a project in black and white focusing on indigenous Brazil, you will have no trouble getting subsidised. However, if you have a more contemporary project, dealing with, let's say, São Paulo, that would be seen as too controversial. Big corporations tend to avoid such projects, so what you end up with is a publishing policy that is too nostalgic. Brazilian photography books give this impression. The country where things are really happening is Argentina, which has combined a European sensibility with this sort of inherent Latin craziness. There is some very interesting work coming out of Argentina at the moment.

PARRWORLD / PARKINGSPACES

This May, the Haus der Kunst in Munich (D) hosts an extensive retrospective of Martin Parr's work, featuring 160 pictures, 500 objects and books and another 300 postcards. *Parrworld* runs from May 7th until August 17th, 2008. More info: www.hausderkunst.de

FOTODOK, the new documentary photography festival in Utrecht (NL) will show Martin Parr's latest work *Parking Spaces* from September 12th until October 26th 2008. More Info: www.fotodok.org

COLOUR BEFORE COLOR

This exhibition was held at the Hasted Hunt Gallery in New York from June 7th until August 17th, 2007.

Slightly overlooked by the European press, the exhibit focussed on European colour photography. Curator Martin Parr selected a group of European photographers who were working with colour photography in the early 1970's. These artists were producing work before or simultaneous with William Eggleston (and others) in the US. The six artists in *Colour Before Color* include Luigi Ghirri (IT), Keld Helmer-Peterson (DK), John Hinde (UK), Peter Mitchell (UK), Carlos Pérez Siquier (E), and Ed van der Elsen (NL). www.hastedhunt.com

NEW YORK PHOTO FESTIVAL

Surprisingly, until now New York – home to one of the most influential commercial and fine art photography communities – lacked a large-scale event dedicated to photography. In 2008, the first ever edition of the annual New York Photo Festival was held from May 14 until May 18th. The festival was curated by Martin Parr, Kathy Ryan, Lesley A. Martin and Tim Barber. Parr's contribution entitled *New Typologies* highlights the use of the photographic series to bring order in the chaos around us. The show features work of WassinkLundgren, Donovan Wylie, Jan Kempenaers and others. www.nyphotofestival.com