Photography in Scotland: The Human Face

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opposite
143 **Thomas Annan** David Livingstone, 1864

This essay is something of a self-indulgence: its approach is from the standpoint of practitioner rather than as a theorist or academic. It is very much a personal response to a subject and medium which has sustained me as a way of life for over twenty years. My friends and colleagues, more rigorously intellectual than myself, will hopefully excuse the unscholarly approach.

Since the invention of photography, aestheticians, the public and photographers themselves have usually failed to agree upon its artistic status. The public perception has often been of a merely mechanical procedure whose products differ only according to the expensiveness of the apparatus used. Aestheticians have often been worried by the scientific nature of the tool and the automatic nature of the product of such a tool. They probably secretly believe that true artists don't use rulers and rubbers. Photographers, meantime, have vociferously campaigned for the acceptance of their medium, insisting that the camera is indeed *only* a tool and that the behaviour of photographic chemicals is far from beyond human control. However, in the last twenty-five years or so, these divergent understandings of the nature of photography have shown signs of reversing themselves, and photographers, exhibitors and the public now meet on relatively harmonious terms.

The convergence is partly a matter of a remarkable consensus that has come about. Dogmatic definitions of what art is, have, from all three categories, given way to a broadly expressionist view. It was stated cogently in Walker Evans's assertion that we should not be concerned with whether *what* we produce is art or not – art is in ourselves, not in art objects nor in the means of their production. Even Marxist theorists can accept this view to some degree. Suffice to say that if art involves imagination, emotion, creation, communication and honest self-expression, then photography *can* be art despite its mechanical nature and its more widespread applications as a utilitarian, scientific and commercial medium.

With portraiture, in both photography and painting, it seems difficult to escape from commercial implications. The portrait painting has the advantage in that it may appear to reveal more clearly the stuff of art: personal interpretation, imagination and visual style through the vehicle of brush strokes. It seems difficult to see the photograph as any more than mere mechanical representation, where the subject asserts itself too strongly for there to be much insight into the artist. Periodically, photographers have attempted to subvert this perceived literality by compromising the integrity of the medium, manipulating the image to make it 'more painterly', giving it the *look* of Art. Frank Eugene, at the turn of the century, is a particularly celebrated portrait photographer in this sense.

However, if photography is, in some respects, incapable of painting's achievements, in others, because of the camera's association with reality, it seems more valuable and authoritative than painting. How wonderful to read of the remarkable adventures of the Scottish missionary and traveller, David Livingstone [**143**], who explored the Zambezi and discovered the Victoria Falls in the 1850s, and then to encounter his photographic image made by Thomas Annan. Like having a lock of his hair, it is inextricably *of* him, and the paintings of

him just do not have the same presence. Groucho Marx understood the photograph's talismanic potency! 'I don't have a photograph, but you can have my footprints. They're upstairs in my socks!'[1] All photographs are invested with this authority inherently. Even the most fuzzy trace image affirms the presence of its subject. Magical as this is, however, we should expect more.

R. G. Collingwood's philosophical theories on the nature of art[2] have been subject to revision and displacement since they were published fifty years ago. However, his comments on representation still strike a personal chord when applied to portraiture. There are, he maintains, three degrees of representation on an ascending artistic scale. The first he refers to as primitive naturalism, characterised as naive and non-selective. In photographic terms this would be the simplistic recording of fact. Like a passport photo carried in a wallet as a memento, it is relevant and valuable to its owner but carries no wider significance. The second degree involves selective and literal representation, where the artist identifies those features or characteristics that draw attention to their particular concerns. This may involve the inclusion of particular symbolic references, but will certainly mean the exclusion of those details deemed irrelevant to the intended statement. The photographer, perhaps unlike the painter, has to decide, importantly, what to leave *out* of the frame when the picture is made. It is at the third degree that photography needs to demonstrate that its dependency upon instruments and potions does not disqualify it as an artistic enterprise. There, according to Collingwood, the artistic motive triumphs over the representational through the realisation of emotion.

144 **Robin Gillanders**
David Williams, March 1989

145 **David Williams** Self-portrait with Lovers, Portobello Beach, 1989

146 **David Williams** My Mum and Dad with their Grandson, Christmas Day, 1989

Can photography be a bearer of emotion? If we approach photography with that question centrally in mind and with a compassionate sensibility, the answer is clear where it is present. By its very nature, photography involves a profound respect for subject, but the best work transcends subject to work at the level of symbol, metaphor and genuine personal emotion. Bill Jay, a passionate and tireless champion of humanist values in photography has said: 'There is no paradox between a photographer placing emphasis on subject matter yet by dint of commitment and understanding revealing a personal life-attitude. All great photographs are made at this interface between reality and subjective response. They are personal and objective simultaneously.'[3]

It is the photograph's chameleon ability to mean several things at once that makes it unique and so fascinating. The best portraits have layers of meaning: one level gives a valuable and authentic likeness made at an instant of time, another gives an insight into the artist's life attitudes, and yet another supplies metaphorical resonances which may be widely received, or individual to particular viewers.

Iain Stewart's picture of a child with her grandmother [**99**] deals with the specificity of time, place and subject, while commenting in universal terms on the devotional relationship between generations in the family, and invites us to contemplate and compare the prospects of a child at the start of life's experience with those of a woman for whom it is largely a memory. The result is a picture that is simultaneously life-affirming and melancholy.

All portraits, indeed all serious photographs, are in some respect self-portraits [**144**]. Date, and to a lesser extent, place, are particularly important here. A photographer, in touch with himself and his relationship with the external world, makes a picture specific to time and place, articulating how he *is*, and by this self reference is more clearly able to understand his relationship to life. David Williams's tired-looking jacket hanging on his tripod watches a distant couple, unsharp, embracing on the beach in his favourite location of Portobello [**145**]. The pictorial elements are in momentary conjunction. The locus of this conjunction is the camera, and the sensibility of the photographer. In the world, they were events that passed one another by. The photographer, as a self-referential element, cannot be removed from the photograph.

While Williams's pictures are usually carefully conceived and formally constructed, his Christmas snapshot of his parents with their grandchild is clearly not [**146**]. It represents the very essence of documentary observation: the selective but unmanipulated recording of an event that we feel privileged to witness. Its delight is in its instant and universal accessibility, its conspicuous humanity, and above all, its ludicrous comedy. For the photographer it is also,

147 **Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert**
Calderari Gypsy Children, Sintesti, Romania, 1993

148 **Catriona Grant** Confirmation, 1995

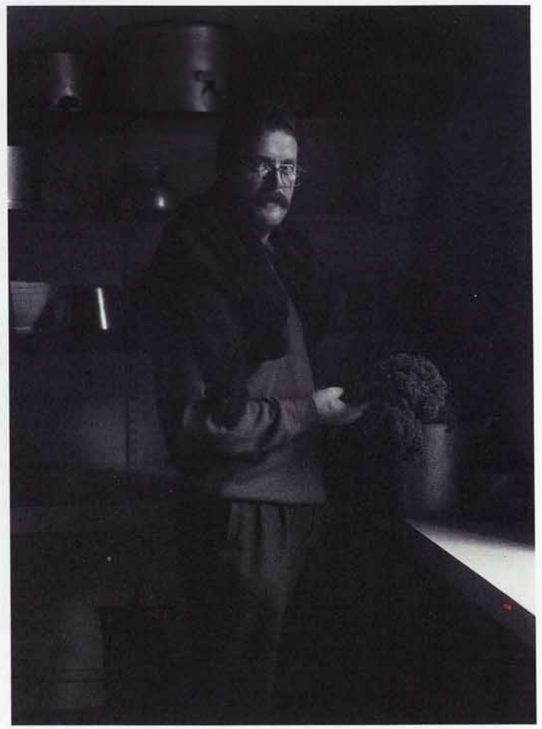
importantly, a memento of family occasions from a previous chapter.

From the beginning photography has had an important role in preserving memory. Francine Dunkley and Catriona Grant examine the family, particularly in relation to memory and the passage of time. Their images are ostensibly reconstructions of the past. In Grant's case, consciously constructed cameos are enacted by her mother and aunt, drawing on their childhood memories, re-interpreted to make fantastical images about childhood and ageing [**148**]. Obliquely they make reference to the role expected by society of older women. Dunkley refers to her own childhood memories, by photographing her child at play. She provides us with metaphorical references to innocence, curiosity, happiness, and to darker moments, where sometimes the memory is well defined and occasionally is blurred to a vague recall of childhood emotion. These apparently unchoreographed photographs simultaneously record her daughter at that time, and invite us to contemplate her future, while being about the artist's past.

Classic documentary is represented by Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert's photo essay on the Calderari gypsies in Romania [**147**]. Here is a photographer working with commitment on a long-term project (he has visited two or three times a year for the last four years), where the primary objective is to convey information about the outside world from a personal perspective. His pictures indicate an intimate involvement with these people, partly suggested by their gaze to his camera: these are not simply stolen voyeuristic glimpses, there has been a contract here.

For anybody who knew Murray Johnston, as a much loved and respected catalyst for Scottish photography in the 1980s, Pradip Malde's fine portrait is also a memento [**149**]. Made with a cumbersome 10 × 8 inch camera, this is consciously considered in terms of its formal composition, lighting, mood and content. However, it has some of the apparent spontaneity of the transient moment caught by the compact camera, because Malde's mode of working is to make these decisions very quickly, reacting in part intuitively to circumstances as they present themselves. He *saw* Murray washing kale, *saw* the formal qualities of the picture, *felt* compelled to collect his camera and tripod and made the image, probably all in the space of five minutes. The result is a portrait of great beauty, rich in enigma and suggestive of humour. Perhaps only at some later stage did the full meaning of the picture become apparent. How appropriate that he should be holding kale, a symbol of humility, for that was one of Murray's endearing qualities. Hence the title *Man with Kale*.

With the growing intellectualistion of art, and especially photography, in our universities and colleges it is unfashionable to talk of intuition, suggestive as it is of mysticism or naivety. The problem is that intuition is impossible to teach and difficult to understand. It is much easier to fall back on the cerebral that can be assessed and quantified from measurable standards of scholarship. And yet as a teacher I am as guilty as any. Students are enjoined to know what



149 **Pradip Malde** Man with Kale (Murray Johnston), 1986

left
150 **Robin Gillanders** William McIlvanney

above
151 **Graham McIndoe** Jack *from the series* For All That's Done, 1990

they are trying to say, what their audience is, what the context is, and what the picture is going to look like, before they take it. Then I wonder why their work is prosaic and passionless!

Yet by its nature photography is the medium that most lends itself to immediate intuitive reaction, intellectual responses taking place at some later time. It is perfectly reasonable to take a photograph and then ask 'What have I done?' or 'What does it mean?' Photographs should be first *experienced* by the viewer and only then deconstructed or analysed. There should be an initial seduction, which can be dismissed as mere infatuation if further consideration reveals nothing more profound. Intuitive and intelligent picture-making demands an intuitive and intelligent audience. The Scottish writer William McIlvanney [**150**] introduces a book of poetry with the following, which could well serve as an axiom for the art of photography: 'It is, of course, an operation to unblock the heart but a tricky one, where you have to go in through the head without getting trapped there.'[4]

Graham McIndoe's pictures of Jack [**151**], a solitary pensioner who had been a drag artist, from the extended series *For All That's Done*, display a sensitive engagement with his subject possible only through a long period of association and investigation. Documentary photography is still accused, even by those who should know better, of attempting objective communication, the simple recording of fact to provide a truthful narrative of a person, place, event or issue. The best of documentary work has always been highly subjective and manipulative, providing a personal truth rather than attempting a universal one. John Szarkowski has suggested in his essay *Mirrors and Windows* that all photographs can be divided between those that principally refer to self and those that explicitly provide a view of the external world. However, as the photography presented here shows, there is no clear division. McIndoe's lyrical series occupies a mid-point in the continuum between mirror and window.[5] Here is proof of photography's power of artistic expression. It represents that deep engagement with life that seems to me to be the essence of the artist.

All the work here considered, and much else in the exhibition, may be described as humanist. That is not to say that the pictures *per se* are humanist but that the value systems underpinning the work are. Perhaps it is appropriate here to attempt a definition in the interests of clarifying a widely misused and misunderstood term.

It is necessary to distinguish between human content, the photography of political polemic, and humanism in photography. Of course, the presence of people in pictures is no guarantee of humanist interest. My passport photograph does not even do me justice as a likeness. The photography that selects objects of human pity or denounces social outrage may have a noble and worthy purpose but, by presenting the photograph as an instrument of information or persuasion, it is concerned to spur the observer to action rather than invite him to pause and ponder. Humanism in photography is not about a specific subject or a style. It is not possible to identify a humanistic photograph by how it looks in the objective sense. As expression, it originates – and in an important sense consists – in the temper of the photographer's perception. We recognise John

Charity as a humanist photographer only by examining a large body of work and, from that, identifying his fundamental motivations and underlying concerns.

Humanism has been accused of sentimentality and has sometimes been associated with woolly-minded, vaguely instinctive compassion.[6] It may in part be instinctive. Some humanist photography *may* be compassionate. But it cannot emerge except from a self-reflective photographer. It is not enough to have a perspective: it is necessary to *know* where one stands and to be capable of compassion as a *conscious* act of imaginative identification.

Quality in photography is the conjunction of intuition, emotion and the intellect. Humanism is a human being's response to his or her social environment driven by strong impulses. It involves not a passive and distanced sympathy but a committed and unpatronising empathy. A broad view will indicate generosity rather than cynicism. Ultimately, humanism in photography is about the individual's life attitudes and value judgements made about the world in reference to her/himself. Does this not sound like at least the start of a working definition for the fine artist? In my view, if photography has any value as a fine art and as a medium that by its nature is realistic, then it must be as an explicit view of the world through the sensibilities of the individual. Humanism and photography as art are inextricable.

At the risk of over-simplification, but in the interest of brevity and clarity, one may describe the foregoing appraisal of photographic art with its emphasis on the integrity of the medium and all its innate strengths and implied weaknesses, as Modernist. Post-Modernism, as applied to photography, may be described as questioning all that, which is laudable but is often manifested in crass dismissal. In its place, borne out of compulsion for innovation, it has given us mixed media from which some good work has come but this is so often just a cheap and gimmicky way to look like an artist. It is hardly new, anyway, since Robert Rauschenberg was working in this vein in the 1950s. The perceived necessity for progressing the medium has meant that 'new' work is produced in ever shorter timescales and 'old' work is just last year's. If one way to advance the medium is to mix it with others, another is to intellectualise it, so that the image becomes less important than the text that accompanies it. Exhibitions then become more interesting for the issues they raise than for the pictures themselves.

Post-Modernism is a notion that is as yet open to varying interpretations. However, from what has been discussed here, one key point suggests itself. It contradicts the principle of autonomy. In technical terms, photography leaks out into other media (and vice versa) and becomes categorically indistinct. It also ceases to bear meaning on its own, but operates in tandem with text. The Post-Modern photograph is just like the ivy: unable to stand by itself.

Perhaps at this point I may end my attempt at dispassionate discussion and express a personal view. As a result of the retreat of our university and college courses into the security of discourses at which academics and intellectuals are adepts, a tendency has emerged to neglect the more testing enquiry – how to function beyond the pale of texts. Images become no more than illustration and are, perforce, banal, functioning only to raise debate over an issue rather than create a dialogue within the work itself. Much of this work explores consumerism and mass communication. Robert Hughes, in the final page of his book *The Shock of the New*, refers to *... the dominance of mass-media imagery – of art which took the effects of mass-media as its given field of enquiry – was reinforced, thus driving art down even further towards the status of a footnote ... Its mark is a helpless scepticism about the very idea of deep engagement between art and life, to abandon one's jealously hoarded 'criticality' as an artist.* Hughes was referring to American painting and sculpture, but how apt for much of photography in Britain today. The worst manifestation of this tendency is for photographers whose main life experience has been of academia, taught by tutors who themselves have known nothing else, to produce work that comments on the medium itself and which, incestuously, only photographers can relate to. Those who regularly go to exhibitions must be weary of the type of introductory blurb which states, 'This work ultimately questions the whole nature of the documentary/traditional-portraiture role of photography as art...'

Scotland has always maintained its tradition of individualism and what may be termed fine art photography, and has managed, so far, to resist the worst excesses of Post-Modernism and 'issue-based' socio-political work, currently so fashionable elsewhere. Partly, this is due to excellent courses in the colleges and universities, that emphasise practical picture-making as an applied art or as a fine art. It is important also to acknowledge the catalytic energies of some tireless individuals who initiated courses and have set up excellent galleries, such as Stills, Portfolio and Street Level. Perhaps an underlying reason, however, has been the stance taken by the Scottish Arts Council. Ironically, while they resisted demands for a separate budget and officer for photography, they applied a policy of reacting to individual requests for funding on the basis of quality. This reactive rather than pro-active approach created a climate where photography has been subsumed into general fine art practice, not subject to the potentially narrow didactic agenda of a photography panel.

This artistic environment has contributed to the robust and healthy state of Scottish photography today. There has over the last ten years been an atmosphere of excitement, energy and adventure in Scotland, generated and exemplified by such singular and prolific talents as Calum Colvin, Thomas Cooper, Owen Logan, Patricia Macdonald, Ron O'Donnell and David Williams, whose work represents a wide variety of styles and subject matter while being born of distinctive engagements with, and attitudes to, life.