

FOREWORD

"I embarked on a project to make the atmosphere visible."

Todd Watts: Pea Field is a presentation of the artist and his work. It joins Watts' *Pea Field*, a series of nine photographs produced in 1994, with the artist's thoughts on subjects ranging from his first camera to northern Maine.

Watts' thought process is sophisticated and best revealed through conversation. I found it necessary then to include not only the *Pea Field* images, but also a word from the artist himself. Being averse to formal explication, Watts had no artist's statement to provide; in fact, he claims never to have written one. The statements I have included are excerpted from an interview conducted to be published here, and are fragments of a much larger conversation.

Watts has done all he can to breathe life into his thoughts. Impressed by these thoughts, I have let them live here.

Jacqueline Maasch
Editor, Interviewer, Friend
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FRAGMENTS SPRING 2010

WATTS ON HIS FIRST CAMERA

In 1972, I was looking forward to graduating from the School of Visual Arts. I was rushing to finish all of my artwork when I was told that I was required to leave slides of my work with the school. I hadn't studied photography and didn't own a camera. Fortunately, a fellow student was trying to sell his Nikon to get money for a road trip. I bought the camera, read the instruction book, and made the necessary pictures.

ON ASPIRATIONS

I can't say that I ever had aspirations – certainly no grand aspirations. I started creating things at a very young age and never stopped. For me, living and making art are completely integrated. My wife, then yet to be, once asked me to describe my art-making life. I flippantly replied that I woke, burned the toast, tied my shoe laces, and made art. She still married me, and then found that that comment was not far from the truth.

Frequently I am asked, "why do you make art?" I do it because I can.

ON PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESSES

I find that black and white silver prints and dye-transfer prints are best suited to my work, to the way I think about pictures. Unfortunately dye-transfer materials are no longer readily available. I find that the archival inkjet print has many advantages over dye-transfer, so for some time I have been printing my color images on a large format inkjet printer.

Important images may be undermined by poor equipment and materials, but poor images cannot be redeemed by technique. There are extraordinary photographs made with the best equipment and printed using the finest materials, but there are also brilliant images produced using copy machines.

ON DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

I began exploring digital imagery in 1972 – I think that was before DOS – with a friend who was a computer scientist and had access to minicomputers. It required a lot of code writing, which he did, and the output was on Polaroid film. It was very primitive. It has been interesting watching and dabbling as the technology has progressed, but for me digital photography has only recently become part of my work, and then only digital printing.

For a medium to be useful in making fine art, it must have the flexibility to accommodate creative ideas. It is clear that digital photography will increasingly replace analog photography. That isn't to say that analog photography will disappear – painters still use oil paint – but digital printing has already matched and in some ways surpassed analog printing in clarity and flexibility. I don't use digital cameras as they are still in an early stage of development. But when you consider that the Hubble Telescope is essentially a digital camera, it is clearly just a matter of time before digital cameras match the qualities of their analog precursors.

The only drawback I find with digital printing is that it is too good. The results tend to lack "hand," which is a natural part of all analog photographic processes. I find that I have to undermine the digital process to allow my imperfections.

ON THOUGHT PROCESSES

The mind is both linear and nonlinear. We constantly absorb a stream of sensations that we unconsciously analyze and compare to our conscious experience. If all of the sensations rationally agree with what we are experiencing consciously we feel a comfortable sense of self in place. If they don't agree we can find ourselves in a state of anxiety.

Creative individuals seem more able to absorb and use, if not revel in, apparently conflictual information, and find connections that lead to discoveries. I assume it is a genetic trait because I have no other way to explain it. I do know that it is impossible for me to make art rationally.

ON THE PEA FIELD SERIES

My work usually starts with a question. The nine pictures in this book are a good example. The original negative is of a farmer's field of peas. Many years after I made that negative, I was watching the sun set over Hoboken from Manhattan when I began wondering about the changes we humans were making to the atmosphere. I was living in New York at the time, and looking up, the sky looked just fine – but I was told that it had changed and it smelled like it had changed. I wanted to know how I would react to something familiar, like the pea field, if the changes happening to the environment were apparent.

I embarked on a project to make those changes visible. The eight other planets in our solar system have distinct atmospheres, so I imagined what the pea field would look like in those atmospheres and created these pictures.

These works also address another question of perception. Photographs from space of Earth are not often made from a point of view showing a vertical axis and a horizontal horizon. On Earth, many photographs are made with the camera tilted, intentionally or by accident, showing the horizon at an angle, and we have no difficulty deciphering these images. However, without the intervention of a camera, we see the horizon as horizontal. If we lay on our side on the beach, parallel to the horizon, logically the horizon should look vertical – but it doesn't. Clearly perceptual limitations evolved along with everything else. The *Pea Field* pictures are subtitled "You just have to Decide about the Color and the Alignment." To do this we may have to deny parts of our evolution.

ON NEW YORK

New York, my hometown, is a fabulous city that for a long time was considered the center of the art world. It remains a cultural epicenter, but the city has become difficult for artists, particularly young artists. The primary issue is money; artists thrive in places where there is space to live and work for a reasonable price. These kinds of places attract artists, and creative communities form. New York's SoHo district is a good example of this evolution. I lived in that community for a long time. In 1972, large industrial space was available for little money, but living became increasingly expensive. Many artists moved away and young artists could not move in, so the creative community collapsed.

ON MAINE

I first came to Maine in 1974 to print and produce a portfolio of Berenice Abbott's images for the Witkin Gallery in New York. I spent several months printing in Abbott's studio. At the end of the project, on a whim, I bought the house next door. For years I traveled to Maine from New York for a dose of reality. In 1999, when I was one of the few artists left in SoHo, I moved permanently to Maine.

Maine has a thriving creative community. Artists have migrated to Maine to work and to live for more than a century. It is a state that is generally supportive to artists, and space is readily available. To me Maine feels artful, but I can't explain why.

I stay in touch with the international art world through the internet. An interesting aside is that my wife Jemma Gascoine, who is also an artist, and I now have more visitors from around the world than we did in New York, though they mostly arrive in the summer.

ON ART EDUCATION

I taught for seven years. In hindsight, it was a thoroughly delightful experience, though I am not sure that I felt it was that delightful at the time. Art school provides a place for people to exchange histories and create futures. I think this exchange is critically important and difficult to organize when you are no longer in school and working as a professional. Schools also supply space and equipment to make work, another difficult thing to organize when you are on your own.

I originally started teaching for the money (not that it was much), but I quickly discovered that teaching art was much like making art. When I exhibit my work I am essentially asking for conversation. I bring all of me as an object and the viewers bring all of themselves. If they are interested, we have a chat in time, but it is their time. Teaching is a dialogue in continuous time, often with twenty or so unique individuals. I bring all of me; they all of them. I point out what they may be missing, and they do the same for me.

Visual art is a language that probably began about the same time as the grunt, and although we keep talking about it, visual art remains non-verbal. In art school you can grunt a lot and still express complicated art ideas with pictures and objects. I grew up on the edge of the South Bronx where there was lots of grunting. On my first day attending art school a fellow student said to me, "Let's get coffee, they've got Brubeck on the jukebox... I'll show you my sketchbook." I felt finally at home.

I do question aspects of formal art education as it is currently practiced in most universities. It seems to me that there is an important component of art education missing, and that is exposure to the day-to-day lives of working artists. There are many important aspects of art to learn in school, but it is also important to learn how to be an artist – or, more accurately, how to feel an artist.

ON CURATING A PUBLIC ART SPACE

There was an abandoned freight elevator in the building where I had my studio in New York. The bottom of the shaft opened directly onto West Broadway in SoHo at number 410A. I acquired the space to use for storage. It was eight feet square and fourteen feet high. In 1990, Nina Chernik, who worked with me, suggested that it might make an interesting gallery. So we renovated the space and installed an eight foot wide glass door and proceeded to have exhibitions. As the space was small, the artists could completely change the environment to suit their work. It was sometimes art in an installation, other times art with an installation and occasionally installation art. The exhibitions could only be seen through the glass door, so there was no need for an attendant and the shows could be viewed by the public anytime. In all, over a three year period, there were thirty consecutive exhibitions. The experience left me with a profound respect for exhibition curators.

410A Exhibitions presented art directly to the public. It was a public service for those who felt served. Clearly, public art includes more than plinths supporting generals on horses. To me, if it is art and available free to the public, it is public art. That includes architecture and literature and dancing in the street.

ON PRINTING AND PUBLISHING ORIGINAL ARTWORKS

Artists have been working with printers since the beginning of printing.

Usually, it is a collaboration between a publisher, a printer, and an artist. The publisher funds the project; the printer supplies technical expertise; the artist supplies the images. Of course, there are endless variations of this structure. The printer's job is to best realize the artist's vision. This is done through a great deal of experimentation with the combined involvement of the printer and the artist. The publisher supplies the production costs, pays the printer and the artist, and distributes the finished work.

I have been an artist working with a printer and publisher, a printer working with an artist and publisher, a publisher/printer working with an artist, and an artist/printer working with a publisher.

ON SCULPTURE

Of all mediums I find photography and sculpture the most closely related.

When I began studying art, probably before that, I found myself drawn to three-dimensional objects. In school I studied drawing and painting, but eventually I found myself helping out in sculptors' studios and taking classes in the sculpture department. I graduated from that department and first exhibited as a sculptor. At that time, artists were making large minimalist works installed in the environment. I saw many outstanding works, but I found that for me the surrounding environment often carried more intriguing information than the artwork.

Sculpture relates to its environment and that environment can become a limiting factor. It is hard to compete with a thunderstorm. I guess I wanted to work with all of nature and felt that I couldn't with sculpture. It is a problem of scale. I had to move place from the physical world into the viewers' world and create storms there. For me, photography is the best laboratory for that experiment.

ON FILMMAKING

Photography and filmmaking both use cameras but just about everything else is different. We go into a dark box to watch a film and a lit gallery to view a picture. If a photographer wants movement in a picture, it must be expressed in one frame and stimulated in the mind of the viewer. If a photographer wants a blood curdling scream, it must also come from the viewer.

I have enjoyed working with film, but every medium requires commitment. Making films is a life. A filmmaker's life is not a photographer's life.

ON PORTRAITURE

It is not a good way to make friends.

ON DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

There are countless brilliant documentary images in the history of photography, but when viewing them I feel transported to another place, and referring to the content I use the past tense. I strive to achieve works that always remain in the present tense, where the work is the place and the viewer is the time.

ON ART

Some thirty thousand years ago, probably more, we started making visual art. Most of these original artists were probably just a few women, and they started a new language. Though it is likely that visual art was our first recorded language, there were probably other creative languages that began around the same time. Music and dance come to mind, and probably science. Creative people have been adding to and modifying these languages ever since. Recently, I had the chance to flip through the book *30,000 Years of Art* (Phaidon). I was surprised to find that although the images were made by individuals from unique cultures, none of the work seemed alien to me. I easily understood the art message in each piece – more like lesson than message – because every artist sends their discoveries forward for future artists to use.

Our society, many societies, build edifices to house and protect art at great expense. Why? The answer may be found in the language itself. We make art only for ourselves. Taken as a totality, the language of art it is an ongoing analysis of who we are, our investigation to understand consciousness. It is our collective identity.