

# FLYING VISIT

Bill Jay is a controversial figure in photography — once enfant terrible, now perhaps eminence grise. Rob Powell finds out.

**F**OR A whole generation of British photographers, young and now not-so-young, Bill Jay needs no introduction. No single figure is so inextricably linked with the crucial years of the late sixties and early seventies which saw the beginnings of a new self-awareness in British photography and of a new awareness, in Britain, of the medium of photography as a whole. First editor of *Creative Camera*, co-founder of the short-lived but influential magazine *Album*, and pioneer campaigner for the acceptance of photography as the most vital and significant of contemporary arts, his name is still capable of evoking strong and contrary reactions. He is certainly something of a mythical figure in certain circles—a status which, if anything, was enhanced by his sudden departure, in 1972, for America, where he has lived ever since. Distant heroes are always the best.

Bill Jay is currently Associate Professor of Art History at Arizona State University. Irreverent and vociferous, he is something of a controversial figure in American photography as well. A prolific speaker and writer, he is engaged in long-term research into nineteenth-century photography which, by any standards but his own, would seem prodigious. He frequently shares the fruits of this research in somewhat off-beat articles in this magazine and in lectures which — judging from the two I heard in Cardiff and Newport — are remarkable in the sheer intellectual excitement they transmit and in his ability to both focus on intricate detail and maintain overall perspective about photography's relation to the world at large.

This theme, that photographers, and artists, have an ultimate social responsibility, is central to his thought, and is at the core of his rage against certain elements of contemporary American photography. He is a complex figure ... a moralist profoundly disturbed by what he sees as the amorality of modern culture; an altruistic egotist who is the scourge of egotism in current art and art photography; a missionary crying out in the wilderness, self-penned Bible in one hand, sense of humour in the other.

Jay visited Britain for a few weeks in May last year to do a spot of teaching at Gwent College of Higher Education and to deliver two lectures as part of an ongoing series organised by the Ffotogallery, Cardiff. (He's back in England again this month to talk about his alternative view of photography.) I found him a most unmythical figure, affable and unpretentious, youthful despite the greying hair and beard, an animated but relaxed conversationalist with a refreshingly wide range of reference. He was anxious to debunk his own importance to British photography, and found it somewhat curious to be asked about his own background. Nevertheless, that's where we began.

*HP: Bill, let's start with a more personal question. What is your own background? Where did your interest in photography start?*

*BJ:* Oh! I've never talked about that before! I didn't have any training in photography ... in fact, at first I had no interest in photography whatsoever. When I left grammar school I wanted to be a soil agronomist. I was brought up in Maidenhead, Berkshire, so I went to the local agricultural research station at Hurley. My plan was to learn about agriculture and to go to underdeveloped countries to help them with their agricultural problems. While I was there my boss was asked to give a lecture tour of Scandinavia and he had the brilliant idea of illustrating

his lectures with slides, which was not at all common. The journals in those days were full of statistics but no visuals at all.

So as I was the most junior of the juniors at the place, he gave me a camera and told me to photograph our experiments. I didn't know anything about photography, so it was fascinating and full of problems — like how to photograph the nodules on a clover root!

Well then other people at the centre asked me to do pictures for them. They set me up in a little darkroom and sent me to Art College one day a week, to learn about photography. Well after a year of that the head of the department at the college asked if I'd like to come full-time, if he could get me a grant. This was in 1959 or so — very early days in photographic education. There were, in fact, only five students doing the course, which illustrates the state of affairs then.

I spent a year there, learning very basic things... making our own emulsions, using densitometers, learning 19th century processes ... And in fact we never saw any pictures at all by other photographers. In the two years I was there I never saw a photograph by Cartier-Bresson or Brandt or anyone else.

At that point I still intended to go back to research. But then I got a summer job at *Practical Photography* magazine under Alex Surgenor, who was a very strange man but a wonderful editor. I went in as an office boy, and he had me writing Readers' Letters, because we weren't getting enough. Then I started writing captions and after a while he brought me into his office and said 'Look, you've been smelling printer's ink for a few weeks. This means you're ready to leave and never want to work for a magazine again, or it's got in your blood and you'll never want to leave. Which is it?'

So I stayed on and started writing for them. And within three or four years I was writing a good amount of the copy in *Practical Photography* and its then sister weekly called *Photonews Weekly*. Well, I was then made Features Editor.

I think that Alex Surgenor is really one of the under-recognised important figures in British photography. He wasn't a photographer, or a particularly good writer, but he had an uncanny ability of picking young people and training them very rigorously. And people trained by him made their mark. For example, there was Dennis Taylor, John Tidy, Brian Fretton, Alex Fry, Jim Hall, George Hughes, Bryn Campbell, Robert Scott, Martin Hodder...

*How did Creative Camera get started? How did you get involved in that?*

I used to write small pieces for other magazines as well as *Practical Photography*, and one of them was called *Camera Owner*. It was edited by Jurgen Schadeberg, the South African photographer. And he had left because he said the magazine was folding. So I went to see the publisher and he said yes, it's folding. So I said 'I'd like to edit it, but I don't have any money.' Well, the next person to come into the office was Colin Osman, and he said 'Well I'm a publisher, I've got *Racing Pigeon* magazine; you be editor and I'll be publisher and we'll do it together!' This was 1966 or 1967. It was just a chance encounter in a publisher's office. I remember walking back to Doughty Street, you know... and that was the start of our collaboration. After about a year we changed *Camera Owner* to *Creative Camera* and on we went.

*How long did the collaboration last?*

Something like two years. In the end, to cut a long story short, our paths diverged ... primarily for *editorial* reasons. I saw the magazine going in a different direction from what he did. And he was the publisher with the money, while I was doing what I wanted to do and getting all the credit and the kudos. We parted ways with some bad grace, I must admit. Because I had gone to New York, on my own money, and got the work of Winogrand, Friedlander, Arbus, Weegee, Frank, to use in the magazine, and as soon as I'd got back, when I'd gotten about six issues in hand, he said, in effect: 'Well I no longer want you. I'd rather have more editorial influence myself.' So yes, there was some bad grace. But it's better now, things have mellowed a bit!

*What was different about Creative Camera from the other magazines, and what were you consciously trying to make of it?*

Well, for me it was a very personal thing — and in this Colin Osman is absolutely right, that in a way I was being very selfish. I was beginning to learn about whole areas of photography that I didn't understand yet which I knew, in some subconscious way, were important.

*For example?*

For example, the work of David Hurn. I'd seen some of his photographs and didn't understand them, but I believed they had a strength and potency. So I went to see him, did an interview, got some pictures and published them in the magazine. It was a way of me *learning* about photography.

And the same with Bill Brandt. When *Perspectives of Nudes* came out and I was on *Practical Photography* magazine, *no one* would review it, because they said that he was a con-man, these are *awful* pictures ...

*That's interesting, considering the response Brandt is getting now, even in the non-photographic press.*

Exactly. But when that book first came out there wasn't a single photographic publication that gave it a good review. In fact, at *Popular Photography* [in the USA] they gave every one of their editors a copy of it, and they all reviewed it, and all castigated it, they just thought this con-man had no idea how to make pictures. And the same happened at *Practical Photography* in this country ...

Well I just couldn't believe that. I didn't understand them, but I could feel this power in them that certainly wasn't the work of a con-man. So I reviewed it.

At the same time I was calling up any photographer who had a reputation in the medium and saying 'I don't understand your pictures but I'd like to meet you so you can explain them to me'. And not a single one refused. So I was meeting all the giants in photography at that time. And I was learning a great deal from them. At the same time I was earning my living on the side by talking at camera clubs—about five or six a week, travelling all over the country, at £7 a shot! Just talking about photography and showing them the work of contemporary Americans, which just hadn't been seen in this country.

*How were you received?*

In general, remarkably well. I had a few bad experiences. One time I drove up to a tiny fishing village in Scotland and got to a Temperance Hall with a tin roof where about 20 villagers were there in overcoats and mufflers, you know, glowering at me. And I was showing them the work of Friedlander and Winogrand and Weegee! Then I showed them this Ilford publicity picture of a kitten in a teacup, as an example of the kind of stuff we had to get away from. And one man stood up and said 'That's the only decent picture you've shown us all night!' And they all got up and walked out! So all I could do was drive back to London!

So I was editing *Creative Camera* when I got home of an



Bill Jay Photo Hob Powell

evening, or on the road in hotels, or wherever. I worked for a while for Globe Photos picture agency, then I went to the *Telegraph Magazine* as their picture editor. That was the worst year of my life. I idealistically thought I could have some effect on the pictures they used, but of course I had none. One day I just cleared my desk and walked out.

Then I got thrown out of *Creative Camera* as well, and so I decided to start *Album*, the magazine I really wanted *Creative Camera* to be.

*Can we just pause for a moment with Creative Camera and talk once again about its sign/cance?*

I think that what it did in those times was act as a rallying point for young photographers. They had felt that society was paying them no attention, and here was a magazine that spoke with their own voice. And the *Creative Camera* offices became the focal point for a new energy in the medium. That wasn't my intention, but it happened. I've been given a lot of credit for it all, but I don't like that because really I saw myself as *part* of what was going on rather than as a leader of it.

*Did you model the magazine on any other publications?*

No, I just tried to imagine the magazine that would subscribe to and tried to create it. I never imagined people would ever look back on those days and see it as the start of a new movement in photography. That didn't happen until after I'd left England ...

*Let's move on to Album.*

Again by chance, I met Tristram Powell — son of the novelist Anthony Powell — and he said that he had a little spare money that he'd like to put into a high quality photographic publication. It was a fixed amount—£40001 think—and he said that when it was gone, that would be it. This was 1969-1970 ... I'm sorry, I'm a bit vague on dates ... And there was an accountant with Colin Osman's organisation called Aidan Ellis, so the three of us started *Album*.

Again my policy was to create a magazine I myself would want to subscribe to — this was the only editorial policy I ever had! And lots of activities grew up around it, as had happened with *Creative Camera*. We started a little gallery in conjunction with a woman who had a shopfront up the Princedale Road called the Do Not Bend Gallery, which I think was the first photographic gallery in London. It wasn't very successful.

I went to the Institute of Contemporary Arts over many months, trying to get them to put on photography as it was the most important 'contemporary art'. But no way was I going to get in. So eventually I went and banged on the door of Lord Goodman, the Minister of Arts at the time, and I said to him 'Tm mad! I'm real angry about photography not being considered an art in this country' and I gave him this real hard-line attack. And he sat there sort of nodding his jowls, you know, and he pressed some intercom buttons and some aides came scurrying in, notebooks at the ready, and he said to me 'Right. Say it all again!'

So I again went to the ICA and was in as Photography Director! Well there was no money. They gave me a store-room which I had to clear out, and I built all the benches myself and hustled back-projection equipment from Kodak and so on. It was a very intense time.

Anyway, when it opened we invited 60 people to an opening, and half an hour before the doors opened we had 300 people waiting! It was a great success.

*This suggests a significant undercurrent, a demand for this sort of approach to photography. What was the reaction from the photographic establishment and in general?*

Looking back, I felt like a front-line soldier constantly being shot at. I got flak from everywhere, from friends, readers, the photographic establishment, the RPS, from the ICA. I mean, I was thrown out of there eventually too, because, you know, photography was getting much too popular. In the end we'd

taken over two-thirds of the gallery space, and our weekly lectures were attracting 200 people!

It was *too* popular, you see. These were rich dilettantes, these were in a social class I didn't belong to. They didn't want photography there, it wasn't a fine art to them. They didn't like my aggressive attitude.

And the RPS told me they were worried about declining membership, and I said 'Of course it's declining! The old people are dying off and no young people are attracted to you!' So I offered to help and we had meetings at the RPS, wildly successful, packed. Then Kenneth Warr, the secretary, told me to cancel the next meeting! And I said 'What's the problem?' and he said 'Well, our members are complaining because there's a lot of long-haired yobs cluttering up the corridors.' Those were his words— long-haired yobs! So, of course, we got thrown out and never got back in again ...

Now that sort of fighting, day in, day out, was what it was like. It was very draining. I went bankrupt twice, had to bail myself out of jail once!

It was only David Hum's intervention — offering to share his office with us — that saved *Album*, and enabled it to go on a bit longer.

Eventually, things were getting fairly harrowing for me, on a personal level as well as anything else, and it was at this moment that Van Deren Coke came over from New Mexico, and one day he said 'Everything is folding around you. Why don't you come to University of New Mexico for a year, study, recharge your batteries, and then come back and carry on?' So I said 'Right. You get me in and I'll come!'

*Was Album still going or had it folded by then? How long did you keep it going?*

No it had just folded. It went for twelve issues — about a year. I'd made some mistakes, but even in the end it was a close thing. We were just holding our own, just beginning to get enough subscriptions in, when suddenly our printers asked for three months' payment. Well, that wiped us out. But if we could have kept going for another three or four months *Album* would still be going today. We came that close. Now, of course, copies go in the States for \$60 a copy!

As I've said, we had no notion at the time that what we were doing was in anyway historic. There was simply nothing going on in photography, and it just seemed that anything that I wanted to happen in photography, I had to do myself. But I remember that, one time, the *New York Times* published an article about *Album* and said we were 'revolutionary'. And when we saw it we all just burst out laughing. We just thought it was absurd!

*Do you think that what was happening in photography was part of what was happening in other ways at the time... the whole sixties phenomenon ? Or could it have happened at any time?*

I guess I'm a bit close to it to say. I do remember that *Oz* was in the office below us in Princedale Road, and *Time Out* was on the floor above us, just starting out! But no, I think it could have happened at any time.

I think there's a lot of myth-making that goes on about it. We were just people who were anxious about the medium of photography, anxious to see it thrive. I think that I was the right person in the right place at the right time, and that pressure of circumstance forced me into that position and any other person in that position would have done the same.

*So you left England in 1972. Why?*

I was frustrated, angry, fairly exhausted, and depressed about *Album*. And then, months after our first talk, I got a telegram from Van Deren Coke saying 'If you're going to come, come instantly.' Well I had a lot of trouble deciding, but eventually I sold everything up and went.

TO BE CONCLUDED

# FLYING VISIT

Rob Powell concludes his interview

with Bill Jay, now resident in America

*iJOW did you find things in America, compared with Britain?*

# 1 It quickly became apparent that the war I'd been fighting in England had in fact already been won in America. Again the analogy of the front-line soldier, fighting for seven years and then told that the war was over, to go home and relax. I suddenly had enormous time to think and read and reflect.

I can remember that when I first walked onto the campus I went to the very beautiful art museum they have, and there, on the walls, were photographs, side by side with paintings, and I just couldn't believe it. I kept thinking some artist or the Director would come up and say 'Oh! We can't have photographs here!' I just found it incredibly difficult to believe that everyone was enthusiastic about photography.

*You started as a student. What happened then?*

Well I was still intending to return to England after a year. But I thought I might as well stay one more year and get a degree. So I stayed on and got my MA. Then I thought I might as well do a dissertation and get my terminal degree. Meanwhile, Arizona State University advertised for someone to establish a photography programme there. I was encouraged to apply, and I got the job. So I went there because it was a new challenge. Well one year led to another; there was a great deal to do. And as they hired more staff, administrative duties were taken from me and I had more time writing and doing my own research. And each year I had to do less and less teaching — I do two classes now, six hours a week.

What was wonderful was that the university not only enabled me to carry on with my own work but actively *encouraged* me to research and write and attend conferences and so on. It is an incredible attitude, and it certainly never would have happened in England!

*Can you give some idea of what kind of courses are available to students at Arizona?*

The students not only have the opportunity of doing the normal photography course from Beginning to Advanced, but also can take a lot of specialised courses in technical areas ... the use of non-silver and obsolete 19th century processing, in gallery management, in criticism, and a whole range of activities that expand their job possibilities. And the staff comes from all parts of the photographic spectrum of opinion—we argue a lot — so the students can always find someone who sympathises with their point of view, no matter what it is!

*You said that there are 300 photography 'majors' at the University. Do they find jobs?*

Only a small percentage do. But only a small percentage *want* to follow it up in that way. There's a different ethic involved over there ... almost the ethic of the Liberal Education. What we are doing is training people to be more sophisticated *viewers* and *consumers* of photographs rather than necessarily turning out people who will enter the medium in any professional capacity.

*You've described America after your struggles in England almost in terms of a Promised Land. Yet evidently this point of view soured somewhat. In two July issues of the British Journal of Photography of 1980 you published a long article that amounts to a polemic against certain aspects of American photography. Among other things, you described it as incestuous, dominated by the money motive and by galleries.*

*prone to 'intellectual fascism', and full of 'critical gobbledygook'. How did you arrive at that view, and do you still stand by it?*

Oh yes, absolutely. In fact, everything that's happened since has confirmed it. But I do want to make very clear, as I did in the article itself, that I think that American photography is very energetic and alive and rewarding. I just wanted to say that so far the negative aspects hadn't come to Britain, and that hopefully photographers here would learn by the mistakes.

*Yet the 'ten commandments' at the end of the article seem somewhat tongue-in-cheek, almost facetious. Do you really think that the negative aspects can be avoided? Aren't they simply an inevitable result of the acceptance of photography as a fine art and as a saleable commodity?*

Well, I would *hope* that the problems could be avoided here, but, yes, I don't see how they can be avoided, because the problems I outlined that are associated with the status of photography do automatically bring with them these problems.

*The article seemed almost as much a rage against attitudes in contemporary art as against photography.*

Yes, I am very concerned — and angry — that Art has changed its function. It seems to me very clear that up until very recently in the history of Art, paintings, for example, have been used as spiritual reinforcers, that they've been a kind of moral vanguard for a culture, used as focal points for the elevation of public spirit. And I'm very concerned that Art in general, and art photography in particular, is merely reflecting current cultural norms, and if those norms are low — full of banality, and depression, and defeatism—then that is what will be reflected. Well I don't think we need art that merely does this. I would like to see art that *transforms* the human spirit, and acts as those potent catalysts for a higher state of consciousness. And I think that almost all artists have abdicated this role... poets, writers, film-makers, TV producers, the whole range. I would like to see the return of the artist as a moral leader, as hero.

*How was the article received, particularly in America? And how are you perceived in general by your peers and colleagues?*

Well, I was very surprised — and amused in some ways — at the reaction to that article, which was several times longer than the article itself. It was republished in *Printletter* in Switzerland, then in Spain, France, Germany, Sweden, Israel, then in America. Usually I feel that the articles I write are being dropped into a bottomless pit — no reaction at all. Yet this one seemed to hit a nerve.

I think that American photographers are beginning to become aware of the problems their medium has created. But my peers — the people I respect and work with every day — tend to react to my writings with an embarrassed silence. I'm a sort of *persona non grata*.

*Have you kept in touch with British photography?*

Yes, I come over every year for a couple of months and I do travel around to galleries to see what's going on, and see photographers. But inevitably I tend to keep in touch with people I was close to before I left, and they keep me informed. But I certainly wouldn't claim to have any authoritative comprehensive knowledge ...

*But from a distance, have you noticed any major changes?*

Welt, a disturbing change is that twelve years ago I felt there was a communal support system within the photographic community, regardless of where people came from or thought. A sense of all working towards the same end, and a generous spirit that prevailed. By contrast, today, I feel a lot of energy that is fragmented around the country, and unfortunately those small groups tend to be warring against each other. There are still problems ahead for British photography, and by combining their energies and working on a common front photography would leap ahead faster and more efficiently.

*You've expressed the belief that where American photography is, British photography will follow. Do you still think that? Don't you think there are cultural differences, or even that the economic situation will be a significant mitigating factor?*

Oh yes, I think all the little signs and signals are that British photography is heading in the American direction. For instance, the photographers I meet are now anxious to sell prints, at relatively high prices. This would have been unthinkable ten or twelve years ago. Then, a photographer would have aimed for, say, a picture on the front of the *Daily Mirror* where it would get to five million people. Now, I suspect, they would want an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, and a monograph of their work.

It's true that it won't be comparable in terms of the excesses of money available in America. But the thing is that once photographers start thinking in this direction, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy syndrome that comes into effect...

Culturally, naturally it will be adapted and moulded to British as opposed to American experience. But I still feel that with the rise of galleries, the rise of publications by British photographers, the interest in the single print sales syndrome... that the broad goal is the same.

*Is this good or bad?*

I think it's inevitable. I mean, I'm *disturbed* by it simply because ten years ago I felt that if I worked hard enough and long enough I could embrace the medium of photography in Britain with outstretched arms, that I would begin to understand how it worked. Now even the world of 'serious' or 'art' photography has become extremely fragmented. It's too much for one person to embrace.

*Isn't diversity a good thing?*

Oh yes, it's just that I find it *personally* frustrating!

*You've spoken of photography, in America, being separated from the everyday world. What do you mean?*

Primarily I'm thinking of art photography, which tends to transfer the emphasis from the subject matter to the photographer. As Tom Wolfe said, there's a 'Me Generation'... a kind of self-indulgence among photographers that produces self-indulgent work. Now a photographer who uses 'self-expression' as his prime purpose can only make banal images if that 'self' is also banal. Now I personally feel that photography has a much more important cultural, social, historical, political function than that. I think photography is an extraordinary medium in that at the same time that it's addressing social issues, that is outside reality, it *automatically* is inculcated with the spirit of the photographer. Single works can be very useful for Man to understand Man, but the body of work of a photographer, over a long period of time, that's been done with commitment, will eventually reveal a spiritual search — and I make no apologies for that term. I can't think of any other medium in which those two functions go so harmoniously together.

*Let's pause on that. You've written that 'photography is different from other media to the degree in which meaning only*

*emerges from a large body of work. Can you expand on that?*

Yes, I'll give you an example. If you took a photograph that Paul Strand made of a lathe in 1923 it would look *no different* from countless other prosaic commercial photographs of lathes that were used to illustrate technical journals. And I doubt if any critic or expert would be able to say which one was Paul Strand's. But does this mean that Paul Strand was no better than any of those other photographers? No, because if you put that photograph in the context of the body of his work you would then see how it was part of his struggle towards clarity of vision.

I'm very uninterested in the notion of psychiatry, of discovery of self through self-analysis. Photographers have a unique capacity for self-discovery without dwelling on every twinge in their emotions and every rattle in their mental machinery.

*Why?*

Because the camera by definition needs reality in front of the camera, and in a sense the photographer is always looking outwards.

*Can we return for a minute to photographic education? It seems to me that some of the attitudes prevalent in American photography that you attack are the result of the encouragement of those attitudes in educational institutions. So isn't it possible that the antidote lies at the point of education?*

Yes, that *is* one way that Britain could avoid the pitfalls. The vast majority of photography teachers in America have come up through a university education and gone straight into teaching. So all they can do is propagate those same ideas.

If I were organising a photographic school here, what I would do is ask how many staff members I could have and then not hire them but instead use their salaries to hire the very best professionals to come in and talk to the students for intensive month-long sessions, so the students would have a wider range of options. And what they heard about photography would come from the best practitioners, not from failed professionals who can't do anything else but teach and not from artists who know nothing other than the systems they themselves have been nurtured in.

*Bill, let's get this straight. Are you against photography being taken as a fine art?*

No, I'm not. You know, I think Don McCullin, for instance, is one of the most extraordinary photographers in the history of photography, not only because of single pictures of his in magazines and so on, but because the body of work, though paradoxically about horror, is an extremely elevating one.

In photography we've got our critical attitudes completely wrong. What we do is look at the appearance of a photograph and categorise it. . . Journalism, Fine Art, Industrial, and so on. What we should really be doing is looking at the *motive* of the photographer and looking for the *spirit* there,

I have no objection to photography being taken for a fine art, it's just that the vast majority of 'artist-photographers' are *appallingly bad* by any standards I'd care to apply to photography. I am not against an art photographer like Robert Henecken, for example, who works extremely hard, who is extremely energetic, who is constantly exploring his medium, himself, and the relationship of his art to the medium at large and society at large, and constantly reverberating between the two. That kind of commitment *inevitably* produces a body of work that is important. But the fact is that most art photographers do not have that commitment, that hard work. And the work is shallow, slick, full of stylistic pyrotechnics without any underlying human spirit. They're like someone who buys a Porsche and then sits in the driveway revving the engine and pretending they're getting anywhere.

*Would you care to name names?*

I could .. but I'm afraid we'd be here all day!

But I would like to say that there *are* standards, that I'm not just being personal. For instance, I admired Gary Winogrand immensely as a photographer — he was one of the most significant photographers of his generation. Yet I *hate* his pictures because I do not share the life-attitude expressed by them, which is one of aggression, antagonism, and alienation. So I say that he was good, but I don't like his work. But the vast majority of art photographers have nothing to say *at all!*

*Although your name is completely associated with photography, I get the feeling that photography is not the be-all and end-all for you, that your real concern is elsewhere...*

Well yes. Basically I'm not very interested in photography at all. Although I've been involved in it for twenty years now, the purpose of that — though it sounds pompous — is to become actually what I am potentially. And photography just happens to be the medium I've used in this personal quest.

When someone tells me that they're 'committed to photography' I get a slight shudder, because it seems to me to be a very silly thing to have as the purpose of your life. Photographers tend to get totally wrapped up in the medium. Making photographs, and certainly taking art photography too seriously, is really such a trivial activity. I think it's important to step back and keep perspective.

Obviously when I talk about photography I talk very intensively, because I do care for it. But it *is* merely a tool. You don't love a screwdriver, you appreciate it for what it can do. Well that's exactly the way that I look at photography.

*Nevertheless, you continued to explore the medium — and in particular its history — meticulously. I understand you're engaged in a rather daunting project of reading. Would you like to describe it?*

Yes. About fifteen years ago, when I first got interested in the history of photography, I read the standard works — Beaumont Newhall, Helmut Gernsheim, and so on — cover to cover, and I still wasn't satisfied. So I made the decision to read every article on photography in the English language in the 19th and early 20th centuries. So I'd take a magazine like the *British Journal of Photography*, for instance, and, starting with Number 1, Volume 1, read every page right up to about 1910. Then I'd go onto another journal, and start again. I reckon that at the present rate I have another 20 years' reading ahead!

The main function of this is that I am learning about the history of photography from *the inside out*, and I'm finding that it's a very different sort of history than historians or critics have told us.

*In what way?*

Well, historians have a way of looking back and finding information that confirms their preconceptions. But the photographic journals give a very different picture. For instance, according to Beaumont Newhall's book, the major concern in the 1880s was whether photography was an art. But when you read the journals of that time, the vast majority of photographers couldn't give a damn about that. There are ten times as many column inches about spirit photography, for instance, than about photography as an art. But spirit photography isn't mentioned *at all!* in the textbooks!

As for names of individuals, I once took one volume of a 19th century periodical and listed all the names that appeared in it. I then chose the ten that had been mentioned most often. It's very crude of course ... but of the top ten, only two were ever mentioned in the textbooks. You know, in the 1880s in England, for example, when Robinson, Rejlander, Emerson, Stone, Bedford, Frith, were all working, the most famous photographer by far was Francis Galton—an anthropologist who did 'combination' portraits and who no one now has ever heard of!

*The kind of thing you are finding out would seem to call for a new and revised history of photography — a kind of 'Photography— The Real Story'. Do you have any plans to write such an account?*

Yes, I would really like to write a history 'from the inside out' so to speak. But, I've lots of other projects too.

*Some of these projects — like your research into photography and the paranormal— would seem somewhat tangential. Isn't there a danger of them distracting you from a more seminal work?*

That question presumes that I want or need a 'reputation' or want status in the medium. But both as regards my role in the late '60s or my role now. I'm *totally uninterested in* a reputation, or status, or being famous, or doing something 'important'. I'm engaged in my own personal search and that's all that's important to me. If anyone else is interested in that, or what I write, well that's jam on the bread and butter — I love to share what I learn — but that's not of primary concern to me.

*Bill, have you abandoned Britain for good?*

No, I've a very comfortable existence in America, but I could give it up tomorrow. If I could find a challenge in Britain — or anywhere else—which I felt I should tackle, then I would take it up with alacrity. If there was a job or position here which I felt I could do and which expanded my knowledge of the medium and my relationship to the world around me, then yes, I'd be happy to come and do it. ■