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**The Photography of the social forms. Interview with Blake Stimson**

**Q:** In *The Pivot of the World* you say that after World War Two photography became a kind of lingua franca for the new "postnationalist" world order. This notion of *lingua franca* can be assimilated or identified to notions of photography as universal language so frequent in mid-century high modernism. But simultaneously, you describe a kind of rearticulation of photography as having in that moment a "special capacity to explore constitutive principles of relationality". How do you articulate universalism with relationality, which, in principle seem to be antagonistic principles, universalism as a classic form of essentialism versus the relational as contextual, historical and opposed to essentialism? Could you develop the idea of photography as relational?

**A:** This is an excellent question and really gets to the nub of the project. The main thesis of *The Pivot of the World* is that the distinctive photographic aesthetic sensibility developed differently in the three projects studied — *The Family of Man*, Robert Frank's *The Americans*, and Bernd and Hilla Becher's typology of industrial architecture— was a kind of last hurrah for the old dream of enlightenment, the last hurrah for a principle that modern art had long taken as its reason for being but was rapidly falling from view. That principle is universalist by definition and not at all relational or differential in the way we think of now when speaking about "subject positions," say, or when acting in the name of this or that politics of identity. It is indeed essentialist in one sense —that is, it assumes that human nature is essentially defined by what Marx called "species-being" or a drive toward freedom or autonomy that can only be realized through the public exercise of the innate human capacity for reason— but it is not essentialist in the identity-oriented manner much criticized in the 1980s. Where the three projects articulated that universalist and essentialist enlightenment principle was in their distinctive efforts to systematically develop a way of being in the world that was not reactive (in the way we now associate with relational concepts like performativity and micropolitics) but instead proactively attempted to embody a global political subjectivity. Put differently they were attempting to produce a postwar version of the 1920's "new man" but without socialism as the means to the universal ends.

That said, the universalism of these three projects was also very different from the universalism of l'art brut or abstract expressionism in painting or from that of Minor White, say, or Henri Cartier-Bresson in photography. The type of universalism these other developments all shared was based on the principle

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**About the text**

In 2004 the MACBA rethought one of its main means of communication with the public: the Agenda. This quarterly publication, which began as a mere means of communicating the Museum's activities and programs, has evolved into a compendium of relevant texts and works as a short treatise, the objective of which is to contribute to the reflection on-and the articulation of the Museum's thematic axis. Compiled in this section are the leading article, *La cuestión local (The local subject)* and the interview from the back cover, *The Photography of the social forms*, published in the back cover.

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of equivalence —that is, when we get down to some basic human condition that is revealed to us existentially (in the “decisive moment,” for example) we discover that we are all the same. The universalism of *The Family of Man*, Frank and the Bechers is related to this but different: the goal was not to reproduce and reaffirm the same truth again and again and again —one drip painting after another and another or one decisive moment after another and another— but instead to establish a system of relations between pictures that by its form alone posits the necessarily public or social dimension of the enlightenment ideal. Put differently, the three projects defined themselves against the furrowing into the particularity of being either essentially of existentially and instead insisted on the sociality of freedom or autonomy —that is, each in their own way pitted the enlightenment promise of cosmopolitanism against the twin perils of existentialism and essentialism.

It is really in this last sense, then, that the three projects studied use relationality as a means to universality and how, by extension, they each cast photography as a medium particularly suitable to this end. Their relationality, in other words, is not relationality as such or relationality in its communitarian sense (in the manner that is often associated with the term “relational aesthetics,” for example) but instead relationality that is explicitly driven toward autonomy or freedom as a form of critical public exercise of reason. This drive is what defines the book’s central category —“the pivot of the world” — that is, the turning of one’s perspective outward to an ever greater, ever-receding horizon of intelligibility, reaching again and again to incorporate into one’s world view, consciously or not, what western Marxists used to call “the social totality.” Not all photography is defined by this sort of motivated relationality, of course, but the ease with which photography circulates —because of its push-button manufacture and, now, push-button reproducibility, and because it is not restricted by language barriers— and its distinctive, slice-of-life indexical truth claim, it lends itself to the pivot experience described better than any other medium.

**Q:** Family of Man is understood as the great monument to this universalist high modernist understanding of photography. Contrary to dominant critical accounts of this project you defend the kind of political dimension of it, which seems to correspond to a kind of last moment of notions of the public as citizen rather than as consumer, which will be soon the dominant mode after late 50s and the new hegemony of mass consumption notions of culture and public access. In any case how to read politically this notion of public as citizen? I mean does it fit into notions of left or right or is beyond that? I ask this because, contrary to left wing discourses since the 70s, you seem to “defend” family of man but at the same time family of man does not precisely fit into notions of progressive forms of political practices, at least at first sight.

**A:** I did not really intend a defense of *The Family of Man* as a proper political program, left or right or otherwise. Indeed, first and foremost all three projects were anti-political in their main emphases —this was really how they defined their reason for being. It was this anti-political character of *The Family of Man* that was criticized by Roland Barthes and Hilton Kramer in the 1950s through Allan Sekula and Christopher Phillips in the 1970s and 80s and on up to the present. What *The Pivot of the World* tries to do is reevaluate the historical significance of that anti-politics by opening up a gap between the dream of a global *homo politicus* that is reborn in 1917 and given a new imperative in the wake of World War II and the reality of a global *homo economicus* that would become the victor of the Cold War. For a brief moment in the middle there was another promise of global subjectivity that did not imagine itself either on the model of the citizen or on the model of the consumer but instead as a global homo culturalis. In other words, instead of experiencing one’s globality at the ballot box or as a savvy shopper in the marketplace, globality was to be experienced in the circulation of photographs and the promise that circulation opened up of pivoting from one worldview to another and another incorporating into oneself an ever-greater sense of the global social whole. On the one hand, this separation of culture from politics and economics was a kind of delusion, of course, but on the other it was also pretty close to the old dream of enlightenment, a dream that by definition requires an arena of meaning making separate from the instrumental reasoning of commerce and governance in order to realize its aim.

As such, *Pivot of the World’s* focus on *The Family of Man* comes not from an inquiry into its politics or lack thereof but instead from the way in which it —together with Frank and the Bechers— reenacted the old dream of enlightenment and the ways in which that reenactment failed. This inquiry is driven by a desire to look back to the cusp or turning point into our own period now, back to the moment where modern art gave up its ghost, gave up its affiliation with modern politics—its enlightenment promise of being protopolitical —and eventually succumbed to the workaday neoliberal reason of the marketplace that we now associate so strongly with the concept of globalization. In the process the hope is that some of what was repressed in that giving up might be revealed or worked through and our own moment now of late or intensified globalization might be better understood.

**Q:** Your book is also about tracing a specific historical moment in the 50s in which photography played a special role regarding the social. You say “photography could serve as a laboratory for social reconstruction”. It seems to me that the condition of photography to play this role is precisely its hegemony in the media before television but also its position of being an art of the real and the everyday, a kind of popular art, an “art moyen”. What are the reasons and conditions for photography to play this role and why this condition didn’t have a continuity after the late 50s, after Robert Frank so

to speak?

**A:** Yes, I think you are absolutely correct. Photography did have a sort of residual privileged status as a mass medium in the 1950s that was progressively diluted by the impact of television. Part of its capacity to hold on to its status against the emergent threat of television was the ease with which it transcended language barriers but part, too, was the way in which it invited —by its formal slice-of-life quality—invited or allowed for the pivot experience discussed in the book. What changed after the 1950s was not so much television's triumphant hegemony as it was the new hegemony of the commodity form generally as a newly important broker of the emergent geopolitical order. This change was summarized and symbolized by Richard Nixon in the famous (or infamous) 1959 kitchen debate with Nikita Khrushchev in which he was able to cast the future battle for global political dominance to be based not on which power made the best rockets but instead on which power manufactured the best household appliances. As such, what displaces photography's brief period as a hegemonic "art moyen" is more Coca-Cola than it is television (something that Pop artists picked up and ran with, which, in turn, would deeply influence artistic activity to this day). Put very schematically, it might be said that the strongest "moyennage" or averaging function that allows individuals to transcend their particularity and participate in a social imaginary had generally been provided by politically organized forms like nationalism or workerism or even UN-style "one-worldism" up until the emergence of McCarthy in 1950 while after the kitchen debate in 1959 that averaging function was taken over with new force by the commodity form, giving rise to the sense of globalization so dominant now. In between these shifts there was a momentary sense that culture might take on this important function, and what better cultural form than photography in its privileged capacity as an art moyen.

**Q:** It seems that the role of photography in the 20th century for constructing important notions for western democratic culture is beyond discussion, such as the popular subject or the "global social" which is a key notion for the discourse of humanism, for example. You say that photography has been an active agent of modernization. Do you think photography still plays this role? Or does television, film, advertising or the new media do that? How to imagine the social after or without photography, I mean in a post-photographic era?

**A:** I agree —my sense is that photography and the other media mentioned no longer have the capacity to draw from themselves the kind of ambition studied in *The Pivot of the World* but instead now serve more completely as distribution and promotional mechanisms for commodities which are the real carriers of the global social. One gets a sense of this quickly enough from art photography today which, if it can be said to carry a single common valence, returns again and again to its own alienation, its own lack of capacity to speak to the global social through anything other than the commodity form. This is what makes noble attempts to represent the world otherwise —like Sebastiao Salgado's, for example— seem somehow anachronistic or idiosyncratic.

There are many other efforts to imagine the global social outside or tangential to the market, of course —from Islamism to the Bush Doctrine to the World Social Forum and the counter-globalization movement to global protests against the Iraq war to some of the hype surrounding the internet— but it is hard to see any of these (perhaps with the exception of Islamism or maybe fundamentalism more generally) effectively stepping beyond reaction (or reaction against reaction) to form an alternative medium of belonging that carries a workably unified global social imagination in the way that nationalism has regularly done for the nation-state in the past. It is impossible to know what will come, of course —the eighteenth century's Enlightenment was a cultural movement after all and it successfully gave rise to lasting global social imagination even if that imagination has been progressively hollowed out from the inside ever since. One area of research into this question that continues to seem promising— despite its many critics and despite its fantastic projections— is Hardt and Negri's effort to revive Marx's understanding of the factory form as catalyst for class consciousness by casting the internet as the foremost infrastructural principle of industrial production today.

I suppose the main insight I would hope that could be drawn from *The Pivot of the World* is a sense of the historically circumscribed character of our understanding and experience of globalization now. The three projects studied momentarily renewed the dream of enlightenment just at the cusp or turn into the moment that continues to carry forward now. Looking back to that turning point, to a momentary flash of oversized ambition for photography, thus, might contribute to the kind of perspective about where the world might head now that only historical understanding can provide.

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