

*This is the third and concluding segment in a series, which began with PHOTOGRAPHY THEN, published on LuLa in December 2015. The second essay, PHOTOGRAPHY NOW, was published about six months later. If you haven't read these essays yet, please use the embedded links to check them out before taking in this final installment, PHOTOGRAPHY TOMORROW.*

## **PHOTOGRAPHY TOMORROW**

*In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.*

*—Andy Warhol from the program notes for his 1968 exhibition at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden*

In all fairness, Warhol's "15 minutes of fame" channeled an observation that was in the air in the late 60s. Marshall McLuhan had expressed similar ideas on media regarding how television was making "ordinary" folks famous as contestants on game shows. Eventually, game show contestants morphed into reality TV "stars." Many in the 60s media could have foreseen this future, which was not lost on Warhol, who long before his fame as a pop art icon, was a distinguished designer and art director at Manhattan ad agencies. He was an AIGA award recipient, notably for his album cover designs, which he continued to accept commissions for long after he no longer needed the money. His background in commercial art informed his views on pop culture.

So, what does it mean for fame, and the media focus that goes along with it, to be universal, global in scale, and exceedingly brief? It has far less to do with achievement and far more to do with the voracious appetite of media and the attention span of the masses who consume it. Naturally, the folks who are furiously creating content, are impacted by the brevity of the impression they create and the relatively banal subjects on which they are increasingly focused. Whether it's Warhol, or McLuhan, or someone else, who first recognized and predicted the future direction of this phenomenon, the insight is beyond prescient. It's clairvoyant. What was foreseen in the late 60s was influenced first by the pervasiveness of the printed page with newspapers and magazines plopped down on every doorstep; then with radios in every kitchen, automobile, and workplace; and finally televisions, beginning in every living room, and eventually finding their way to every bar room, restaurant, and airport in the country. This plethora of content would all eventually be eclipsed by the internet, which would become more pervasive and voluminous in content than all the older media it swallowed up

whole. Welcome to the future present where you'll find your local newspapers, monthly magazines, radio stations, TV stations, bloggers, social media "friends," everyone's worldly possessions up for sale on Craig's List or eBay, relatives posting your and their dirty laundry on Facebook—all of it vying for attention on your computer, tablet, or smartphone screen. Fame, of every sordid variety, is now universal and the internet is the primary forum. Any content that's "good enough" quality-wise for the internet, is good enough, period. Or is it? Maybe not if you're an art gallery; or a museum curator; or if you work in older, traditional media creating works that will exist in the real world, rather than the virtual world of the internet. Mass media, journalism, social media, all seem to be following a trend. Art, theater, literature, classical studies, and the like, if not on a different jag, are not exactly following along in lock step. The masses don't seem to be looking too intently at academia or the intellectual elites for direction either. They seem content doing their own thing, relentlessly focused on unedited, uncurated, unorganized, FREE content. (*The most important attribute is the free part, hence my emphasis.*)

With this prelude out of the way, I have some observations about photography's future. And it's important to note, these are my own predictions. They are informed by the comments of the five photographers I interviewed for this series—Mike Blumensaadt; Alex MacLean; David Rae Morris; Myko; and Carter Tomassi. All had interesting things to say about the future of photography, some of which I quote in this final segment. But, in the end, when it comes to predictions that aren't always agreed upon in the present and don't always come true in the future, I feel I should accept the consequences. For the ones that do come to pass, in whole or in part, then maybe I've played the prophet part well enough. During the interviews, there was some reticence from the photographers I talked with to proclaim where things will be in 20 years. "I don't know." was a common response to a lot of the speculation I tried to coax from their experiences. I think this is not only the most pragmatic and realistic answer to the future of the photographic medium, it is the most informed, as well. We really don't know. A lot has changed very fast and the changes keep coming. There is one certainty, however. Photography 20-25 years from now will not be the same as now. The framework of the industry may not be that recognizable either. To repeat for dramatic effect: "We just don't know," is the scientific answer. Nonetheless, I do have some hunches that come more from the gut than anywhere else, and in no specific order, here they are. . .

There will be fewer freelance photographers in the future. At the corporate level, those businesses that regularly use still photography will hire staffers.

They won't be known as "photographers" either. Maybe they'll have an informal name like "media guy." They'll take the still photos the company needs, and shoot videos too. They'll be in charge of archiving, post-production, and will constantly update the company's web sites, blogs, and social media presence with the new content they've created. Larger companies may actually have a media department with 3 or 4 staffers with some skill set redundancies and skill set diversities too. Some staffers will have more of a wordsmith/marketing background and others will have more of a visual/art background. But, no one will do just one thing because all the "things" that were highly specialized skill sets in the past will be generalized skills in the future. The media guys will cover the waterfront and, if there's only one of them, that person will be a multi-media, multi-disciplined, hyphen.

Freelancing, as it has existed throughout the post-WWII era, will be relegated to a small percent of the profession that serves the top tier of the market. I believe the highest paying, most prestigious specialty will be fashion/glamor, which will exist almost exclusively in the major fashion and traditional media markets of the world—New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Milan, Tokyo, and some new markets beyond the western or western-influenced world. Maybe the freelancers don't live exclusively in these markets, but this is where the clients will be and anyone not residing in these markets will be operating in them from afar or traveling to them like migrant workers to harvest. If this pilgrimage is not your thing, you can always shoot weddings in your hometown. (Think of it as fashion/glamor without professional talent.) Wedding photography, propelled by digital technology, has emerged as one of the few freelance specialties that is not only growing, but is more prestigious, as well.

The primary economic reason for fewer freelancers is two fold—photography has become technically easier and the gear is not just simpler to use, but cheaper. The industry will adjust to this. The past dynamic of greater technical difficulty, coupled with the need for highly specialized and expensive gear, led to the hiring of independent contractors (freelancers), rather than staff, to fill photographic needs. Now that digital technology has changed that dynamic, there will be more staff and less freelancers. The lucrative pay, which freelancers could once command, will be replaced by much more pedestrian salaries for full time employees. The photographers I interviewed made similar observations in more colorful terms than my own. Mike Blumensaadt commented, "Commercial photographers aren't in quite the same position as buggy whip manufacturers in the early 20th Century, but it's closer than anyone would like." Myko expressed it with a bit of dark humor when he said, "When Zeiss starts making lenses for iPhones, the

hand writing's on the wall." (You can have a look at Zeiss's "truly professional lenses" for iPhone here: <https://exolens.com/discover-zeiss/>.)

For those handful of freelance photographers, who are self-employed and sell their skills and photographic vision for significant money, marketing and promotion will be different. Their fame and recognition will be spread via the internet, which hardly qualifies as a prediction, since this is already largely how it works. But, this is the prediction part: All the places on the web, which are inhabited by everyone, pro and novice alike, will not be the venue through which artistic excellence will be showcased in the future. It won't be Facebook, Instagram, or any of that. These aren't professional platforms, but are the platform of everyman. For professionals to be on them does not elevate their stature, but lowers them to the level of everyman instead. It's like trying to sell art on Craig's List. It's just not where serious collectors are looking. So, where will the professional platform be? Most likely in a place that doesn't exist yet, but the blogs of the present day are likely to be the prototype. Carter Tomassi mentioned the work of a photographer, whose blog he followed, who had elevated his photography to a lucrative level through the blogosphere.

The photographer Carter told me about is Scott Schuman. His blog is [www.thesartorialist.com](http://www.thesartorialist.com). Schuman is also on social media, but the foundation of his web presence is his blog. He shoots on the street, but he isn't a typical street shooter. He has an angle and a moniker. He's the sartorialist, a fashion hound, with a good eye. As he combs the streets with his camera, first in New York and now globally, he captures folks with a fashion sense. His approach is largely descended from the late Bill Cunningham, whose street fashion work for the New York Times became legendary. So, Schuman starts a blog to get his work out there. It's not a blog about photography, but is instead a visually driven fashion dialog. His blog simultaneously functions as a commercial fashion portfolio, accessible to anyone, anywhere. Because the work feels more genuine than much of the location fashion work that's intended to look candid, but is actually staged, his street work has led to commissions, book projects, and thousands of followers. He is an item, an authority, within the fashion world. I believe his is a prototypical example of how future freelance photographers will market themselves. Beating the pavement with a portfolio already doesn't work well because art directors and photo editors don't really review portfolios as they once did. Buyers become familiar with commercial artists in many ways, some of which are face to face, but devoting time during the work week to sit down with artists who are making cold calls is no longer essential, and is therefore no longer a priority or an official "practice." Beyond that, it's time inefficient for both parties. When it comes to being

recognized and grabbing the attention of a critical decision maker in this environment, Warhol's 15 minutes is a relative eternity. You'll have more like 15 seconds in cyberspace and you better be good if you want a lengthier perusal that culminates in a commission.

Scott Schuman is a successful photographer not just because he has a good blog, but because of other attributes long known to be important. The one attribute, which I think will be vital in the future, is knowledge of, and passion for, your subject. In Schuman's case it's fashion, for other photographers it's design, architecture, the human condition, travel, nature, etc. In the future, subject knowledge and passion, vision (the distinctive way you photograph), will be everything. Photography will be taken for granted. Of course, you will need to know how to operate a camera, but this knowledge will be more secondary than ever before. And, in my opinion, Schuman's blog has been so successful because it's not about photography, but fashion. That's the right orientation because it's all about his subject and is directed to paying clients and fashion mavens. Photography has always been, and always will be, about the subject first and foremost.

Another important criterion for future freelance success was brought out by Alex MacLean during his interview, and it has to do with market reach, or the geographic range of the client base you can serve. Alex commented that his commercial practice in the past had been limited strictly to clients in the Boston area where he's based. Now, thanks to his books and web presence, he has developed relationships with clients from all over the globe. Technology has made it easy to communicate, and deliver photographic images, globally. His local market, if that were all he had, would no longer be large enough to support him. As the pie has shrunk, those photographers who can manage to get a bigger piece of it survive. In the future, if you freelance, you will need something bigger than a local market to survive. It will need to be regional, national, or even global. It's a tall order, but thanks to the internet, a business as small as a freelance photography practice will have a chance at reaching and serving a geographically diverse client base.

During my interview with Alex, I was particularly interested in his take on the future of photography because he's an aerial photographer, with a pilot's license, and his own private plane. Would drones render his skill set and rather expensive tools obsolete? Alex pointed out that, so far that hasn't happened. Planes can fly further and higher than drones. But he was skeptical about the future of the type of aerial photography he does and his concern has nothing to do with photographic technology. "Private aviation," he commented, "may become a thing of the past due to global warming." Carbon emissions in the upper atmosphere are a major problem and electric

planes don't seem to be a viable alternative anytime soon. Drones, yes. They're electric already, in locomotion and in the mindset of photographers. But, who knows? This is a great example of the uncertain future impacting photography, along with just about everything else.

Photojournalism will not be a particularly relevant term in the future, and when it's used, it will be more of a historical reference, rather than a contemporary one. "Sports photographers" will cover all manner of sporting events from car racing to the Olympics, using highly specialized gear to capture highly specialized action. For the same technical reasons there will be "performance photographers" who cover everything from rock concerts to opera. And then there will be "crisis photographers" who travel the world documenting the most catastrophic and dangerous situations on the planet. Theirs will be a short-lived career known for the severe under-payment for services rendered, given the risk involved. Their primary competitors will be the victims of the events they cover, who record the demise of the world around them with their smart phones. Reporters, using the very same smart phones as the crisis victims, will cover all the soft news, where bullets aren't flying and the subjects are close at hand and more cooperative. Other competitors will be ubiquitous unmanned video cameras. Virtually everything everywhere will be captured and repurposed. In a lot of cases, the recording of news will require no human presence, or decision making, before the fact. Humans will appear on the scene to edit, contextualize, and comment after the fact. I don't believe this is an ideal outcome for journalism, but is inevitable.

Historically, photography has always been a curious mix of art and journalism. That's its tradition and it has helped make the medium compelling and influential. This marriage of art and journalism has gradually, over the last 3 or 4 decades, been growing apart and the unraveling of this marriage will lead to a future divorce. There will be artists and there will be media guys (for lack of a better term). Both will use cameras, but their common purpose will begin and end with the technology they mutually employ. They will be as different as house painters and still life painters, to reuse an analogy from a previous installment. "Art photographer" will be as antiquated a term as "photojournalist." These professions will simply be artist and journalist. The fact that photography may be a component of both will be so inconsequential that it will be de-coupled from the definition.

The patronage of newspapers and magazines has been critical to photography and to photographic careers. That patronage will continue to shift to gallerists and curators, who operate in a different world and communicate with a different audience. But, the most important difference

between the two sources of patronage is that gallerists and curators do not hand out commissions. Not typically. The banter over the difference between the applied arts and the fine arts, is usually framed to buttress the notion that the fine arts are superior. How that superiority is manifested can be something of a fluid concept. But, there's really only one difference between the fine arts and the applied arts in the modern age. In the fine arts, the artist chooses the subject and through the creation of the work conveys a personal viewpoint or interpretation of that subject. In the applied arts, the artist's subject is imposed by others who have their own motives—to sell, glamorize, exploit, indoctrinate, or influence a range of variables, which have little to do with art, or the artist. It's a difference that can be profound, or it may be negligible. The point is, in the applied arts the artist doesn't control the process. They are merely hired for their skills. They are mercenaries, which by the way, is synonymous with "freelance," a term which originally referred to a knight in days or yore who fought without allegiance to king, cause, or country, but strictly for money instead.

The absence of any major future patronage for still photography from journalistic media is bound to have some unfortunate consequences. Imagine if a documentary project similar to the collaboration between Walker Evans and James Agee that culminated in the iconic work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, were being done 25 years from now. This project began in the 1930s as an assignment for Fortune magazine. It outgrew that venue, and other magazines where Agee wrote features related to the project, and it ultimately saw publication in book form in 1939. Fortune was a patron of both Evans, who photographed for the magazine, and who ultimately became its photo editor, and for Agee, who was one of its writers. Given the subject matter—abject rural poverty—it was significant that patronage came from a journalistic or news source, rather than from somewhere in the art world. It was controversial enough in the 30s that the patron was Fortune, a magazine devoted largely to wealth management and business pursuits. But, there was a connection. Sharecropping was a failing, exploitative business model that wasn't working for the laborers, making it a germane, relevant, journalistic topic, but the marketing of contemporary depravity, squalor, and inhumane conditions in art galleries or museums can be very problematic, particularly if prints of these subjects are sold to wealthy art collectors for significant sums. It's unseemly, exploitative, and just not right. If photographic patronage is relegated to the art world alone, the types of projects which can be appropriately monetized will shrink. It doesn't matter that the photographer (or writer) may work for no pay and self-fund the project for years. Ultimately, it has to be monetized. Either that or only independently wealthy trust fund types will be photographers. And it won't be a profession either. It will be a hobby, avocation, or interest, but

not a living. The pervasive financial problems currently plaguing print journalism will continue to impact photography's future, and not in a good way.

On the gear front, the demise of cameras with mirrors, in favor of cameras without them—mirrorless (bad name, but its the one we are currently stuck with)—will prove to have been exaggerated. In the future there will be a cult following for cameras with mirrors. It will be no different than the cult following for rangefinders, which developed in the late 60s and 70s as soon as they had been eclipsed in the professional ranks by SLRs. What comes around goes around. Just as SLRs eclipsed rangefinders, mirrorless cameras will eclipse DSLRs, which will then cultivate just as devoted and maniacal a following as rangefinders have for the last half century. There's a lot to be said for being able to compose a scene as human vision sees it naturally and not as it's rendered by a sensor and cluttered up by a bunch of technical information, which has as much of a chance at distraction as vital data, depending on the situation. But, as with rangefinders, mirrors aren't for everyone. They'll be for the special people—the same special people who prefer vinyl, a stick shift, the printed page, and guess what else—film.

That's right, the demise of film has been exaggerated too. Film and film cameras already have a cult following, which will only grow, and significantly within certain ranks. New technologies supplant older ones, but they don't always cast them into oblivion. Sometimes the new stuff gives the old stuff a special, revered status. This phenomenon can be rather magical in a way and there has always been something especially magical about film. Computers and pencils co-exist in a useful way. The tasks we choose them for and the regard we hold for each is shaped, and maybe even warped, by their co-existence. Having the choice is a wonderful thing though. Look for a steady growth in both the use and appreciation of film over the next 25 years. And for certain photographic pursuits, look for it to dominate. Don't look for that to happen in commercial photography, but for personal work and art projects, film will be a big deal. It's a separate medium really and the perfect way to distinguish yourself from the pack. If you like the grain effects in Silver Efex Pro, then you'll really like Tri-X. Push it a couple stops for good measure. You'll get your grain and contrast in a natural, organic way because its intrinsic to the material you have chosen to work with.

As for the art world, and photography's place within it, I think I would have better odds at predicting who will be president 25 years from now, than making any predictions about photography's place in that future. I do believe still photography will grow as a medium, relative to painting, sculpture, and older media in general. I believe the debate over its legitimacy will be less



relevant and will be waged less often. I think the opportunities for photographers to exhibit in contemporary art galleries, to have monographs of their work published, and to receive major museum exhibits will continue to grow as well. Essentially, the trend of photography's growing acceptance and recognition as an art form, which I wrote about in the first segment, will continue on its current trajectory. Admittedly, this is not a very exciting prediction because there's nothing unexpected in it. There's nothing out of left field to disrupt the status quo. Disruption could very well happen, may even be likely to happen, given the extraordinary unpredictability of the art world. I just don't see a trend in the art world today that is dramatically altering photography's place within it. But, there is something I see evolving that will profoundly impact media, including photography, and most every other medium of personal expression.

The stage has now been set for an epic cultural battle over information, every aspect of information. Who controls the dissemination of it, who has access to it, and most significantly, who will edit it, vet it, curate it, safeguard it. If anyone? The cultural battle, which has been foreseen and debated for awhile now, will rage over the next 25 years. Warhol made flip comments about it nearly a half century ago and all means of mass communication, particularly photography, will be impacted by how the dust settles over this debate and how we respond, as a society, to the pervasive heaps of information we are now able to subject ourselves to. Do we really want *everyone* to be world famous for 15 minutes? Do we have time for that? Given an almost infinite volume of content to devour, this is what we want? An unedited, unvetted, uncurated, disorganized pile of stuff to sort through? Well, we probably don't want that. On a daily basis, we'd probably want a trusted, informed source to pick say the 10 oddest famous people of the day, or maybe the 10 most beautiful, or the 10 who live in our neighborhood. The criteria will be different based on our personal interests, but someone really has to screen this stuff. We never really did want to immerse ourselves in a vat of random information. So, why does it seem that's what we're now confronted with? Because it's a by product of what everyone really does want—a platform, a voice, a place at the table. Things that have always been denied by an establishment that doesn't know what it's doing. We can't get our manuscript published. We can't get that museum exhibit either. The editor at the local paper won't even publish our rants. And that recording contract? Why hasn't that happened yet? Since the establishment is so out of touch, let's just bypass them entirely. We can become social media sensations. We start blogging. Forget the stupid newspaper editor, we can just tweet all night, as we sell our unedited manuscripts on Amazon. Cynicism aside, empowerment is a beautiful thing, as are viable alternatives to rejection, particularly undeserved and

unwarranted rejection. It has been building for decades, and since the dawn of the internet, we have seen steady, unrelenting support for an open and overly democratic platform, to the financial detriment of traditional media and the establishment that controls it. The internet is everything traditional media is not. For those of us who earned a living through the patronage of the traditional media, we have seen that patronage erode and in some cases die out. Finding new patronage to replace it on social media, or elsewhere, can be as daunting as switching from film to digital, or from the darkroom to the computer screen.

This debate over whether we are better off with or without gatekeepers controlling all the media we consume is one of those debates with no correct answer. Editing is a good thing. Too much editing, or poor editing, not so much and censorship is downright evil. Since there are no absolutes here, we are left with a swinging pendulum, of which we can be certain of only one thing—it will swing back the other way eventually. So, that's my safe and predictable prediction: In the next 20 years, the pendulum will swing back the other way. Traditional media, the printed page, craftsmanship using traditional tools and processes, printed photographs you can frame and hang over the mantel, even content you have to pay for, will see a resurgence. Folks are going to get bored with their smart phones too. They will spend less time texting and trolling around the internet and more time at the local pub talking to one another. Maybe they will be looking at and collecting more photo books too. For photographers, the size of their audience may not be as important as the quality of their audience. When I interviewed David Rae Morris he happened to mention that twice in his career he had been fortunate enough to have been published on the front page of the New York Times. When he told me that, I responded with a question: "So, which is better, the most likes on Instagram or being on the front page of the Times?" "That's easy," he said. "No one knows who's on Instagram. I know who reads the Times. I'll take the cover of the New York Times." To that I would add my own additional observation— The Times paid him for those cover photographs. I'll bet that in the long run, reaching the right audience, and getting paid for it to boot, beats out a random, uncompensated niche in cyberspace and it will be an achievement worth sacrificing and struggling for.

—**Richard Sexton**

*Richard Sexton is a fine art and media photographer, who is currently working on his 14th book project, Enigmatic Stream, which will be published in 2018 by The Historic New Orleans Collection, and will be accompanied by a traveling exhibit. More information about his work and gallery representation can be found on his web site: [www.richardsextonstudio.com](http://www.richardsextonstudio.com).*

