AARON SCHARF

A verbal snapshot

Bill Jay

Aaron Scharf was one of the most important and influential names in photography during the 1960s and 1970s. Photographers everywhere discussed his ideas and pondered his writings. Today, he has been largely forgotten. That's not only sad but also self-destructive, because his words and wisdom are still wholly relevant.

The last direct contact I had with Aaron Scharf was a couple of years before his death. He had been sent a copy of an annotated bibliography, Degas and Photography, produced by one of my students, Karen Churchill. With grace and generosity he wrote directly to her: "I'd like you to know that I find it a most useful piece of research, intelligently conceived and presented with great sensitivity. I'm usually taciturn in such matters (as Bill Jay can verify), but I was so favourably impressed, I felt I had to send you my compliments. . . ." Karen's thrill on receiving such approval from one of the few great authorities in the field can be imagined. And I shared in her pleasure because I can vividly remember similar feelings of pride evoked by Aaron Scharf when I was about Karen's age. In my case, the pride was not directed at anything I had accomplished, but at the medium of photography itself.

In 1965, the spectrum of "approved" photography in Britain seemed limited to the bright band of socially active photojournalism with a token representation by the bands of high fashion and society portraiture. That was that. Until a modest little book caused a major explosion: Creative Photography by Aaron Scharf (Studio Vista, 1965). This was the 60s equivalent of P. H. Emerson's Naturalistic Photography of 1889 which was called "a bombshell dropped in a tea party." Suddenly, perceptions of the medium changed; its now-based shape transformed by deep plunges into history and lateral shoots into the visual arts. It is difficult, in today's more accepting pluralistic era, to convey just how shocking, exciting and marvellous was this revelation. In England, it could only have been accomplished by Aaron Scharf the outsider and academic.

Aaron Scharf was born in 1922 in the USA and studied at the University of California before attending the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Not incidentally, his doctoral thesis at the Courtauld was eventually published with revisions and additions as Art and Photography (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1968), the expanded version of Creative Photography. At the time of publication, Aaron was head of the History of Art and Complementary Studies Department at St. Martin's School of Art, London. His American

background meant that he was not limited to the then English strictures of what constituted good photography, and his academic status gave his ideas authority and legitimacy. His only peer at the time was Van Deren Coke, whose own studies in the same area had resulted in The Painter and the Photograph, published a year earlier than Creative Photography, but which due to its size and limited distribution in England, could not have the same influence. But Scharf and Coke were not only peers but also frequent correspondents and close personal friends, the “odd couple” of art and photography. Whereas Coke was (and is) a pugnacious activist, a generator of confrontations and major innovations across a wide range of fields, Aaron was a shy scholar, a mediating influence of quiet accomplishments.

Aaron Scharf’s eclectic interests in photography’s history were reflected in the bizarre and beautiful range of images and issues which he published in his Creative Camera column (called “Album”) throughout 1968 – from spirit photography to Darwin, from the largest camera in the world to engravings on the backs of cartes-de-visite, from early photography in Japan to Raoul Ubac’s surrealism. When he asked to be relieved of the column, due to the pressure of other work, it seemed obvious to ask his friend and colleague, Van Deren Coke, to continue the column, which he did, until my last issue as editor in December 1969.

In that last issue, Aaron Scharf returned to the pages of Creative Camera in a different role. Each month when I picked up his column material (he lived at that time just a few minutes walk from the editorial offices), I was fascinated by his own art work, usually quirky little montages made from old photographs and/or 19th-century wood engravings. I always asked if we could publish them, but he declined out of modesty. Again, with typical generosity, he let me use a few for my last issue – but without explanation. He wrote in an accompanying letter:

I am flummoxed! No wonder artists find it so difficult to write about their work. They’ve said it all with images. It’s so much easier to write about someone else’s pictures. I found myself scribbling terrible little aphorisms on reality and appearances and on intuition and the intellect, all of which in this context sounds too pontifical. So forgive me. No text this time! . . . They [the montages] refer to explosion but that is not their full meaning. Give them no titles. Let them open up those little doors to mystery which Redon talks about.

So I published his disavowal of text as the text.

Before long, Aaron Scharf joined The Open University and stayed there, writing art history courses and pursuing personal research until his retirement in 1982. Aaron was very ill and needed special diets. His wife Marina raised goats (for their milk) on their farm at Melton Constable, Norfolk. He died on 21 January 1993.

In closing this (personal) appreciation, I would like to add that his presence changed my life. I can give him no greater thanks. Whenever I try to articulate the nature of this change, a specific few paragraphs which he wrote bubble to the surface of my mind. I think they will act as an epitaph. The circumstances were these: we had distributed a questionnaire to our readers and many said they disliked our "emphasis" on the history of photography. I asked Aaron to comment. His words – literate, relevant, cultured, and reeking of beguiling passion – reflect the characteristics of the author. They are still relevant:

I've heard this one about nasty old "History" before. I never got the impression that Creative Camera was heavy on history. I wonder what motivates such criticisms? Usually the "I hate history" jag comes either from the truly ignorant or the pseudo-sophisticate. We get it in art all the time. One of the reasons that art has reached such an impasse is because it ignores history and instead feeds only on last week's output hankering after style rather than grasping at fundamentals. Is not the same also true of photography? To me, a disdain for history is willful ignorance: deliberate blindness. But of course I mean history in its richest, most personal sense. However, it is the vogue today to reject the past – as though one really can. The cheek of some people! And what narcissism! History can't teach me anything! I project my trivia onto history, thus it can only, must only, deal in trivia. So help me! History is nothing but a useless collection of facts, dates and other irrelevancies! There you have "modern" man, the quick-results man, the man of action with a Lilliputian mind. The Bauhaus? Surrealism? Why that's already history. In a year's time, if not sooner, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, and a dozen photographers of "note," will be as much a part of the past as Shirley Temple and Al Capone. Our greatest blindness is that we believe a thing is better simply because it is new. I am sure you will understand this. I am an historian because I don't believe in "history." To me, what is called "History" is a living, palpable thing with more relevance to modern man than all the social and aesthetic trumperies belched forth in last week's public communications. I could not continue "Album" and deliberately amputate what is so interesting, so instructive and so meaningful from the story of photography in order to satisfy some misguided readers.

Postscript

Aaron's widow, Marina, has published his experiences as a bomber pilot in World War II, Flak. It is a tragic, funny, passionate account of one man's look at war's lunacy.

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