

"There is a lot of casual chat about photography, just as there is a lot of casual photography. But there have always been articulate voices, able to see past the obvious, around the distracting, and through the trivial to say something about the more profound aspects of the medium. Many of those voices have belonged to image makers."

Writer and curator David Company talks with world-class artists about their various creative phases and their rapport with the medium of photography. These conversations go beyond the simple interview to reveal complex relations between art and photography, photography and the world, word and image.

David Company is the author of *A Handful of Dust* (2015), *The Open Road: photography and the American road trip* (2014), *Walker Evans: the magazine work* (2014), *Gasoline* (2013), *Jeff Wall: Picture for Women* (2010), *Photography and Cinema* (2008) and *Art and Photography* (2003). He has written over two hundred essays for museums and monographic books.

Whether long or short, nearly all these conversations were open-ended.

For me, that is always the real value of a conversation. **DAVID COMPANY**

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David Company

So present, so invisible

Conversations on photography

**Broomberg & Chanarin, Daniel Blaufuks, Robert Cumming,
LaToya Ruby Frazier, Lewis Baltz, John Stezaker, Paul Graham,
Rut Blees Luxemburg, Jeff Wall, Lucas Blalock, Susan Meiselas,
Victor Burgin, William Klein, Stephen Shore**

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David Company

Introduction

Photography is the easiest thing to talk about, and for that reason it can be the most difficult. There is a lot of casual chat about it, just as there is a lot of casual photography. But there have always been articulate voices, able to see past the obvious, around the distracting, and through the trivial to say something about the more profound aspects of the medium.

Many of those voices have belonged to image makers. For one reason or another (it might have something to do with the close interplay of photography and words in modern culture), the world of serious photography has been noticeably blessed with articulate practitioners. This has been the case as far back as William Henry Fox Talbot, whose written insights into the implications of the medium that he was in the process of inventing remain as illuminating and readable now as they were in the 1840s.

As a twenty-year old student first encountering the range of thinking about photography and culture, I looked for books of conversations. Paul Hill & Thomas Cooper's *Dialogue with Photography* (1979), Barbaralee Diamonstein's *Visions and Images* (1982), and Pat Booth's *Master Photographers* (1983) introduced me to the thoughts of what seemed at the time like all the great photographers of the twentieth century. The format of the conversation had a special appeal. When "theory" seemed a little intimidating, particularly the French thought that really shaped me intellectually, I would search for published exchanges with the thinkers that mattered. Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes seemed much more approachable when they were talking freely to others, and not addressing *me*. Even if those conversations were just as challenging, there was something about the format that was freeing. I felt I was eavesdropping. Obviously, a published conversation is a rhetorical trick. It's still words on a page, after all. But if it works, it works.

I am often invited by artists and photographers to write about their practice, usually for an exhibition catalogue or book of their work. Every now and then I get the feeling that a conversation would be better. I never purpose-

fully "research" in advance, the way a journalist might. Rather, the desire to converse emerges from the balance between already knowing enough, and wanting to discover more. I never prepare questions in advance either. I am not inclined to interrogate, although as you will see, the best moments come when both parties are really pushing and clarifying each other's thinking.

In a conversation, there is close connection between thought and speech. I think this is so whether it is happening face-to face in real time, via Skype, on the telephone or even via email. You will find examples of them all here, and I would like to think it is not so easy to tell the difference. The exchanges with Jeff Wall, Victor Burgin and Stephen Shore, for example, read as if those artists were committing highly considered thoughts directly to the page, when in fact this is how they speak about their work. My conversation with Lucas Blalock is quite flowing and spontaneous, like an easy verbal to and fro, but it was conducted by email, and intermittently over several weeks. The conversation with Rut Blees Luxemburg was recorded as we walked through the London night, from dusk to dawn.

Whether long or short, nearly all these conversations were open-ended. Neither party knew where we might go or where things would end up. For me, that is always the real value of a conversation, as opposed to an interview (or worse, a questionnaire). There is risk and excitement, a sense of mutual exploration and speculation. And somewhere in the back of my mind I guess I was trying to facilitate the kind of informative and provocative exchanges would have held the attention of my twenty-year old self.

For all the variety of voices here, each photographer has addressed the question of how they understand their medium. That understanding might be technical, philosophical, aesthetic, social, or a combination of these. Putting the voices together, you might get a good working definition of photography. At the same time, you might end up with a bunch of contradictions and paradoxes. Maybe that is all we can hope for from photography, because if it is a medium at all, it is one that has eluded any fixed or satisfying definition. And perhaps this is why photography remains so rewarding. Unlike so many other inventions of the nineteenth century, this one did not die. It has renewed itself constantly. Churning, transforming, mutating and reimagining itself. This is the source of its fascination.