

Any Answers David Campany

Words and portrait by Michael Grieve

I went to school in Essex. I watched wild, anarchic 11-year-olds morph into their conservative fathers. But the atmosphere of benign neglect let me develop in my own way.

Looking at books about cinema was the initial spark that led me to photography. Film stills were the first photographs that interested me. I liked their oblique relation to narrative, to documentation and to artifice.

All true learning is really self-taught. As a student I worked in the bookshop of the ICA. I read pretty much everything. I learned from great curators, artists, writers and publishers.

I first encountered Man Ray's Dust Breeding in a show at the Royal Academy. I thought it was awful and boring. But I learned to appreciate it, and it became something of a touchstone for my understanding of photography's ambiguities and paradoxes - the things that draw me back to the medium in one way or another.

Diane Dufour, director of Le Bal in Paris, asked me for my 'dream show'. I knew right away it would be about Dust Breeding, and how it could be understood as a secret key to the last century. The show became A Handful of Dust.

People expect messages from photography. But it's not particularly good at that. If they return to an image to look again, it's for something else.

Walker Evans detested consumerism, celebrity and shallowness. He experimented. He looked hard at the world and had deep affection for its appearance. He controlled how his images were presented on the page and on the wall. The work he did for money was as good as the work he did for himself. He wrote beautifully.

William Klein is one of the most important artists of the last century. A photographer, film-maker, painter, graphic designer, writer, maker of books. Very few make great contributions to so many fields. By the time I interviewed him I'd been thinking about his work for a long time, and intuited something of his motivations, so we got on fine.

Hannah Collins asked me to curate a show of her photographs and multi-screen films. Her total dedication and certainty was balanced by great humility and openness to doubt. It made a deep impression upon me.

I try to read Mrs Dalloway once a year. It has a profound affect on me. Virginia Woolf's ability to move between inner and outer realities is extraordinary.

It does not matter that photography should be regarded as an art. It always will be and always won't be, because it will always function inside and outside of art, and because every photograph is potentially a document and an artwork.

Documentary photography means necessary experiments in communication. It should have no fixed form or approach.

I have just co-curated an exhibition of Alex Majoli. Working with powerful, off-camera flash, he plunges daylight scenes of everyday life and humanitarian crisis into what looks like theatrical moonlight. The effect, for me, is troubling and provocative. We don't ever see people in photographs; we see the light bouncing off them. Unexpected light leads to unexpected responses.

My next dream project is writings of a sort of wandering, philosophical history of photography in 125 connected images. I think it will be called On Photographs and will be out next year. When I'm writing about photography, I dream in paragraphs and still images.

Does it matter that there are so many photographs out there? That complaint has been around since the 1920s, at least. I've never felt it. But I do feel that any photograph is potentially excessive and saturated. Its meanings are uncontainable. Saturation is not a matter of numbers.

I teach at the University of Westminster. I have learned that photography and attitudes to it never stand still, while the amount of talent remains pretty constant. BJP davidcampany.com

The London-based writer and curator is behind dozens of books and exhibitions, including Photography and Cinema, Walker **Evans: the magazine** work. A Handful of Dust, and his latest, Alex Majoli: Scene, published by Mack and on show at Le Bal in Paris until 28 April

