

**Paul Trevor**

## The Camerawork Essays

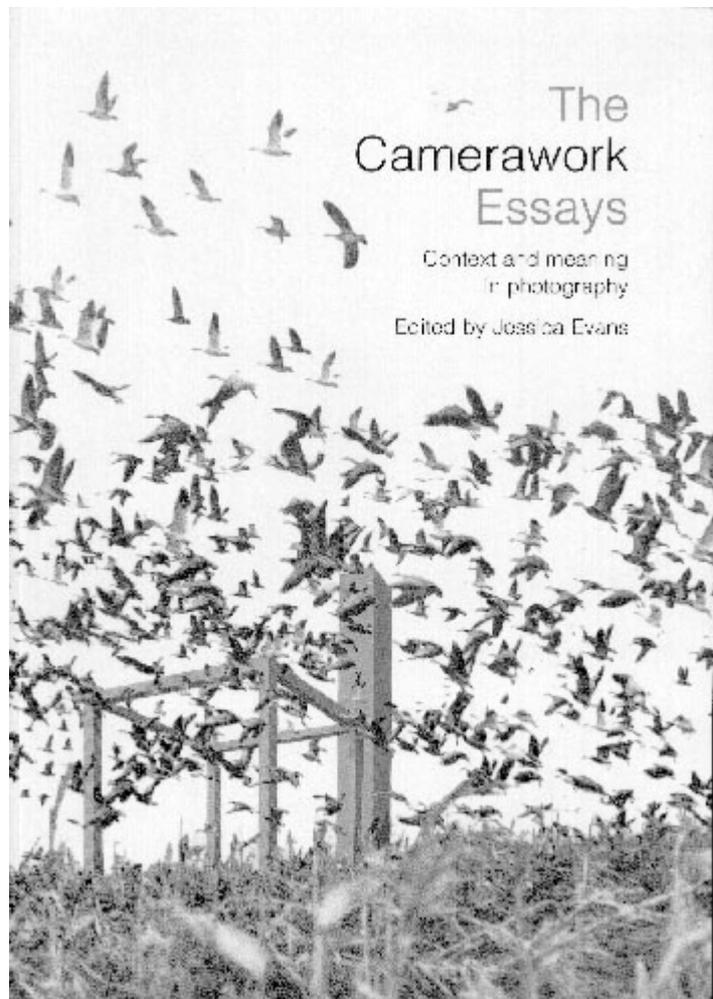
*The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography, Jessica Evans (editor).*

*London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997*

As one of a small band of photographers who founded the UK's first radical photo magazine **Camerawork** in 1976, this book comes as a rude reminder of what went wrong. Within a decade it had lost the plot, spiralling out of control in endless discoursing, analysing, theorising and criticising - to the point of paralysis. One of the book's contributors recalls that in the 1980s "quite a few of the most politically and theoretically 'advanced' photographers stopped taking pictures altogether. The act of photographing someone had been so analysed as a relation of power that it came to be experienced as politically impossible." A cruel joke.

**The Camerawork Essays** serves up some of the evidence. What had begun as an alternative magazine by photographers for photographers is here edited in abstruse academic language as an anthology by scholars for scholars. Fourteen essays by twelve contributors. The editor, Jessica Evans, offers to "recover an historical understanding of **Camerawork's** motivation for encouraging a democratising practice in photography."

I was a co-editor for four years, at a time when the magazine was in its



ascendancy. It's as an insider that I've been asked to comment, based on my experience. My remarks are about the anthology as a whole, not the individual texts.

Jessica Evans writes: "I have tried above all to present an accessible but critical introduction to the twists and turns of the debates in recent British radical photography." Cool. Yet on the facing page she writes: "For this reason, as the magazine followed the trajectory of a 1970s Marxist analysis that had initially regarded cultural production in direct terms as an agency of class consciousness, but then added a structuralist emphasis on the relative autonomy of the structures of meaning of meaning, the concept of ideology became central as a way of thinking of representation in the mass media." Not cool. This says a lot about the nature of the book and her idea of 'accessible'. In tone and feel it largely misrepresents the magazine.

**Camerawork** was lively, visual, user-friendly, polemical. **The Camerawork Essays** is dry, didactic, specialist, pretentious. Different times, different motives, different audiences. Change the context and the meaning changes. Without a hint of irony the book is subtitled 'Context and Meaning in Photography'.

**Camerawork** was a child of its time. It was nameless until the very last moment. Its mission statement - which I drafted and the others approved - was also of its time.. "By exploring the application, scope and content of photography, we intend to demystify the process. We see this as part of the struggle to learn, to describe and to share experiences and so contribute to the process by which we grow in capacity and power to control our own lives." This aim survived till 1980. We insisted on clear, comprehensible language and often asked authors to rewrite, to find an accessible way of expressing themselves - all part of our project to 'demystify'. Jessica Evans's text would have failed the test.

The **Camerawork** I worked on blended image and text, theory and practice with care. But Evans detects a problem of 'editorial coherency' from the start. She writes: "The tone of **Camerawork**, even within the same issue, oscillated between hard-line Marxism, humanist individualism, and the rhetoric of the 1960s counterculture - often with blissful unawareness." The truth is we were acutely aware of what we were doing. We discussed it a lot. We didn't write editorials, we 'editorialised' in the balance and juxtaposition of the content. For example, a one-page review of the sexist **Women are Beautiful** faced a one-page review of the feminist **Growing up Female**; or an interview with Marxist photographer Robert Golden provided a telling contrast with the concerns of arch-formalist photographer Ralph Gibson in an interview a few pages away.

We didn't patronise our readers. We trusted their intelligence. They could judge issues and make up their own minds. In the plurality of ideas and attitudes there was something for all our readers. Evans's remark implies that blissful *awareness* would have compelled us to opt for one consistent position - what kind of stultifying notion is that? We sought to create a popular, dynamic forum in which even 'heavy' theoretical

essays were palatable, and somehow we succeeded. If she understood this Evans might have tried to produce a more palatable book herself.

The political and cultural challenges posed by **Camerawork** are here made to seem unduly difficult and tedious. With subtlety, the magazine promoted vivid and illuminating debates on a wide range of issues and genres (too many to list here). Theory and analysis played a useful but small part. You wouldn't know this from **The Camerawork Essays**. Again the book misrepresents the nature of the magazine.

Each of the essays is given its own new 'context', a mini-introduction, usually by the original author, offering hindsight thoughts on the significance of the piece. The effect of these texts is to distance the essays even further from their original context - the dynamic of the magazine - and subject them (and us!) to a fiendish forest of footnotes. Generally, however, these new reminiscences are the most interesting pieces, short first-person accounts that provide much-needed relief from all the theory and analysis.

The book gives a misleading account of the origins and early years of **Camerawork**. In the introduction Evans refers to one of the founders, the late Jo Spence, repeatedly and some founders not at all. The effect is to create a distorted impression of people's relative importance and roles. This is invidious. The magazine was the collective expression of a small, committed editorial group who worked for nothing to get it out. It was a collaborative effort, based on trust and mutual respect. There was no 'Editor', we were small and informal enough to have equal say as co-editors. I welcome and endorse the tributes paid to Jo Spence, who was an inspirational colleague. But I have to say the Introduction is a disservice to historical accuracy and to those, unacknowledged in the book, whose role and contribution behind-the-scene was crucial.

Evans ends **The Camerawork Essays** with a personal appreciation of Spence's post-**Camerawork** achievements, an essay that never appeared in the magazine, and is therefore historically misplaced here. And Spence's own essay 'The Politics of Photography' which launched the magazine is unforgivably omitted! The effect is to further skew the historical picture. Spence's reputation is secure, and has largely to do with her output outside of her year-and-a-half with **Camerawork**. It doesn't require this kind of awkward reconstruction.

It's curious that Jessica Evans, concerned to "recover an historical understanding" didn't bother to talk with three of the four remaining co-founders. A strange omission by someone versed in 'the politics of representation and the representation of politics'? My own involvement, from 1973, (first as the Half Moon Gallery and later the Half Moon Photography Workshop), included the launch of the magazine. I still house an extensive dossier of original documents. She might have found it useful. Or maybe not, if she'd already decided what she wanted to write.

**The Camerawork Essays** shows the extent to which the process we'd begun has now been professionalised. That was never our intention. The essays are by academic careerists and professional writers. Those in the anthology who were originally published in my time were not part of **Camerawork**; they rarely, if ever, came through the door. And those of us who, like Jo Spence, made it all possible with our time and

energy are overlooked. What you don't learn from this book is that **Camerawork** was *our* baby, we decided how it would grow, the direction it would take. We weren't there for the money (there was none) so what were we there for? We encouraged, cajoled, bullied and begged the contributions we wanted; the magazine was our voice, and represented our journey. This dry, obfuscating book fails abysmally to bring any of this out, or any of the fun, anger, excitement, passion, exhaustion, turbulence, generosity, energy and creativity we experienced. The **Camerawork** that emerges from the book is not one I recognise.

**The Camerawork Essays** is an exercise in that 90s phenomenon - repackaging. The expression isn't used in the book. Nor is 'rewriting history'. The book **represents** only a narrow strand of **Camerawork's** legacy. It reduces a radical visual populism to a wordy specialism. It also demonstrates vividly why **Camerawork** ultimately went down the tube: the academics took over and photographers took off! Why? The cultural climate had changed in the 1980s - says Evans and "there was an emerging rapprochement between the culture of critique and the culture that constituted the object of that critique. 'Intertextuality' was not just an intellectual exercise in pointing out the latest rhetorical device of a postmodern media, but can be read as actually describing the particular texture of experience of those who live by the (media) image." Er ... as I said, the intellectuals took over. Their gobbledygook became of interest only to themselves and the magazine folded.

*PS. Barbara Hunt notes in the Preface that a perfect copy of Issue 1 (and any complete set of originals) has become a much-prized collector's item. If anyone out there is interested I may be able to help..*

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