

TEACHING PHOTOGRAPHY IN NEW ZEALAND (1987-88)

by Rutherford

It is only by spending an extended period in a foreign land that one comes hard up against one's own prejudices and preconceptions. Or, put another way, we often don't realise that our peg is round – until we try to fit into a square hole. For example, those of us from Anglo-Saxon societies often do not realise the extent to which we depend on a certain degree of courtesy from strangers – until we live among the French where it is almost wholly absent. It is only when the surrounding culture is different than our own that we become aware of our previously taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations. One's ability to be happy living in a foreign land depends on how one feels about these differences: some of these will chafe against a value we hold dear – others may give us the room to expand in a direction that our 'home' culture did not. It's a matter of comparing advantages to disadvantages, and deciding for ourselves which are more significant.

After spending our first couple of months in NZ touring the country, I contacted a private college of art and design in an effort to secure a post teaching photography. Invited to meet with the school's founder/director, he asked me to outline my views on the role of the plastic arts, the difference between commercial and fine art practice, and what I considered to be the essential elements of a photographic programme. After about an hour, he agreed to offer me a post ...teaching courses in Glass Art and Furniture Design. When I protested that I was not qualified to teach these subjects, he told me not to worry: "*We'll give you the notes*". Although he finally relented and agreed to assign me to teach Photography, this took longer than the initial interview.

Appointed Senior Tutor in Photography, I was told that ~~NameWithheldforLegalReasons~~, the Head of the photography course would sit in on my first classes. At the end of the third, he approached me in the corridor. "*Excuse me...*" he began, "*I have the impression that you are a very technical photographer.*" I confessed that, if he meant that I consider it worthwhile to understand the alchemy of the medium if we are to anticipate, control or collaborate with its 'picture' of the world in the resulting image, then, yes, I suppose that I was what one might call a 'technical' photographer. "*Then I have a question for you: When you put a negative in the enlarger, and then open and close the aperture of the enlarging lens, the print gets darker or lighter.*"

After a long silence while I waited for him to continue, I realised that he was looking at me expectantly.

"Yes ...?" I said, not quite knowing where this was going.

"*Why IS that?*"

A week later, I walked into the workroom a few minutes early, just as the previous class was packing up. A group of photo students were lined up, with wet, fresh B&W prints in hand, with questions for the instructor.

"*What's this thin white line on my print?*" the first one asked.

The instructor looked at the photo, then at the student and replied "*It's a scratch on your negative.*"

Now, normally, it is just NOT DONE for one instructor to contradict another in front of a student, but I just HAD to say something.

"*Excuse me...*" I interrupted politely, "*but a scratch reduces the density of the negative, meaning that more light passes through it, resulting in more exposure on the paper, and so making a black line on the print. A white mark means that something – usually dust or a hair – has increased the density on the negative.*"

"*Oh...*" said the other instructor, "*That makes sense when that you explain it like that...*" Turning to the student, she said, "*He's right; that's a hair on your negative.*"

The student thanked us and left.

The next student stepped forward fresh, wet print in hand and, pointing to a long, thin, curved white line across the image, asked: "*What is this white line on my print?*"

"*It's a scratch on your negative.*"

I later learned that this (newly-hired) instructor had completed the school's photography programme the year before –while ~~NameWithheldforLegalReasons~~ had been the photography programme. He had taught her everything she knew.