

William E. Parker interview with Candida Finkel at the School of Art, Chicago, Illinois, 1979.

Transcription made through Trint, minute markers provided after speaker's name.

William Parker [00:00:23] There's a type of meaning that covers a wider field of human consciousness than simply the individual photographer, artist or what have you. I think basically when I wrote that commentary on Uelsmann, it appeared at a time when people didn't anticipate that photographs could be discussed on the basis of any type of meaning that went beyond what you might call the reflection of imagery that the world offered as opposed to the individual.

Candida Finkel [00:00:51] Do you think it's important to know about the artist personally?

William Parker [00:00:56] Yes, I do. Only in the sense that it might be more of an essay in the principle of checks and balances. It would be that, you either-- I'm not terribly interested in internationalism. Let me give you an example. If John Ward writes on Garry Winogrand and Winogrand later insists that, well, what John Ward wrote has nothing to do with my work. That's "so what" --you know-- it's obviously the case where, from my view, and I think historically this can be confirmed that the artist is often the last person to realize the effect of pictorialization. And as a result, we find ourselves often in a very peculiar situation. We would like to, let's say, if we would want to address an issue and then we say, but I have no evidence, you know, within this photographer's or artist's own biography or statements or catalogs or what have you. And people are sometimes fearful of explaining their thoughts simply because of the fact that they don't have what we might call that intentional aspect to deal with. Well, as I stated before, I think that it's extremely important as a check and balance to find out whether or not there are strains of concern that are expressed by a picture maker. And then I think the biography can be important much more from the standpoint of, let's say, determining certain constructs of influence that might have surrounded the developing pictorialists and much more than the idea of whether or not what one writes about a person or observes in the work or what responses one has as to whether they fit.

Candida Finkel [00:02:42] What kind of influences? You mean parental influences or social?

William Parker [00:02:45] Well, I would say I would say the latter would be, personally, much less concerned with the idea of reductive concerns that is parental or the whole matrix of childhood or young adulthood or even adulthood. I think the concern that would be now much more of a social milieu and the types of, let's say, educative factors, educational factors that led to a certain level of consciousness. Certainly I would be much more interested in asking the photographer questions about what work do you feel has been most influential? In other words, that we have been so cursed, I personally think, by the principle of individualism -- and I don't want that to be forgotten, but I think that we've lost the realization that individuals are working in a context and as a result, that the picture is not an isolable thing. I think on occasion, in my conversations, well, the fact that there were exactly three with Arthur Siegel. Certainly there was that Freudian bias. And quite frankly, I can see the merits of this in certain cases. But what bothers me is that that form of reductive interpretation tends to eventually lay everything at the doorstep of mom and dad or a kind of Lockean viewpoint, as though we came into this world as a tabula rasa, and of course whatever influences occurred are imprinted upon us indelibly and whatever traumas we've suffered inevitably explain the art. I just don't think that this even adds up,

and again I would say historically, as well as in relationship to the realizations of accomplishments that I know that people have made are just simply not traceable to personal biography alone. That may be a factor. But let's say, as in the case of Weston, I think it's far more significant to speak of his terrible dilemma: his suffering between the need to be associated with matter, with Eros, which obviously was expressed very powerfully in his relationships to women and yet his also terribly great need to be associated with some ideal, some sort of transcendental or even I shouldn't say transcendental, but transcendent ideology, which he never could quite explain either. It's like that interest in the thing, the thing itself, but more than the thing, the quintessence of the thing. The quintessential aim coupled with the thing, is a very terrible dilemma. It's a very terrible burden for someone to have to bear, wanting to be both in the realm of Eros and being in the realm of Logos at the same time. And I think there may be a medium there. But Weston, was sort of harmed, I personally feel, by his arch Platonism, because that's exactly what happened, it was an absolutist doctrine that he expressed. And his work confirms that: seldom does, he except in those works-- the early explorations of the West and the later images that we associate with the California landscape imagery--most of the work that that the public consciousness devoured had to do with images or subjects in images that were metamorphosized, no matter how concrete: the bedpan, the pepper, the cabbage leaf, the carrot, the model, the female model; still the object is transformed and therefore it becomes an idea rather than the thing itself. And I think that I'd rather deal with this on the basis of Edward Weston's mythic problem: a man caught between the ideal and the real and never quite able to resolve it as well.

Candida Finkel [00:06:47] But yet you and I think it was in the Murray Riss essay you talk about photography being an ideal medium for uniting the real and the ideal.

William Parker [00:06:56] And I certainly agree with that. And I think that it depends also what directions the imagery takes. That's why I would say that in Weston's case, I wouldn't necessarily find it very valuable to deal with any aspects of his parental complexes or sexual life or what have you. Much more dealing with the work and in relationship to his own Daybooks and his own writings. You know, let's say in the Murray Riss commentary, what I was trying to deal with there was the fact that I find that many younger photographers are reacting against the principle of equivalence. That is to say they want to deal with certain ideas and emotive concerns that they're involved with personally, but they don't want the photograph to become a testament to a world one can't visit, as Sommer would say. They don't want it to become a sort of confessional document, a testament to their own spirituality. At the same time, they don't necessarily want to go to the other polarity and have it become a testament to the banal or the mundane or the sort of utterly detached where the sense of authorship is completely removed. So what do they do? Well, they find themselves in that terrible dilemma. And I articulated in the Murray Riss commentary what I think is an emerging concern that is part of what Alan Coleman best defined as the directorial mode. They enter into their environment, they set up the subject. And if I were dealing with Les Krims or John Pfahl or Murray Riss, I can think of dozens, Emmet Gowin, where they have a strong directorial control over what the subject is before they even think about the documentation or the recording or the photograph. What they do is then, in essence, anticipate something. And I imagine it's all about a return of a pre-equivalence concept that appeared in the 15th century, most apparently in the works of Van Eyck and Robert Campin and Roger Van der Weyden. I think Les Krims has perhaps some of the most powerful symbolic images within the entire development of the history of photography. The interesting thing is there's a good example of, I admire his maturity in the sense that he's permitted, without question, certain people to call attention to his work and Hollis Frampton, myself, Bob Sobieszek, who against the grain I might add of a certain

professional disfavor toward his work, to deal with the fact that there's a very powerful symbolic construct in the entirety of the work. There are individual pictures that, for example, I've lectured on that I think are, for example, you remember the eclipse image of the woman lying on the bed with the wires in her mouth that come from wall sockets in the shape of a cross. This is as archetypal as any image that's ever been developed in any pictorial form. And I think a very powerful one for our time. But even besides individual pictures, or in spite of the fact that there may or may not be images of an archetypal nature or even that define the directorial mode or introduce prolepsis, collectively, Les's work deals with let's call it the shadow side, as Jung would speak of the shadow of our consciousness, of our collective consciousness. It's not a type of symbolism that probes some kind of individual set of concerns. It's the shadow of a particularly American consciousness that does demean the feminine. That does consider the woman as object, as property. I mean, he's extended that theme so apparently that the reason for the offense--and the offense of man as well as woman-- I think is because they're really having to see exactly what the main drift of American consciousness has been, certainly since the 19th century. You understand what I mean?

Candida Finkel [00:11:28] So you're saying he's very important because he's had the courage to make this more clear than other people.

William Parker [00:11:31] Yes. I don't know whether he would be delighted by my saying that. But I think that Les delights in recognizing that what he is doing is a matter of bringing to the public, and he means it to the public, not just to the curatorial levels and to the professional galleries and museums and so on, but to the public, a consciousness of their concerns. And that their rejection quite often is a measure of how successful he's been. He's not at all a foolish man, you know, and he's not at all lacking in a certain degree of incredible wisdom. And I feel that is where the work is disturbing to many people. And I think quite often it fails, to be perfectly frank. I think it fails on occasion when it attempts to draw into public view issues that are so obvious that they no longer deal with anything but what we might call a top of the head, you know, attitude.

Candida Finkel [00:12:32] How do these archetypes come into the culture?

William Parker [00:12:36] Well, (laughs) I'm not so certain that I should...

Candida Finkel [00:12:40] It seems as if they're sort of always there. And yet there must have been, were they born with gods? There is almost a religious quality about them or a Platonic or Kantian ideal about them, as if...

William Parker [00:12:53] Right. Perhaps if we tried to trace the source of the archetype, we come to the Imago Dei. The idea that God is at the source of these, but independent of that, I think, Candida, it is very important that people recognize that even Jung himself stated that the archetype is like an "as if" story. I don't think one will be able to isolate an archetype, although I shouldn't be so sure of that. In other words, we can speak about physical archetypes such as RNA and DNA. We can talk about instincts as having, even scientists can say, instinct is this. We can talk about engrams and we trace it back to electricity and chemistry in the brain. I think the problem is that the archetype is only evidenced--it becomes a matter of evidence-- in the expressions of the human psyche over countless thousands upon thousands of years and obviously through the inspection of cultural groups that have no possibility of contact with one another. They had at the basis of many of their stories, allegories, themes, whether in art or literature or music or what have you, similar constructs of meaning or similar constructs of intention. They come

into society by way of the mind, you know, and they obviously were there within the original postulate of the mind. When we talk about alchemy, we can be speaking of practices that occurred in the Middle Ages or we can be talking about alchemy as it appeared in even earlier paradigms of Greek thought. But basically, we're talking about a type of inquiry that did use an external, it was like a pretense at appearing to be involved with the work to find the Philosopher's Stone, to use retorts, to engage in the admixture of certain chemistry or use of certain minerals, in order to appear to be working out a problem, obviously as Jung has defined it in *Psychology and Alchemy* and certainly in his last volume, *Mysterium Conjunctionis*, that is volume 18 of his *Collected Works*, deals with the principle of the conjunctio, or the idea that the work outside is affecting the mental operations, the psychic operations internally as it were. And I think the deep concern with alchemy recently--and certainly it has appeared, as I mentioned before, Michael Lesy has been greatly moved by the concerns of Jung's commentaries upon alchemy... It's no wonder why persons as far ranging as Thomas Mann and Nathaniel Hawthorne were concerned with aspects of alchemy, not as practitioners, but an interest in the subject, simply because the fact that there's a recognition that everything we do and I think particularly in picture making, that we are performing a work and a kind of externalization of our voice or of our consciousness or of our emotional concerns or cognitive concerns, whatever they may be, that we are investing materials with these concerns. And as a result, what we might ask ourselves the question, for what purpose and to what aim? Certainly part of that aim is to communicate with the public. Part of it is to communicate with ourselves, but above all, to somehow heal the great cleavage that developed in the 17th century with Cartesian philosophy.

Candida Finkel [00:16:45] That would then account for why photography was invented in a lot of different countries at the same time, in terms of this need for...

William Parker [00:16:52] Yes... internationally, consciousness grew to a certain point that it could not possibly admit the same practices that appeared in early alchemy, that there was not going to be the voice of Paracelsus to guide us again or even the victims of early Gnostic concerns, but that basically the need was for finding and discovering, or else we can say matter discovered psyche, a possibility of a medium that would give justification to the components of consciousness that had developed over centuries. And without embarrassment, people could then engage in experiments with matter. It's why Jerry Uelsmann speaks of photography as a form of alchemy. I think in his earlier work... I think it has been much more intentionalist later and therefore it's not as successful as the earlier work. That he really did engage in the idea of recording parts of the world and then in his studio finding the possible synthetic possibilities, the synthesizing possibilities that could occur in the work. And so therefore, what he discovered was as much a matter of an alchemical experiment, that is to find the stone, the lapis, is to find it out there in the form. But then also so that it speaks of a kind of echo of what is happening intrapsychically. That is what is in here is also posited in what is out there. And the two work in a kind of echoing of one another.

Candida Finkel [00:18:25] How do you think Minor White fits into that whole spiritual...

William Parker [00:18:27] I think that Minor's whole extension of the Stieglitzian idea of equivalence and his concern with the idea of seeking spirit in matter. I might add that I think it was less a concern, I shouldn't say this so much in an emphatic tense. But let's say his interest in presuming that spirit already resided in matter or that perhaps spirit in a sort of hierarchical order was more important than matter. It was a problem. In other words, and certainly any originally sage alchemist would not have agreed. But yet his

whole process was very strongly the behavior of an alchemist. The whole principle of sensing within the world vibrations of content, of wanting to make oneself receptive as a photographer to hear the voice of nature, not just to see it but to sense it in one's total physical self, certainly posited some of the same kinds of paradigms that the alchemists dealt with...I think that he was a man who obviously could not tolerate further victimization by his own sensation complex. And as a result, his intuitive function tended to deliver himself from sensation. Minor's life was a remarkable achievement in many ways. And the fact that he was a man who suffered terribly when he admitted his own body consciousness or his own sensation consciousness. Obviously, it was the shadow aspect of a hidden component of his functions as Jung defined four typical functions. And sensation was certainly Minor's unaware function, his hidden function, or the one that he did not express directly. When he found himself in the realm of sensation functioning there was always a problem of becoming the victim of himself or of events around him. Therefore, he worked on the basis and I think even spoke and wrote and taught on the basis of a highly intuitive definition of activity and how he viewed the world and the way he viewed photographs. Many people thought that Minor was delivering us what you might call the mysteries of himself through that intuitive function, not so. If they look again at his work, it's as Jung would posit, that always the function that's not used by anyone or the one that's not accessible to consciousness is the one that's most operative in the development of their most important work and Minor's work reeks with a kind of sensory quality. And yet he thought he was seeing the spiritual, the intuitive, the very opposite of sensation.

Candida Finkel [00:21:34] So would he be another part of this Cartesian split that you're talking about?

William Parker [00:21:40] Definitely. Well, look at Octave of a Prayer. I mean, it's like Minor, in an admixture, a kind of a game developing a polyglot philosophy based upon aspects of Zen, Gurdjieff, Jungianism and a concern with Edward Everett Hale's Episcopalian, Anglican, philosophies-- all valuable. But I think that he tended to seek responses that would eventually justify his need to escape matter, his need to not be victimized by the sensation function. In Octave of a Prayer, he announces that after the fourth octave we throw away the camera and toss away our bodies and reach this sort of Chardin-esque pneumosphere...Minor says pneumon sphere, the idea of the holy and the idea of the transcendent. But yet as I said, I think it's remarkable that he resolved those issues in his life by arriving at a state of mind, a state of teaching, a stage of practice in his work that enabled him to thoroughly believe in that split. So in other words, it was healthily resolved, although I think it was unfortunate that there was a closure system built into his thinking about photography or of his own activity about photography. But that is to say, I feel that in the later editorial comments he made in Aperture in the last years before his death tended to imply that he was very dismayed at many recent photographers' interest in the world. Their return to what's often called dumb subject matter or the banal or the mundane: the obvious presentations of the environment. As if he had spent his life trying to hope that we would see or experience the spiritual, and the spirit in matter. And I think that Minor and Walter Chapell and so many others who were influenced by the Gurdjieffian philosophy, theology, call it whatever you will, practice, were struck by an interest in matter, certainly, and the idea of hoping to say that all things were ensigns of the great chain of being of spirit, but as a result, matter never had the opportunity that he expressed per se. And so photography became an excellent form of, well, I might even be so bold as to call it the trap for persons of this nature. In other words, that's why the alchemists believed that matter also contained within it the capacity to magnetize, to draw consciousness, from the mind into itself.

Candida Finkel [00:24:38] So it's interesting that if I understand you correctly, that photography came out of this need to reintegrate matter into the ideal, operated fairly successfully that way in its infancy. And then people began to take it over, as Steiglitz, as we talked about the other day, who again wanted to separate or elevate the mental over the physical or material...

William Parker [00:25:03] I think that probably Stieglitz would be (laughs) just a footnote to Descartes.

Candida Finkel [00:25:08] Do you think that we have then in terms of art photography recovered from this Stieglitzian split? Are other people working today who are re-synthesizing now between spirit and matter?

William Parker [00:25:20] Yes, I do. I think certainly we've had what I'll call a balancing act occurring in the last decade and since Bob Frank, although I don't want to be just glib but I think there are problems I wouldn't just attribute to Frank the total change in the attitude in photography because there was a strongly propagandistic strain to his work. But in relationship to individuals such as Robert Adams or Joe Deal, Nick Nixon, Jim Dow, Bill Burke, Elaine O'Neill. The sense of developments that even occurred among those who are more interested in Intermedia, such as Eileen Cowan. The sense of reengaging what's directly around them. What is the presence of their cityscape or their landscape or their friendscape, is not to treat it as though it must be altered, but to give it a presence that remembers it very directly. And it's not a snapshot attitude or what have you. It's a kind of review of the possibilities of reengaging what we do see so constantly around us, but fail to take notice of. I think so many of the people I've just named, Jan Grover, for example, has done a tremendous amount to heal our split from our world by presenting us just that, the world. And it's not that there's a hyper degree of unique organization within her work, the serial work, or the side by sides or even the new more still life oriented works. I think Victor Schrager, in developing the new still life work that he's dealing with, not only posits the possibility of relationship between various components in the arrangement of the materials that he photographs, but reintroduces us to a seeing of relationship between things that do not have what you might call inherent interest in and of themselves. And it's not a design feature. Yet these are the persons who have tended to offer us an opportunity to get back to this world, to see it again. Ron Lane? in California, can photograph a hedge in front of a typical domestic apartment complex that can become as dramatic as any equivalent by Stieglitz, that is with clouds as a subject. Mainly the sense that the two are sort of polar opposites. Now, what I see emerging between the two appears in the work, for example, of John Pfahl. The use of this principle of the sense of touch becoming an integral part of photographic activity. I mentioned before the directorial aspect, what I'll call literally coming in and affecting the subject, showing that the photograph is a record, whether prior to or afterward--during or afterward-- of the photographer being involved with that subject. John Pfahl lays ropes or wraps tinfoil-- the numbers of things that he develops to alter the landscape very temporarily. But at the same time, that entering into the world he's going to photograph, that finding a cue from its configurative signals. That is the contour of the canyon wall or the striated aspects in the rock formation or the continuing horizon line of a seascape, or the determining of a relationship between what that world is signaling to him--as observer--and then to introduce elements either the foreground or right within the body of that particular landscape environment, that will again remind him very strongly not only of it and what one might say John becomes the mediational agent between the world reminding himself of it and then also us of it and then photographing it, generally from a view that includes, how shall I put it, seldom are we forced into a lack

of recognition that something has been done to alter, he doesn't try to guard the syntax of his alterations. So as a result, we know that world has been touched. I think, again, that the idea of Schrager or Grover, in their recent still lives, there's no doubt in our minds that this world of objects--they've been touched, they've been manipulated. Now that idea of touching something and getting into the world now is an entirely different construct from standing behind a camera, looking at the cloud or the vegetable, or the Lobos rock, or the human figure, or the landscape, or groups of people and sensing that we are forever distant from them. That we, by our camera work, in the equivalent sense, tend to make it appear as though it couldn't be possibly valuable to enter into an engagement with those folk or those things or even within reality, the construct of any kind of exchange with them, insofar as the photograph finally testifies to it. And the photograph, it becomes basically a transcendence of the presence of those things.

Candida Finkel [00:31:07] So contrary to the language which is used, you're suggesting that the banal is actually the spiritual...

William Parker [00:31:16] Absolutely. The greatest tragedy of our period is that we've called the spiritual that which is distant and what the spiritual, I like to think of Mircea Eliade in his book *The Sacred and the Profane*. It's the profane that is the spirit. Now, that's the paradox in the use of terms, or rather a non sequitur, I guess you would say, because one doesn't follow the other. But truly, I think that the real problem is the fact that it is matter, it is thingness. It is not that we want quintessences, (laughs) I would love to see emerging photographer really take and rewrite the Day Books, but just reverse everything.