

Ruthless Courtesies: The Making of Martin Parr

The first thing to be said about Martin Parr is that you cannot separate the man from the work. This is a cliché frequently written about artists, and like all clichés, it is broadly true. I know many artists and photographers whose work and personalities, whose work and lives, seem oddly disconnected, although at some level they cannot be, if they are any good. But Martin Parr as a personality—photobook collector, curator, patron of young photographers, all-round enthusiast—is at least as important as Martin Parr the photographer.

I have been associated with Martin for many years. We spent some five or six years alone working on our two-volume history of the photobook,¹ yet apart from assorted short essays, dust jacket blurbs, and reviews, I have never written an extended essay about his work—an omission I propose to rectify here and now.

Martin Parr is an exemplary photographic figure at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Not quite an out-and-out modernist, not quite a postmodernist, he is a leading light, indeed a founder, of the New European Color Photography School, yet is also a member of Magnum, photojournalism's premier agency. So he is familiar with the contemporary treadmill of the successful photojournalist, but he also frequently works in a "conceptual" way, and shows in art galleries as well as purely photographic galleries.

He occupies, in short, a central place in photography. He is a photographic polymath, not that somewhat sad species, the commercial journeyman seeking the cachet of artist, but a genuinely versatile photographer, one who lives, sleeps, and breathes photography in all its manifestations, from base function to lofty art. Martin's whole *modus operandi*, like that for instance of Juergen Teller, depends upon slipping deftly between photographic worlds, thereby instinctively addressing such issues as the role of the photographer, the status of the photographic image in our culture, and indeed the very nature of contemporary culture itself. Parr's whole career, and more pertinently his imagery, asks questions about high and low culture, art and commercialism, the duplicity of the photographic image, and (not a whit incidentally) about the lives we live today.

Surely all ambitious photographers ask such questions? Of course they do, but few are in such a privileged position (a position he has gained for himself), operating at a fortunate interstice between art, fashion, and popular, that is to say, common culture.

The second thing to be said about Martin Parr, which might be obvious—though it doesn't ring true to me—concerns his perceived aggression and cynicism toward his subjects.

Cynicism as well as irony. These are the two presumed characteristics trotted out in at least three-quarters of the discussions on the work of Martin Parr, in the same way that in almost any article on the work of Diane Arbus, the word *freak* seems mandatory. Or to



Martin Parr, *Badminton House, Badminton Horse Trials, Gloucestershire, England, 1988*, from the series *The Cost of Living*

take a contrary example, has there been anything written about André Kertész in which the word *humanist* fails to appear?

So Martin, because his various projects have tended to deal specifically with an uncompromisingly direct, even confrontational depiction of social groups, is branded as aggressive, which is then conflated in many peoples' minds with cynicism. Anyone with more than a passing interest in photography knows of the antipathy felt by the late Philip Jones Griffiths who famously opposed Parr's election into Magnum, saying that the latter's work opposed everything the agency stood for, and that he would subvert its proud humanistic tradition.²

Parr's style is undoubtedly direct, "in yer face," one might say. Such directness on the part of photographers has always had its problems, and attracted its share of moralizing detractors. Ever since the destitute sharecroppers recorded in Walker Evans's *Let Us Now*

Praise Famous Men became upwardly mobile and ashamed of their former poverty, charges of misrepresentation, stereotyping, manipulation, even imagistic assault, have attended the photographer depicting the social acts of human beings. The standard device for deflecting critical flak of this nature has been to intone the incantation “social documentary,” a strategy that immediately claims for the work qualities such as honesty of purpose, authenticity, right-mindedness, evidential relevance. By claiming that documentary is good for you, that it is the proper study of humankind by humankind, the cunning photographer attempts to wrest the moral high ground from potentially aggrieved subjects, thereby fobbing off the critics, and in the process acquiring the useful bonus of political “street cred.”

To his great credit Martin Parr does not court the safety of the social documentary alibi. He roundly dismisses those who do so for their evident hypocrisy, while at the same time castigating the cant of their critics. For Parr is well aware that many, if not most photographers of the social landscape—the good ones anyway—are not simpleminded advocates for social groups. Their games are usually far more complex, even those of the politically motivated. If they encompass the aims and aspirations of those whom they photograph then well and good, but although the photographer might tell the stories of his subjects, the story he is most concerned with telling is his own. To pretend differently is precisely to adopt the mealymouthed, hypocritical stance that Parr despises. As he has remarked, with commendable honesty: “Have you ever heard a photographer speaking about the power he or she has over people? Yet it’s unquestionably there. Photography isn’t innocent, it’s riddled with ulterior motives.”³

Let’s add another note into the debate. If Parr talks about the power the photographer has over people, what about writers? Novelists frequently talk about it—they can kill a character with impunity if they so wish. And they regard it as their heroic imperative to filter, edit, mold, interfere, and importantly, use their imagination. In short, the right to *create*. I recall reading somewhere the writer and critic, Frederic Raphael, using words like *devour* and *cannibalize*, when defending the novelist’s prerogative to be shameless about such practices. And in a wider context, such a sense of divine mission is extended to other forms of writing. One or two additional moral caveats may be placed upon the writer of reportage, but they are as nothing compared to the ethical injunctions by which the moral watchdogs of matters cultural seek to restrain the photographer.

The reason for this is clear; its logic may be challenged only in part. No matter how first-hand or direct his or her experience, the account of the writer is discreetly diverted—sieved and sifted in varying degrees through the screen of the auteur’s sensibility. The very nature of the medium—indirect, displaced, and with a desperately slow, manual mode of operation—dictates that. And the same may be said of painting or sculpture. But the photograph is something else, fixed immutably (Photoshop notwithstanding) in one five-hundredth of a second. In less time than the blinking of an eyelid, it is set down, fully formed, like Athena from the

head of Zeus. It would appear to be a simple, mechanical trace of reality, delivering an actuality that is nominally unmediated.

Consider, for example, the most popular of photographic genres, the portrait. We are not given a mere image, a likeness, a representation. We are given Jane Smith herself. At least, that is the common perception. And it is, I would venture, only partly a misconception. For it cannot be denied, least of all by the photographer, that what we have is, verily, Smith. This, after all, is why the particular medium of the camera was chosen—for its undeniably seductive specificity. But of course the photographer is playing a complicated, some might say dangerous and duplicitous game. He or she is, paradoxically, out to transcend that “simple” verisimilitude. The photographer is as concerned as anyone to make an image, to create. To encapsulate Smith certainly, but also to render so much more than Smith, to progress beyond the superficial record and suggest deeper, more meaningful issues. Like life and death and the immortality of the soul. Or the iniquities and inequalities of history. Or perhaps just sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll.

However, perhaps Ms. Smith might not care to tread this larger stage, to be cast in the big picture or made to serve as the principal symbol in an allegory. Perhaps she dislikes being seen as a designer-wearing, Amex-brandishing, yuppie harpy when as everyone knows, in reality, she is nothing of the sort.

In a photographic cause célèbre, Shirley Brown, to be precise, felt slighted by misrepresentation of this sort. The culprit was Martin Parr and the vehicle was his project *The Cost of Living* (1989),⁴ his nominal portrait of the aspiring middle classes in consumerist ’80s Britain. Pictured at an art gallery opening in chic pillbox hat, and clutching a glass of wine as if to the manor born, Brown complained that Parr’s lens branded her maliciously as “affluent” and “consumerist.”⁵ She states that in reality she and the four companions so depicted in Parr’s image were employed part-time by the gallery at considerably “less-than-affluent” rates of remuneration. Another of the women in the photograph, we are told, requested the photographer to withhold publication or exhibition of the picture, feeling that she had been “photo-raped.”⁶

Without wishing to discount a genuine grievance, one might ask whether it was the rhetoric surrounding them as much as the pictures themselves that unsettled and prompted the plaintiffs for the prosecution. Possibly a little negotiation or explanation might have softened attitudes and assuaged bruised egos. To the dispassionate eye the image in question certainly seemed to delineate champagne aspirations, whether or not the protagonists had beer incomes at the time. It is the perennial dilemma. Any photographer or writer has his or her story to tell. If, as I have said, it encompasses the stories of his subjects that is one thing. If it does not, then there is the potential for dispute. But why does the photography of Martin Parr or Diane Arbus in particular raise this issue more than, say, the work of Kertész?

Here are a few more names plucked from the documentary canon, almost but not quite

at random: Sebastião Salgado, William Klein, Tony Ray-Jones, Garry Winogrand. With the exception of Salgado, none could be termed social documentary photographers in the purest sense, though all have been concerned with demonstrating personal views of modern urban reality, views that certainly subtend social issues. Yet if asked to comment upon them, many would probably laud three—Kertész, Ray-Jones, Salgado—as great humanists, concerned photographers who patently did not manipulate their subjects in a manner that was wholly ruthless, emotionally detached, and thoroughly exploitative. Arbus, Winogrand, and Klein, on the other hand, most likely would be castigated for those very misdemeanors.

However, I wonder whether many commentators are not so much criticizing methodology and intent, but rather voicing an instinctive reaction in favor of three essentially optimistic visions on the one hand, and against three essentially pessimistic visions on the other. Of course, I am oversimplifying matters considerably. Nevertheless, I doubt that my so-called humanistic trio were any less prone to objectifying their subjects than Arbus or Klein or Winogrand. I am convinced that few people really look at photographs and think, not simply about how they were made, not simply about how they represent things, but about what the artist was trying to say, what the artist was attempting to re-present. Even experienced critics are frequently taken in by this old chestnut, that the *subject matter* before the camera is the *subject* of the *image*, that *re-presentation* and *representation* are mutually *inclusive*.

Thus we are often in danger of setting moralistic double standards when dealing with photographs of the social landscape. Show the subject smiling, and the critics smile with you. Show a frown, and it will be mirrored by the frowns of the critics. Approach the subject directly, and you are more likely to be regarded as confrontational rather than open and honest. Adopt an oblique approach, and the chances are that it will be seen as sly and deferential rather than sly and shifty. Espouse a specific social rather than an artistic cause or your humanity and concern will be found wanting.

For all his acclaimed humanist bonhomie how deeply did André Kertész actually dig into the human condition? It seems to me that much of the delight in Kertész—and it cannot be denied that there *is* delight—derives from his images' elegant, painterly formalism. Often, Kertész's people are reduced, albeit painlessly, to mere formal ciphers, to compositional elements. This by itself is not eternally damning, but to my mind the bittersweet whimsy afflicting so much of Kertész is the simple obverse of the eternal, coruscating angst that drags down the work of say, Garry Winogrand. Both in a way are equally narrow and one-sided—great artists though both of them are. The light, elegiac novella versus the sour, overwrought kitchen sink drama. I might point equally pejoratively to the pseudo-irony of Ray-Jones at his least, or the overblown, operatic mock heroism of Salgado at his worst. To be sure, I may well have felt more comfortable being photographed by Kertész than Arbus. Kertész's result may have been more pleasing, warmer, and certainly less painful to me on

a superficial level, yet I feel that Arbus would have shown a greater all-round sense of purpose in human and in social terms, demonstrating, in short, more real humanity, however uncomfortable the experience might have seemed to me at first glance. I fully accept that this might be a minority view, because Arbus, of course, was an uncompromisingly aggressive photographer.

One of the fascinating things about Martin Parr is that we are faced with a figure who has worked, or has appeared to work, both sides of the conceptual street I have outlined, the sunny and the shady. And interestingly, the crossing-over itself was fairly abrupt, marked by what many would regard as a paradox. In the early '80s, Parr switched from black and white to color, and switched the tenor of his vision from gritty romanticism to hyaline realism. To be sure, important elements of the new vision were always there. Parr's typically English dry sense of humor, for instance, had long been a salient factor, but even that developed from a 1960s whimsy in the manner of the late Ray-Jones into an acerbic '80s irony, which appears to teeter on the edge of downright cynicism and is authentic Parr. Indeed, he may be said to have written the book on this particular quality. It is one of the singular characteristics that his numerous followers cannot hope to match, unlike his choice of medium-format equipment, a predilection for flash-on-camera, and a nervy, off-kilter way of framing.

But irony, even irony that might seem in danger of lapsing into cynicism, is not cynicism. It first emerged—the charge of cynicism, that is—when Parr published his first major body of color work in 1985, *The Last Resort*.⁷ He had moved to the town of Wallasey, across the River Mersey from Liverpool, and began to photograph the declining seaside resort of New Brighton, a few miles from his home. *The Last Resort* burst upon the photographic scene with the force of a volcano, producing, to say the least, a mixed critical reaction. Parr had dropped a large stone with some force into the British photography pond, and its ripples not only spread out but rocked the boat considerably. It is no exaggeration to say that *The Last Resort* was a defining moment in British photography.

Reactions were extreme, and I want to examine them, because they not only reveal something about Martin Parr, but define the parochial nature both of British photography and British society at that time, something that he was challenging whether he knew it fully or not. After all, Parr was only making photographs. *The Last Resort*, as Val Williams rightly notes, was basically “an exercise in looking.”⁸

For example, art critic David Lee's review berated Parr for taking as a middle class photographer (middle class in the British and European sense) a patronizing view of the working class: “[Parr] has habitually discovered visitors at their worst, greedily eating and drinking junk food and discarding containers and wrappers with an abandon likely to send a liberal conscience into paroxysms of sanctimony. Our historic working class, normally dealt with generously by documentary photographers, becomes a sitting duck for a more

sophisticated audience. They appear fat, simple, styleless, tediously conformist and unable to assert any individual identity. They wear cheap flashy clothes and in true conservative fashion are resigned to their meager lot. Only babies and children survive ridicule and it is their inclusion in many pictures which gives Parr's acerbic vision of hopelessness its poetic touch."⁹

And Robert Morris in the *British Journal of Photography* was equally damning: "This is a clammy, claustrophobic nightmare world where people lie knee-deep in chip papers, swim in polluted black pools, and stare at a bleak horizon of urban dereliction."¹⁰

But what were the reasons for this extreme criticism? I failed then to see it in the work, which to my mind was as affectionate and as tender as it was acerbic, although certainly sharp. But what is required of photographers if not to have a sharp and penetrating vision? I must say that I was amazed at some of the more vituperative comments, and wondered if these critics were not simply looking at the pictures and seeing their own prejudices reflected.

Of course that begs the question, quite a large question, in relation to photography. Perhaps I was looking and reflecting my own prejudices. Everyone brings prejudicial baggage to images, and Martin has had more than his fair share of detractors, some a little envious of his success. But he has also had many fanatical admirers, especially outside Britain. Inside his own country, he has had a particularly polarizing effect upon this island's photography. Or, I should say, did have, because the worst of the controversy has largely, although not completely, fallen away as he has attained the status of an "Old Master." Indeed, *The Last Resort* work was chosen recently as one of "1000 Artworks to See Before You Die" in the *Guardian* newspaper, and Elisabeth Mahoney's view seems to be the one that has prevailed: "At the time, Martin Parr's series of photographs from New Brighton, a dilapidated seaside spot on the Wirral, were seen as condescending. But now they look humorously engaged and fond, bringing British working-class nook and crannies into view, and reminding us how unusual that was (and is) in art photography."¹¹

Quite. It is now high time to focus upon Martin Parr's real achievement, but let us remain with *The Last Resort* for just a moment longer, and consider what it represents, not just in terms of a seismic shift in British photography—but later in European photography.

The black-and-white or color issue is clearly an important one. "Black and white are the colors of reality," remarked Robert Frank back in the 1950s. Indeed, for almost two decades following this notable aphorism, that was the avowed belief of most serious photographers. Color, it was believed, trivializes. It prettifies, privileges the exotic, and softens the harsh grayness of life's realities. Serious photographers, the medium's macho men, would have no truck with it, leaving it to the mass-media dream merchants and espousing the gloomy chiaroscuro of monochrome. By the mid-'70s, however, it was realized by this tiny band of self-styled "independent" photographers that everyone in the wide world bar themselves was utilizing color. Color was commonplace, cheap (or getting cheaper), and

cheerful. With this realization, which happened at a point in time around 1980, it was black and white that suddenly seemed exotic.¹² If color trivialized, so much the better. What better medium to record our trivial contemporary culture?

Suddenly, it was black and white that developed the air of unreality, seeming to glow with the obsolete bloom of yesteryear's medium. "Black and white are the colors of nostalgia," Frank might have said in the 1980s. And black and white in British photography seemed to refer to a mythic past as much as a material present. In imagery dealing with the social landscape, the twin specters of *Picture Post* magazine and Bill Brandt seemed to hang heavy at times. I do not intend that to be a negative observation. That black and white promotes at least a whiff of nostalgia has been a central tenet of photographic representation since the inception of the medium, yet seems a particularly pertinent issue at this particular moment in the development of expressive photography. All photographs, however, become instant history, and many of today's spicy color observations will, in turn, pass their sell-by dates, in spite of the best intentions of their auteurs. They will acquire the rosy cast of nostalgia before the yellow cast of decay, the notoriously fugitive nature of color materials notwithstanding, although Parr's color images, by virtue of their biting sharpness and depth, should survive this fate better than most.

In a way, color—and Parr's, in particular—seemed to signal the end of the humanist phase in British documentary photography. Although in truth, concerned photography had been changing for three decades or more—since the halcyon days of such photographers as Robert Frank and Ed van der Elsken. Since, as John Szarkowski succinctly put it, "a new generation of documentary photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends," with their aim "not to reform life, but to know it."¹³

In Britain, a decade or more after Szarkowski's shrewd observation, the reformist imperative remained firmly entrenched. There was a vigorous and certainly beneficial climate of public sponsorship for 1970s photography. But the left-leaning agenda of bodies like the Arts Council of Great Britain, which championed art as an instrument of social analysis, ensured that concerned documentary remained in ideological vogue longer than elsewhere. British photography was also heavily in thrall to the theoretical tenets of structuralism, which provided a bitter opposition to the unbridled capitalism of Margaret Thatcher's monetarist conservative government.

But why Martin Parr was perceived as being so at odds with this general documentary agenda is an interesting question. To be sure, he did not accompany his pictures with a polemic, but neither did others, including his friend Chris Killip, whose book *In Flagrante*,¹⁴ published in 1988, was rather differently received, criticized yes, but not perceived as almost subverting the proper purpose of documentary. Killip said of his book that it was "a fiction about metaphor,"¹⁵ but that somehow escaped the notice of reviewers from the concerned wing, and his book was generally seen to be on message, unlike Parr's.

Yet in essence, the gritty, black-and-white flavor of Killip's view of the northern working class, despite its superficial similarities to the "classic" tradition, was neither more didactic nor concerned than Parr's, nor less personal and aesthetically derived. A slight difference in emphasis marks these two important views of the working class in Thatcher's '80s Britain—they are both fiercely independent, individualistic photographers, yet they were perceived as being worlds apart. One has to conclude that the use of color was a substantive one, and that many were taken in by this factor, a matter of style rather than substance. Indeed, I have always argued that the great divide between the old and new schools within Magnum—which basically began when the agency took on color photographers Harry Gruyaert and Parr—has been largely a question of style wars.

Magnum's reputation as home for some of the world's best and most concerned documentary photographers did not collapse overnight when Parr joined them. The style of some of the photography changed. There was a difference in emphasis here and there, but like the rest of his colleagues in the agency, Martin Parr remains basically a documentary photographer. He might channel his work through art galleries, make artist's books, and so on and so forth—as do most of his colleagues—but fundamentally he is concerned with documenting contemporary life, surely the ideal mission statement not only for Magnum but most of photography. Martin may deploy humor, in a typically English, somewhat mordant fashion, but at root he is commenting upon modern mores, from a sharp, edgy, ironic, critical, yet consistent political point of view. Far from being an embodiment of "the moral climate of Thatcher's rule," as Philip Jones Griffiths ungraciously put it,¹⁶ Parr is a trenchantly critical observer of the dumbed-down, consumerist culture that emerged during the Lady's premiership, and not a caricaturist of individuals.

There is a big theme here—how consumerism and the pursuit of a quick buck has come to dominate our lives and our thinking—which has been a constant thread in Parr's work since *The Last Resort* and his early color work from the north of England. And this was certainly confirmed by the 1989 *Cost of Living*, which contains some of his sharpest, and possibly sourest social observations. It is far more critical in tone than *Resort*, and if anything could be considered his chronicle of the Thatcher years—it is surely this, one of his most acerbic, and important books.

And yet, as always in Parr, among the implicit and explicit social criticism, the needle-sharp observation, there is a degree of warmth and affection for the foibles of human beings, though there are occasional exceptions. The hair-flicking girls at badminton, for instance, always remind me of Szarkowski's observation about a Brassai: "Who else ever made a picture so full of wormwood?"¹⁷ Martin Parr did. There is also the forlorn spectator at a Greenock Morton football match.¹⁸ His scarf is emblazoned with the word *Morton*, but a fold has obscured the "t," so in the picture it reads *Moron*. Incidentally, this is a tiny detail in a complicated image, so I cannot believe Martin noticed it when shooting. I am

full of admiration that he even noticed it at the proofing stage. The result is a brilliant, very funny, savage picture, but as I say, these are notable exceptions. Parr's humor may be sly, or pointed, but I firmly believe he tends to poke fun—for the most part—at society rather than individuals. The Greenock picture was just one of those gifts for which he had to thank the photographic gods.

Any photographer, no matter how much of a social critic—unless photographing something as desperate as war or utter social deprivation—must have affection for his or her theme, and it should show. Frequently, as Parr clearly demonstrates in his work, it is a two-edged sword, a love/hate thing. The ambivalence of *Last Resort*, which leads to the even more apparent ambivalence of *Cost of Living*, might be traced back to his grandfather, who not only introduced him to photography, but to the northern English resort of Scarborough and the delights of this hitherto forbidden fruit. And what were its delights? Like much forbidden fruit, the seaside was vulgar. As culture it was distinctly low, yet the tantalizing promise of lubricious pleasures hovered in the seductive haze, around the bared flesh, the seedy pleasure arcades and gaudy cafés. As Parr says, “if the seaside was tatty and more than a little run-down, it was also vibrant.”¹⁹ Thus a simple—and of course not-so-simple—correlation, an indisputable truism, was formed in the mind of the young Parr. *Tacky* frequently means *lively*. Whether or not one assumes that the automatic corollary must also pertain, it does not matter. The celebrated Parr penchant for all things kitsch has indelible links with the seaside. His seaside observations in general have the intensity of a Proustian recall from childhood or adolescence, a sudden unlocking of a half-remembered, half-forgotten strata of the imagination.

Thus although Martin Parr is often regarded as a satirist in a typically English mode running all the way from Jonathan Swift to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and the magazine *Private Eye*, one must qualify that characterization. Satire at its purist predicated a biting anger, a political edge verging on the anarchic and blatantly misanthropic. Some certainly have seen a nihilistic, even antisocial strain in his work, but I would beg to differ. Like one of his heroes, the late comedian Tony Hancock, Parr has too much affection for his subjects. He patently loves the seaside, kitsch, and the excesses of consumerist culture. For him they are an entertainment, a sustenance for the spirit, a laboratory for photographic experiment. His vision might be sharp and skeptical—he certainly has the essential pessimism of the satirist—but it is also playful and whimsical, even surprisingly gentle at times if one looks closely enough. He lies much more within the mainstream English comic tradition of self-deprecating irony. Unlike the true satirist, Parr is not disaffected. He is assuredly a part of the world he photographs, and if clearly not sharing all its values, he is not seeking to demolish it totally. After all, it furnishes him with endless raw material.

Like many artists, his attitude toward his material is ambivalent. So many photographers today are preoccupied with photographing the scrofulous interface of our “denatured”

world, pretending varying degrees of righteous indignation or nonchalant contempt, but where would they be without the starting point for their formal speculations? Martin Parr loves kitsch, but that does not prevent him from railing at the bland blanket of uniformity with which an indiscriminate culture of kitsch has smothered us.

The big theme therefore, emerged gradually, organically, as Parr both developed his vocabulary—the fill-in flash, the close-ups, the garish color—and his thoughts about what he was doing. After *Cost of Living* and his admission into Magnum, his perspective became more international, and so the theme and its various interrelated sub-themes, both broadened and deepened. Not that everyone saw it that way, because the third body of work that contributed fundamentally to the making of Martin Parr was another fundamental shift, and for some a shift too far.

Common Sense (1999) is where some felt that Parr had gone completely off the rails, placing artiness before documentary values. Launched in over forty galleries more or less simultaneously all over the world,²⁰ with the resultant media razzmatazz, *Common Sense* consisted of sets of Xerox copier prints presented in large, Becher-like grids. The exhibition was accompanied by a photobook²¹ with full double-page bleeds, and colors that were lurid even by Parr standards.

Yet *Common Sense* is important because it demonstrated, as it were, another string to his expressive bow. Most photographers have only one—think about it—but having two gives Parr an enormous advantage in broadening his range. The first Parr mode, of course, is the color “street” photograph. *Common Sense* marks the most important manifestation of his second mode of expression, the forensic close-up. Working in this long-established artistic genre—hence the appeal to the art world—also enabled him to explore certain cultural themes close to his heart.

Parr has made no secret of the fact that the inspiration for this way of seeing came from Nobuyoshi Araki, and in particular Araki’s book *The Banquet*,²² in which Japan’s best-known photographer made a record, a “food diary,” both in black-and-white and color, of the food he ate with his wife, Yoko, before her death from cancer in 1990. Martin was intrigued by Araki’s use of ring-flash and a macro lens, a technique normally used in medical photography to make close-ups of skin diseases and organs. It was the forensic nature of the imagery created by this method that was of interest to Parr, imagery that was repellently revealing, or perhaps revealingly repellent.

And we certainly get morbidly fascinating, often cringe-making close-ups in spades, beginning with food. A cup of tea, Britain’s national drink, sitting on a checked tablecloth, is all very well, but two melting ice creams, chorizo sausage, a bowl of jello (especially when a fly has landed on it), and confections covered in fluorescent-colored icing sugar look revolting when given this degree of attention. So do used hairbrushes, kitsch ornaments, kitsch items of clothing, and wrinkled skin (especially if sunburnt). Even generous

cleavage does not look inviting in this context, and as for the forest of cigarette butts stuck in a sandtray . . . well.

As Val Williams has written, “*Common Sense* is a violent book, its violence made even more acute when Parr interleaves his images with photographs that speak of his own veneration for the gentle and the traditional: a woolly mauve hat worn by an elderly woman, a cup of tea in a willow-patterned tea cup, a pensioner in flowery oven gloves holding a pile of flowery plates.”²³ And, as she concludes: “*Common Sense* is like a dictionary of sins, a malodorous concoction of the sugary, rotting and fascinating detritus of the Western world.”²⁴

Recently, Parr has widened his indictment to include the non-Western world, showing neither fear nor favor, but as always, it would seem that it is this duality, the combination of fascination with repulsion, the contrast between the facelessness of corporate consumerism, and the idiosyncratic consumerism of individuals, between the bland and the eccentric, that makes for the particular quality with which the best of Parr is suffused. Whereas it is usually more subtle in his street photography mode, in *Common Sense* it is writ large; the dualism is laid out in fierce detail and vibrant color. And one can note, given the reaction to this important body of work, that Parr’s public was also divided—the diehard documentarists generally hating it, the art world reacting much more positively.

But, as Martin himself has pointed out, *Common Sense* and his forensic mode is simply another kind of documentary photography, another way of commenting upon modern life. As an avid consumer of every kind of photobook, from artist’s books to commercial catalogues, he does not make distinctions between genres of photograph, only between good and bad. His relationship with the photobook is sometimes underestimated, I feel, seen as a rather acute case of the mad collector syndrome. It is in fact central to his whole being as a photographer.

Val Williams notes that *Common Sense* can be seen as a pictorial compendium of modern mores embedded in everyday objects. In *The Photobook: A History*, Martin and I included *Point It*,²⁵ where the conceit was that if you were in a country where you didn’t know the language and needed, say, a car, or a chicken, you just pointed to a photograph of one in the book and your needs would be satisfied. In a similar vein, we included one of a series of Dutch books entitled *Useful Photography*. Number two²⁶ in the series featured photographs of objects posted for sale on eBay. In both books, the photographs look remarkably like those of Martin Parr in still-life mode. Indeed, the forensic still-life has been widely imitated in contemporary photography—partly, though not solely, as a result of Martin’s employment of the ring-flash and macro lens.

Looking at all these images, however, whether by anonymous or known photographers, or by Parr, one can only paraphrase (yet again) Lincoln Kirstein’s remarks about Walker Evans and say that compared to the current cornucopia of still-life imagery, Martin’s pho-

tographs have “in addition, intention, logic, continuity, climax, sense and perfection.”²⁷

The point is that Parr has his themes, the aspects of contemporary life about which he wants to talk: globalization, consumerism, kitsch, eccentricity, national identity, cultural clichés. Whether he chooses to do this as a documentary photographer or an artist doesn't matter. Let's just call him a photographic auteur.

Martin has sometimes self-deprecatingly remarked (and I'm not sure just how much he means it) that his best photographs are behind him rather than in front of him. What I think he means is that his breakthrough is behind him, but that is the case with most senior artists. Artists tend to break through when young, but that does not necessarily negate what they do later. In Parr's case, I feel it is the whole body of work that matters; it is both varied and consistent, broad in reach, and much more (dare we say it?) humanistic and complex than it appears at first glance. The retrospective of his color photography, *Assorted Cocktail*, shown in Berlin in 2007–8, was an extremely strong show, and gave no indication of a flagging talent.²⁸ It demonstrated that, as one of the photographers most aware of the breadth of the medium (thanks to the photobook), he is constantly reinventing himself. As Thomas Weski has rightly remarked, “his photographs are original and entertaining, accessible and understandable. But at the same time they show us in a penetrating way how we live, how we present ourselves to others, and what we value.”²⁹

In short, for me they demonstrate what I believe are photography's core values. Martin Parr has been the dominant force in British photography over the last thirty years and one of the most dominant in European photography. Everywhere in fact, except perhaps in the United States. Despite the initial doubts of some of his older Magnum colleagues, he has revitalized the agency by continuing in his inimitable way with its core mission, which is to interpret contemporary life, but he has done so with an especially impeccable, unerring sense of the zeitgeist.

Notes

1. Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, volumes 1 and 2 (London: Phaidon Press Ltd.: Vol. 1, 2004; Vol. 2, 2006).
2. When Parr was up for election at the 1994 Magnum Annual General meeting to become a full member, Jones Griffiths led the opposition, circulating a vituperative memo that contained the following: “He (Parr) is an unusual photographer in the sense that he has always shunned the values that Magnum was built on. Not for him any of our concerned ‘finger on the pulse of society’ humanistic photography. . . . His membership would not be a proclamation of diversity but the rejection of those values that have given Magnum the status it has in the world today. . . . Let me state that I have great respect for him as the dedicated enemy of everything I believe in and, I trust, Magnum still believes in.” Parr was accepted for membership by one vote. See Russell Miller, *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 294–5.
3. Martin Parr, lecture at the Photographers' Gallery, London, January 30, 1990.
4. Martin Parr, *The Cost of Living* (Manchester, England: Cornerhouse Publications, 1989).
5. *Bristol Evening Post* (Bristol, England), Thursday, November 16, 1989, p. 7.

6. Ibid.
7. Martin Parr, *The Last Resort* (Manchester, England: Cornerhouse Publications, 1985).
8. Val Williams, in *Martin Parr* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2002), p. 161.
9. David Lee, review of *The Last Resort* in *Arts Review* (London), August 1986, quoted by Williams in *Martin Parr*, *ibid.*
10. Robert Morris, review of *The Last Resort* in *British Journal of Photography* (London), August 1986, quoted by Williams in *Martin Parr*, *ibid.*
11. Elisabeth Mahoney, in 1000 *Artworks to See Before You Die*, supplement to the *Guardian* (London), October 29, 2008, p. 10.
12. The publication of *William Eggleston's Guide* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1976), the book accompanying an exhibition of Eggleston's color photographs, together with bodies of work by Stephen Shore and Joel Meyerowitz, is regarded generally as the "beginning" of color photography, that is to say, the point when the art museum and art market in general, and the Museum of Modern Art in particular, deemed color photography to be respectable.
13. John Szarkowski, wall label to *New Documents*, an exhibition of photographs by Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 28 to May 7, 1967.
14. Chris Killip, *In Flagrante* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1988), republished by Errata Books, New York, 2008.
15. Ibid.
16. Miller, *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History*, p. 295.
17. John Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973) p. 110.
18. This image comes from a commission by the Glasgow firm of architects, John McAslan and partners, to photograph the A8 road between Glasgow and Greenock. Greenock Morton is one of the "little" teams of Scottish football, the butt of jokes from supporters of the "big" teams in the main urban centers of Glasgow and Edinburgh. It is they who would most appreciate the joke. See Martin Parr, *A8: JMP Journal No. 1* (Glasgow: McAslan, 2005).
19. Martin Parr, in conversation with the author, Bristol, England, May 27, 1999.
20. *Common Sense* opened in forty-three galleries worldwide during the month of March 1999, beginning at the Rocket Gallery, London, on Wednesday, March 10.
21. Martin Parr, *Common Sense* (Stockport, England: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 1999).
22. Nobuyoshi Araki, *Shokuji (The Banquet)* (Tokyo: Magazine House, 1993).
23. Williams, *Martin Parr*, p. 278.
24. Ibid., p. 279.
25. Dieter Graf, *Point It: Traveller's Language Kit* (Munich: Graf Editions, 2004).
26. Hans Aarsman, Claudie de Cleen, Julian Germain, Erik Kessels, Hans van der Meer, editors, *Really Useful Photography #002* (Amsterdam: Artimo, 2003).
27. Lincoln Kirstein, afterword, in Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), p. 190.
28. Martin Parr, *Assorted Cocktail: Colour Photographs*, was shown at C/O Berlin, International Forum for Visual Dialogues, December 12, 2007, to March 3, 2008.
29. Thomas Weski, wall label to *Assorted Cocktail*.