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At the opening of my first show a man approached me with his congratulations. He said his name was Duane Michals. I'd seen his work, and I'd sent him an invitation, but I never thought he'd come.

Shortly afterward, we sat down and taped an interview. In the years since, we've talked dozens of times, stringing together enormities over coffee: Life, Death, The Cosmos, The Nature of Time, all that stuff. After these talks, I'd vibrate away down the street, full of energy. This is what he tends to do to people. Recently we taped another conversation. Still vibrant. Here it is.—Sean Kernan

Duane Michals: One of my big complaints about photographers is that they tell me what I already know. Or a version of what Robert Frank knows.

The problem is for photographers to make me trip over my assumptions, to challenge, to contradict them. Instead of showing me what people look like..., say a woman crying ...deal with *why* she's crying.

Photographers work from the known or from the given; that's the source, that's their inspiration, their subject. I'm always working against what I don't know and what I can't see.

S.K. I was reading the introduction to (your book) *Real Dreams* and the only thing you said that I don't agree with is your statement that personal photography usually means a white person photographing a black person.

D.M. To me, you're a personal photographer when you're dealing with your person. Most photographers are very safe. They take risks with other people's faces. You know, a guy will go to a party and photograph people making fools of themselves. He's really taking risks with other people. Some straight photographer goes to New Orleans and he photographs guys dressed up like women and thinks he's got something. He's taking risks with their faces. It's very easy to say, "Look at these funny-looking people," but to me a personal photographer takes the risk with his own face, not someone else's.

S.K. You can deal with something out there, outside yourself, that still has to do with you. I photographed in prisons. I worked with people that I don't know or understand and I'm afraid of, in a way. The risk I'm taking is to let them have at me ....

D.M. To deal with them. That's true.

Don't forget, I have a very well-defined dialectic. In an area where people don't define anything, I want to define terms. Photographers throw around phrases without ever knowing what they're saying. "Personal" means to deal with my person in a most interior way. I don't want to look at another book on another suburb. I know America is homogenized. I don't find "social significance" very significant anymore.

S.K. How do you react to photographs of things like industrial parks?

D.M. I find sophisticated looking [pictures] extremely boring. I have 15 or 20 years left, maybe 25, and I don't have time for all those art games. I really want to know what's going on here, to cut through the photographic decoration and fashion. The Museum of Modern Art imprimatur given to banality is destructive to photography because it lifts to the status of High Art the most ridiculous, redundant photography. The snapshot aesthetic raised to High Art trivializes what photography can become by treating photographers as children. I hate it when the art and photography establishments get into

dictating what art or photography is. When it comes from that direction, it's the politics of photography. I don't know what's going on in the minds at the Museum. They can make or break people with their power. They don't report what's going on, they report their own point of view, their own prejudices.

They've never included Krims or Gibson (Les Krims and Ralph Gibson). These are very important people. How can you avoid them and talk about photography in America today? It doesn't make sense.

S.K. I saw a book recently, a collection of reviews and articles on minimal art. In the introduction, Gregory Battcock said that what you're going to see more and more is a collaboration between artist and critic. Notice that a critic said it.

D.M. I think the photography world is guilty of just that collaboration, though not to the extent that the art world is because it's bigger and more organized. As photography grows and gains status, you'll get all those hangers-on, flip people who catch on to styles.

S.K. You're not talking about photographers now ....

D.M. I'm talking about photographers... all the ambitious people that every field attracts, the untalented people who latch onto gimmicks. They photograph 27 right ears and do an ear show. But I don't want to waste my energies talking about something I don't really care about.

What is significant is getting to one's awareness of life and trying to use photography to deal with and expand one's consciousness. Not in the sense of seeing puddles of water where you didn't notice them before, or ripped posters on walls, but in the sense of really seeing into the profound aspects of life that never are observed, of dealing with questions of time and memory. The rest is decoration. The real question is: What is this experience we're all in?

S.K. Perhaps the first thing to do is dissociate one's self from photography, stop calling yourself a photographer. It seems like a weight.

D.M. Those labels are very unnecessary. We should invent new words. I don't know what the new words will be, but I think the key is expression.

It's almost impossible for us to see around language. In many ways, it's very useful, but it's also useless and counterproductive. I think when you get to the really important stuff, it's superfluous. When the idea is really meaningful, the words collapse. Like I said in the book: "I want," "I love," "Please touch." All those things end up in two-word sentences. What I find so amazing is that our reality is entirely construction. I was walking along Park Avenue the other day, and I thought, "My God! A hundred years ago none of this was here, and a hundred years from now it probably won't be." We've invented the whole thing.

S.K. How about the reality of Duane Michals, which has been invented. It occurred to me that you may not have started your work yet. You may do something that has little or nothing to do with what you've done to this point.

D.M. I wrote in one of my albums that I might become another person at some point, and that I'll look back at the person who's writing this and wonder how I could have been that person. As I get older, the question of my identity, as it has been established, completely collapses under close examination. I practice being me every day, and when I let go of that for a minute, it's scary because nothing in our culture has prepared me to deal with letting go. Most of what I know about myself, or what anyone knows about himself, is what someone else has said. Very few ideas about ourselves do we come to by ourselves.

We have these sketchy ideas because if we look in the center and find there's nothing there, it's very upsetting.

S.K. Nobody ever said growth was comfortable or pleasant. Certainly you've had a chance to settle into the comfortable parts of Duane Michals' life and you've chosen to stay out on the edge where there's not much comfort.

D.M. Well, that's the nature of the work. I get upset when I don't feel uncomfortable. That's just the price you have to pay for being creative and growing. As a matter of fact, I realize how significant an idea is by the degree to which I'm disturbed by it.

Most work reinforces your prejudices, tells you what you already know, entertains you when it should contradict you. It should be abrasive, it should wake you up, not put you to sleep. The familiar lulls you to sleep, although I need the familiar to survive.

When I get to the point where I have no precedent, I experience the loneliness of being out there by myself.

I'm also glad about it because I feel some kind of growth.

S.K. According to Arthur Koestler, discomfort is a very positive sign, something to be welcomed as a step toward breaking through.

D.M. I agree. Although I can't make breakthroughs happen, I wish I could. All I can do is open myself to the possibility of that thing happening. I realized that when I first left home, when I went to school in Colorado at 17. I was miserable.

When I would come home to my mother's chicken soup, I would feel terribly comfortable, but I realized instinctively that there was no growth involved. And I realized that I had to go through those problems.

And it's been a pattern with me, I can see that now.

The other day I was doing something for a fashion supplement for Soho Weekly News. They let me do anything I want, so I had this girl burning newspapers. I thought, "Here I am, I was in a serious fire, I'm frightened of fire." I confront things that disturb me, rather than hiding away from them. I eventually deal with them somehow. And that means dealing with the discomfort of having to deal with it.

The things I'm interested in have very little to do with photography.

I'm very interested in the way people's minds operate, and I came to the conclusion that I pay attention to things that most people take for granted. I don't notice curiosities, like funny-looking people among the hangers-on, flip people who catch on to styles.

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I pay attention to the way time operates, the way my mind is, the way sentences and ideas pop into my head.

S.K. Have things ever come to you at times during that state a few minutes before you go to sleep and after you wake up?

D.M. No, I've had very few eureka-like experiences. But I just did a sequence, for *Du* magazine, that takes place in the moment between being awake and being asleep; it's called, I dreamed a perfect day in New York.

S.K. People should look, not for verification, not to drop a rock on their foot and have it hurt again, but to throw it in the air and have it keep going and learn that that's another thing it can do.

D.M. People view life like spectators, always looking around for something to take photographs of. Photographers use their eyes totally, rather than deal with the other 90 percent of their heads, with the whole fabric of what our lives are about. Take the possibility of magic, which we completely rule out, especially in photography. Photographers always deal with a certain kind of historical documentary sense, like the life and times of a diner. And that's fine, but it cuts them off from their imaginations. No questions are ever asked. I wrote something in *Real Dreams* about how sometimes photographers photograph everything that moves, hoping to capture something in spite of themselves, instead of realizing that they are the experience.

You are the event, and once you realize that you're free to create the event, too. You're completely taken out of the role of voyeur. You're experiencing the event and you can't separate yourself from it.

S.K. A wonderful early sequence of yours, *The Voyeur's Pleasure Becomes Pain*, just came to mind.

D.M. Yes, in that one, the viewer is part of what goes on.

But the possibilities are so extraordinary. Photographers settle so quickly for the first thing that looks like something they've seen before.

You go to enough schools and it'll drive you out of your head. When I look at work, I'm always looking for the mistakes, for the steps into that whole area we were talking about before, that area of not being sure, of tossing the ball into the air and not having it come back down.

S.K. I think there's a misconception about what's good. People think that what's good is what's already proved to be successful.

D.M.

When people are in school, they work for grades or the teacher. If they continue, they work for MoMA's approval. If you try to second-guess what the public taste is going to be, you're in very serious trouble. This year in the country I was looking at some daffodils, and I thought, they were so extraordinary. We talk about Paradise, but this place is Paradise. We simply don't see it.

S.K. I've thought of collecting butterflies in relation to photography.

What you get with a photograph is a case of dead butterflies. They're like footprints. To concern yourself with them, you have to walk backwards, and that's a funny way to walk.

DM. It's true. I've never thought of it that way. I've done pieces that don't have any photography at all, and if I'm not careful, I'm going to muck about the person who writes it as about the person who reads it.

D.M. A lot of the complaints people had with the written pieces in my show weren't with what the writing was, but that it required too much of an effort. People expect to be entertained. But good work makes demands on you, it doesn't just make you giggle. Or if it does make you giggle, it makes you cry at the same time.

S.K. Do you dislike photographing as much as Magritte disliked the act of painting?

D.M. No, I like to take pictures. But I don't think that photography is the act of taking the picture. It's the whole process. I may have been thinking of something two months before, so the actual picture-taking is the easiest part.

Then once the work is done, I have the luxury of getting published. The first thing I like is to show a picture to somebody to get their response. There's that excitement of sharing something I'm doing at the moment. Maybe five years from now, I'll decide that it wasn't that important. But nothing is ever finished, and I look at each piece as on-going. The ideas unfold. Although there have been definitive pieces, like *Things Are Queer*, that make me feel I don't really need to work on a theme again. Somebody once asked me why I take photographs, and I said "For fun." The universe is not pleased for me to be unhappy.

It simply doesn't care.

That sense of fun is what I always missed in Minor White when he talked about religion. It was all serious and heavy. The essence of religion should be a joy.

S.K. A friend of mine once said that when the creative act is flaming through you, the best thing to do is get out of its way and become a tube, a sensitive recording device.

D.M. I agree. In fact, I'm my only enemy, I'm the one who gets in the way. I really screw up when I put my nose into it and say, "Oh no, that's really too much," or, "What will *they* say?" Remember *them*? The smartest thing I do is permit the ideas and intuition to flow. For instance, when I began to piece together the Mr. Fujiyama sequence in my mind, I had a lot of fun with it. I just sat back and listened as my mind rambled and made its own connections. Unfortunately, I can't make that happen as much as I'd like to. I just have to be alert when it's happening. You know, a lot of people have ideas all the time, but they don't pay any attention to them. I grab the idea and I make it happen, then I look at it. There's something really exciting in looking at a piece of paper and saying "My God, that's exactly what I had in mind, isn't that extraordinary!" Paying attention is so important. Photographers pay attention to the wrong things. They look much too hard.

S.K. Have people's expectations of you as a sequence photographer become a weight on you?

D.M. People's expectations bother me a bit. Also, they seem to think that I know something that I don't. And the more I say, "No, I don't know anything," the more they say, "Of course you do because you say you don't." I just want to continue to grow up to the very last second. And I'm so intrigued by what's going on here on this planet, in this city, in this room, in this particular life.

S.K. A few weeks ago you said that you had bloody feelings about the earth.

D.M. I'm discouraged about man as a species. For the last five or ten thousand years, we've been turning out the same greedy little schmuck, with an occasional poet. Just look around. Where are the honest people?

The only salvation is to realize that if you want an unprejudiced world, you've got to be unprejudiced. If I want an honest world, then I have to be honest. The only gesture I can make is by being that person myself. The only thing I can really count on any more is change. The only absolute is change. God, I look in a mirror and I have no idea who that is looking back at me. The more defined I become as a photographer, the more diffused I become inside.

It's very strange that a public personality becomes more etched with every interview, with every portfolio, and yet at the same time I feel more diffused personally.

S.K. Maybe being "enlightened" is the same thing as being crazy.

D.M. I never go by what the culture defines as insane, although it's hard to avoid. You must always go by your own definition. Being thought a bit weird is a compliment in this culture.

I would love to have the wall undulate, have my hand go through it.

I'm so up for it, and I'm so square, it's beyond belief, I believe in all the possibilities, and they just keep eluding me. I'm dying for a burning bush. I'd settle for a burning building.

S.K. I have a friend who had a burning bush. As a child she wanted to believe in God.

And she said, "Give me a sign, give me a sign," and she prayed and prayed.

And she looked out one day and saw a bush in her front yard on fire. And she looked back again and it wasn't on fire any more.

D.M. When I was a kid I half-heartedly attempted that. I didn't want to blow it by giving it everything, saying "Please, please, please," and not have anything happen. So I always hedged my "pleases." I didn't want to push Him all the way because if nothing did happen, I'd have nothing to look for or to lean on any more.

Photographers never see anything in the overview. They look at today, they don't see the broad spectrum of things. Sometimes, for a moment, I understand my life as an event with a beginning and an end, as an experience floating out there someplace, as totalness. Right now we're in this experience; we can hear a clock ticking, it's a certain temperature, there's traffic on the street. We are of this experience. When this thing happens, I have an overview, not only of this experience but of the whole experience, and I recognize it, with a beginning and an end, seen from the outside.

It's very upsetting, and I rush back and put on the television.

S.K. Given those possibilities, can you imagine making painting a prime concern?

D.M. At the turn of the century, Stieglitz complained about photographers trying to make photographs that looked like paintings, and that was a big battle. Then Aaron Siskind photographed splashes on walls, like an abstract expressionist. And photographers are still following that kind of thing, following painting styles. That's a real step backwards. The only difference between a photograph in a photography gallery and one in an art gallery is about \$10,000. There's so much nonsense going on, and I don't want to have to deal with it. I've always prized my independence, I'm not a disciple of anybody, I'm not a photographer that somebody put on the map by decree. And that suits me very well.

S.K. To what extent have you chosen the world you live in? D.M. In a way I haven't had any options. I deal with something in my photographs I once thought was much too personal. Then I realized that's the nature of the work I do, that if I don't deal with my

life, with things that disturb me, I don't do good photographs. It's not as though I have a choice. There's nothing else I'm capable of doing. I have no option but to continue. But very little of my activity is original decision making. I may perform in a certain way because when I was in third grade, Sister Mary Joseph made me stand in the back of the room for half an hour. I don't know it, but today when I avoid something, it's because that happened. It's a mechanical way of being.

S.K. Perhaps, unless you bring it to consciousness.

D.M. Well, that's what changes it.

There are a lot of "me's." I wrote in the book that when I was a kid I used to sit on the edge of the bed and try to find the "I" of me. I thought if I was very still I would locate it.

S.K. I've always meant to ask if you really did that.

D.M. Absolutely. And I could never sort it out. And I still don't know.

Essentially, meditation is about trying to find the "I." There's a Zen attitude toward photography, and whenever I read about it, I have questions about how all that really functions. Questions about chance, about being at the right place at the right time, about what's really going on. When I give a talk at I.C.P., I always want to call it, "What's going on here?" And Cornell Capa always changes it to something like "Creative Introspection." I say, "No, no, I really want to call it 'What the hell's going on here?'" When people ask me about being an artist, I say: don't try to be an artist, just do your work; if it is true, you might become an artist. Practice your form and it follows that when you have the form, you'll hit the target. Discussions of Zen are very difficult because there's nothing to really talk about. I like to read haiku.

There's one that says something like "the geese flew south, but their shadow remained on the pond." Basho would read it and receive enlightenment. I'd read it 12 times . . . be left with a feeling.

I can't claim to have invented the ideas in my pictures, I just put them together and photographed.

One sequence I like very much, one typical of the way my mind operates, is called *The Old Man Kills the Minotaur*. One of its themes is an awareness of being older. I'm not old, but I'm not young any more. It's incredible to be in a conversation with someone and realize I could be that person's father. In the sequence, the minotaur ends up being the old man's youth. He wrestles with youth and youth defeats him, but in the end he kills youth, because to become old you have to kill your youth. That's the process of aging. The sequence *The Captive Child* is about innocence. I'm fascinated with innocence and loss of innocence as a theme. But I recognize it now as a state that I have passed through.

S.K. You can't have your innocence until you've given it up.

D.M. To be truly innocent means you can't be aware of it.

S.K. Which makes "being" a matter of almost complete unconsciousness.

The model of time is such that you address the past, past, past.

D.M. No, I think it's all simultaneous, that when I was born it was now, and when I die, I'll be now and right now it's now. It has never been anything else but now. The whole idea of past and future are total constructions. We have a residue of past which we call memory and we have whatever our mind permits us to anticipate. We see time as a continuum, but actually it's simultaneous like one big drop falling through space.

It's called "now." You get out of the continuous experience in meditation, and there are other ways to get out of it.



S.K. You know the phrase, "Be here now."

D.M. That's very difficult.

S.K. Best I can do is, "Be here now and then."

D.M. "I'm never in."

S.K. I'm sure you see a lot of bad metaphysical photographs.

D.M. Oh yes! It's really bad when they become self-conscious, and it's all too perfect.

There's no awkwardness about it. I love work to be flawed. The more I work in a medium that has the possibility of perfection, the more I'll pick out the soft picture, the blurry picture, anything to destroy the perfectness of it. And in the writing, I love the mistakes. I think it's a matter of staying vulnerable, and not hiding behind perfect work.

The real problem is to live at the edge of your fingernails. That's a problem for photographers who are looking but never really seeing.