

Duane Michals has inspired countless photographers over the years. I am one of them. It's not that he moves people to do work that looks like what he does, more that he takes one's head and spins it around a half-dozen times, and when he is done you find you don't believe in photography the way you once did. But so much energy is released in the process that you just go roaring off to try new things...with no idea of what those new things might be...which is pretty much the way Duane works.

When we did this interview, Duane was in the midst of doing provocative series of pictures.

One such series, called *Things are Queer*, works like this:

The first picture is of an ordinary bathroom—sink, toilet and tub.

In the next, a giant bare foot descends into the bathroom.

The camera pulls back for the next picture to reveal a man standing hunched over in this (tiny?) bathroom.

It pulls back again to show that this scene is actually a picture in a book that someone is holding.

Back again to reveal a man standing in an alley studying the book with the picture.

And back yet again to reveal that the man standing in the alley is actually a framed photograph hanging on a wall above...some whitish indistinct form.

And the final picture is of the same bathroom we saw in the beginning. Over the sink is a framed picture of a man standing in an alley holding a book, etc.

And if you go back to look, you can see that this framed picture was there at the beginning.

So that was Duane at the time of this interview. (And, by the way, the owner of the huge foot in the bathroom was me. Small world.)

Duane is working on some new and exciting stuff that will, I promise you, astound everyone shortly. But this interview is a good place to start.

How do you Photograph Chance? An interview with Duane Michals by Sean Kernan.
From *Camera* 35, October, 1971.

I don't want to preface this with An Appreciation of Duane Michals, so I'll just make a sort of mumbled introduction.

Michals was born in McKeesport, Pa., wanted to paint, wound up working at Time, Inc, designing insert cards.

These cards may have done great things for Time's circulation, but they didn't do much for Michals. So he took his savings and went off to Russia as part of an Intourist tour. It literally changed his life.

A friend had insisted that he take a camera. "After all, Russia! My God!" He acceded. No light meter, though. They scared him. He'd just guess.

While there he photographed madly—acrobats, flower sellers, children in schools, in the street, sailors. The results were as far from everyday traveller pictures as it is possible to imagine. They were simple, direct, trustful, seemingly artless, suffused with a love of light and with a deep, wordless connection to whoever was in front of him.

Through some mysterious, shadowy process, Michals had mutated into a photographer. Returning to designing subscription stuffers was out of the question.

With the Russian pictures as an indicator, portraits seemed obvious. He brought his style, which seemed based on creating an instant trust in his subjects, to bear on everyone from his grandparents to Jeanne Moreau. He never shocked the viewer with a quirky take on the subject. People in his portraits simply looked out at viewers, at you, rather than at some photographer's concept. Soon, they were looking out at you from Esquire, Show, Mademoiselle, and others.

Then he began his sequences, done for himself, as a means of deciphering his own inner life. He refers to them as philosophical explorations, though my own reaction to them is less like a calm-spirited and philosophical insight than an instant flash of a deep and sometimes disturbing emotional experience. Someone else's reaction might be totally different from mine...but probably not.

When I had the opportunity to speak with him, I spent some time trying to dream up a few intelligent questions. I didn't really manage it, because practically everything one might wish to know is there in his work. So I went with a set of rather obvious questions, which he then answered intelligently.

The result is less an interview than a conversation between photographers, one very junior.

D.M. I am making an interior journey. I am illustrating myself, and I don't know who I am.

People don't examine their lives as events. What's time, what's disappointment? How do you photograph death? How do you photograph chance? Now, these are experiences that are just as valid as the facts of our lives. In fact, more valid.

Photographers always photograph the facts of their lives, but we don't live in our bodies, we live in our heads. They photograph, but they don't get to the spiritual, to the emotional-spiritual side of their lives which is just as real and just as important.

Documentaries are nice. I like documentaries of the 30's, they show me bread lines, but that doesn't really make me feel physically or psychologically what it means to be hungry or lonely or depressed. I would like to have seen someone photograph something that suggested that.

And I do think photographs should suggest, I don't think photographs should tell everything. I think they should intrigue you and involve you, and just suggest the situation where the viewer...

S.K. It's a collaboration.

D.M. Yes, where the viewer is brought into the photograph, not just bounced off an interesting surface where there's a jazzy light thing happening or some campy face is sticking her tongue out.

It has to be deeper than that.

The real thing is that everybody should do something else. But they don't. That's what kills me, they don't. They just keep doing the same five or six categories.

S.K. In some of your early, presequence stuff, there is really a feeling of stories wanting to be told. I look at them and get an urge to look to the right to see what happens next.

Did you get to a certain point and find that things had to become a sequence of pictures?

D.M. I had to work through things. At the point in my life where I began sequences, things were happening that were making me more introspective.

And it coincided that my photography was getting to the point where I wanted to do more with the work in terms of my life. All these things came together and I suddenly began to use myself, my experiences. I had to work through things.

The sad thing is, some people never work through things. They just keep on taking the same picture over and over.

I work something completely out of my system, examine it and move on. I stay loose, let life happen to me.

You know, when I'm talking about myself this way, I'm talking about this other guy.

Which is also happening in the work now. I have a sense of somebody else doing the things and I'm just sort of astonished by them. I have this idea, you know, "I can't wait to see what he's going to do next." And then I realize I'm talking about myself.

S.K. Would a photographic novel be a natural extension of the sequence form?

D.M. No. You see, the form is what it is. It's like haiku. If you try to make a Dante out of a haiku you're destroying what it is, and essentially is just a brief instant. If you examine it, there's really nothing there. To try to expand it changes the form, and I have already defined the form.

The sequence, "The Spirit Leaves the Body," is just an instant, a suggestion of something. They're still photographs, and when you put them together singly they don't have the same meaning as when you put them together. They suggest something together that they don't when you look at them one by one. It's an epic in my mind, it has a great number of ideas.

But it's still an instant.

S.K. Just out of curiosity can you describe a sequence from inception to completion, the mechanics of it? I am curious that you have trouble finding models, for example.

D.M. I know. I think it's probably me, I have my own problems. I tend to make a thing out of it.

Well, I usually have a number of ideas in my head sort of bouncing around, and sometimes they sort of come together.

For instance, the idea of losing something intrigues me. I don't know why. It's in "The Fallen Angel", where the man loses his wings or his virginity or whatever.

(In "The Fallen Angel" a naked angel appears to a young girl lying on a bed.)

He approaches her and covers her with his body. He then sits up on the bed and buries his face in his hands. The wings are gone. He then sits fully dressed on a window sill, face in hands, while the girl lies on the bed oblivious and ecstatic. Finally, he hurries off past the camera in a blur.)

It's also in "The Lost Shoe", where something is lost and transformed. *(In "The Lost Shoe", a figure hurries from behind the camera and starts down a deserted street. He drops a shoe in the street. He hurries off and disappears.*

When he is gone, the shoe bursts into flames.)

Even the burning of the box in "Senseless Act" is the loss of something, and it becomes something else.

(In "Senseless Act", a man passes a box of trash and throws a match into it for no reason. As he walks off and disappears, the box is completely consumed in flames.)

That idea of change. Somehow it's very nostalgic.

So there are a number of ideas. I'm very interested in personal identity. I haven't thought of a way of doing it. You know, the way people behave differently in different situations, how we really don't know who we are. Very few people have any idea of what they really are.

How to suggest that, I really don't know.

The idea of chance interests me, but I've probably worked through that as far as I want to go.

The idea of death always intrigues me. I did one series which I've never shown called "The Dance of Death", where a man, a blurred image, walks in and dances with a nude girl, and as the dance progresses she becomes more and more blurred until she vanishes into him and they blur out together.

I was walking up Fifth Avenue and I saw a crowd of people, and through the crowd came this strange man. You know how in New York you see these people talking to themselves, kind of weird people. And he was doing this funny dance as he came across to me. So I did a sequence based on that kind of madness in the city. It was called something like "The Dance of a Man Going Mad". It did resolve itself. I showed it once and I'll never do it again.

But I love that idea, the idea of the dance, the dance of life, the dance of death, the dance of somebody going insane--especially in the city. I do city pictures, and this is such an insane city.

We're all a little bit insane. And to try to suggest that kind of insanity in a crowd--if I could pull it off, I'd love to do something with that idea. Like, you walk down the street and see a group of people standing there. I don't tend to stop, but I find those groups interesting, and if you do stop, normally nothing is really there to look at.

I would like to do an empty street and a group of people closed in together looking at something the viewer can't see, and you don't really know what's going on. And as the group begins to disintegrate you realize it's not looking at anything. It's very strange.

You know, people keep talking about Brodovitch as such a great teacher, and I'm sure we see in certain ways because of him; but I think he made a bad point, too, and that was that kind of Avedon element of shock and startle, be outrageous, so that when you turn the page of a magazine you're assaulted by an image. And I don't like that. I hate things that are purely gimmick. Like, "Wow, what a way out idea!"

Of course, we work out of our own taste bag, and I keep looking for things that intrigue me, that introduce me to something I've never seen before, that change my way of seeing. That's why I like so many painters. I know when I look at a Morandi painting, nobody else in the whole world would have done that.

I see still lifes differently because of Morandi. Paul Klee, too, has changed me.

There aren't many photographers who have changed my way of seeing things, who've invaded my consciousness with their images. And that's my means of final judgment--have I seen this photograph before in a better version? I'd really rather see crude, bad efforts at something new than a nice, competent version of something I've seen a thousand times before. I'd like to see more mistakes, because they mean that someone is trying things.

I'm really angry about still photography. Still photographers really sit around on their cans, visually. Nobody's breaking any new ground, they're still taking the same five groups of pictures. You know, imitation Robert Frank, imitation Harry Callahan. We have the whole world to photograph, so why do photographers narrow themselves to so few categories? I'm hoping that within the next 10 years or so we'll have a new explosion

of vision, that people will begin to examine their entire lives, not just the facts of their lives, the objects, but their entire range of experience, and use that and not just the facile kind of surface things, the easy things to see.

I think a lot of the young kids are getting into new things. A lot of it is junk, but if even two people come out of it, that's good. I'd like to see more mistakes than polite pictures. S.K. Maybe that's where teaching fails. Did you see that show a few years ago of the work of Harry Callahan's students? There were like 50 students of his shown, 49 of whom reworked Harry Callahan pictures—large camera, small prints, so forth—and one who overreacted and did sort of grab shots, 40x60 prints on grade six paper.

D.M. I find myself—I find a distance now. I'm getting to a certain place in my own head where I find it difficult to talk to many students because we just don't speak the same language. Their concerns are not my concerns. Maybe it's just myself, I don't know. I find it very difficult to get to them in a way, because they're concerned with stylistic problems, which are not problems for me. I'm more concerned about philosophical ideas, where they're more concerned with the manufacturing of certain presentable kinds of photographs.

S.K. I know that a number of Diane Arbus' students seem to do prints with black edges with the negative crooked in the enlarger. When she does it, it's a concern with content that overrides the technical presentation, but in the students it seems self-conscious. I know that if I were to teach, and I'd like to try, I'd really land on anyone who turned in a picture that looked like one of mine that he'd seen.

D.M. I did black edges a long time ago when I first did the Russian things, but only because my enlarger did that. I liked it because I hate the perfectness of photography, and I liked the fact that the enlarger made a certain signature that other enlargers didn't make. It was like my thumb print. That was my print.

And now it happens so much as a stylistic thing that it doesn't mean much. I do it because the enlarger does it, and also because it completes, defines the full image, which I like. I can't wait to see what's going to happen in the next five years, to see what we'll all be doing five years from now.

S.K. My own prediction is that we won't have magazines as an outlet for photography. We'll have these little tape and video cassettes•

D.M. Yes, but there'll always be a place for photography. I mean, photography is very important.

S.K. I think it will be some sort of minor medium, like lithography.

D.M. I don't think it'll be minor. For instance, what I'd like to see . . . I mean there are millions of dollars spent in this country on photography. Where are the serious photography magazines? In the world, how many are there?

S.K. You're talking to one•

D.M. Oops, oh yes.

S•K. You mentioned Aperture before, but what bothers me about Aperture is Minor White's writing. Probably because I simply don't understand it.

D.M. Well, I like . . . Oh, I'd better not talk about other photographers.

S.K. Oh, go ahead, what the hell.

D.M. Well, I like Minor White. I didn't originally, he put me off by his talking, but now I understand what he's talking about. I just wish he'd talk about it another way that wouldn't set people off. But I feel very close to some of his ideas.

S.K. I had the same thing with Walker Evans at first. I couldn't get excited over an empty room. Then suddenly one day I found myself lost in one of his empty rooms.

D.M. I think the only thing that really interests me now is to continue growing.

That's what everybody should do. To find out who you are, and if you do that . . . it's like that Zen thing, where you keep practicing your form on hitting the bull's-eye with an arrow. And you're not concerned about hitting the bull's-eye, you just practice your form and eventually you have to hit it.

If you just keep growing and finding out who you are, you will eventually evolve to yourself. And, of course, that's the hardest thing in the world to do.

S.K. Relating this to photography, then, you probably don't feel a need to go beyond sequences at this point.

D.M. Yes, at this point, but I don't know ... I wouldn't want to go on forever, like in 1982 doing "Son of Sequences Goes West" or "Sequence Meets the Purple Monster". At that point I may just have run out of that and gone into something else. I don't intend to do it forever. I hope I'm smart enough to know when to quit. I don't want to end up doing Imitations of myself like De Chirico.

But as long as it stays vital and my ideas are still right for me, I'll continue.

S.K. Are you tempted by film?

D.M. No. That's not to say I won't be in five years. The trouble with film...you see, everything comes down to ideas, all the rest is garbage. If you don't have ideas it doesn't mean anything. And most film makers have no ideas. They do some friend in drag in a garden on the Lower East Side reading poetry, and it has absolutely no meaning at all. It has all the arty artifacts, but it has no heart.

S.K. Film would probably spoil sequences. It would just show too much. I mean, filming your sequence ideas would be far too literal.

D.M. Besides, it would only take a second on the screen. But, you know, when I went to Miami to some school to give a talk, I put the sequences on slides and it was really thrilling to see them, they worked so well that way. If I were to do anything, I might like to do a film some day of sequences as still images with music.

I don't know where the ideas are coming from, but they're still coming. When I started out I didn't know what the hell I was doing. You, know, I'd call up a friend and say, "Look, we're going out to burn a shoe on the street." He thought I was a madman. You really have to have enough confidence in your idea, no matter how obscure, to see it through and satisfy yourself.

That's very important, too. Always work in terms of yourself. Never try to satisfy anyone else primarily. If you are pleased and you know in your heart that it's really right, then you'll be strong enough to show it to people, and if you get knocked on the head a little bit it's not because you were wrong ... you were true to yourself.

S.K. That's a hard thing to know.

D.M. Of course it is, but the thing is that it feeds off itself. Once it starts rolling, it keeps rolling. Right now I feel very confident in myself. I worked for about two years on those things and the publishing thing just happened. I mean, they called me up and asked me to publish them, and that was a marvelous kind of fluke.

But I kept being reinforced. I showed them to a few friends and they were digging them. But when they got to a general audience and something was happening, then I felt strongest. Now I feel very strong, because no matter how obscure the idea is, if I have enough faith in it to pull it off, that's reason enough to do it.

What I'm sort of saying is that I wish somehow I could tell people not to be afraid and to make mistakes. Especially when you're young.

I spoke to a group of kids once from some school, and they were interested in how to make it. They weren't interested in what I was thinking about philosophically, they wanted a formula...how do I become successful, how do I get things seen, what do I have to do to get in a gallery? They want instant success. It's a search for a kind of American formula. add water and mix. But there's no shortcut. You have to work. And those who aren't going to make it will fall off. They can't sustain it, it's not there.

I found the students are very frightened of coming to New York. They all have this thing about coming here. "How can you work in New York, how can you do anything creative, how can you make it? How come you haven't sold your soul?"

But you don't have to. I don't any of that stuff.

The problem narrows down to, widens down to, being a human being and what does one do about it, and I am photographer so I use my camera use my photographs to explore being.

S.K. Speaking of cameras, aside from the famous Argus C-3 (which give double exposures in perfect registration) are you at all interested in the mechanics of photography?

D.M. Not at all, I'm not a camera buff at all. What I think you should do learn your equipment thoroughly a then forget about it. The camera should never become something between you and the thing you're photographing You should do everything with your eyes closed, or be able to. The came should be invisible. The only thing that counts is the photograph. The camera is just a necessary evil. It would be like a writer getting hung up on his typewriter--it's just an instrument.

S.K. That's very funny. Imagine a writer saying, "Yeah, I'm trading in my Smith Corona for an IBM Selectric system.."

D.M. "And I'm getting a Lettera 22. You should see the Q's, my God."

S.K. But photographers are that way.

D.M. Well, often the ones who are don't take very Interesting pictures. They, make a whole mystique out of it. They, really get hung up on the wrong thing. I don't know why it is but I was never bitten by that particular bug. The important thing is the end product.

So the camera is important, but it should never become an object that stands between you and the viewer.

S.K. How important is the print to you.

D.M. Well, I always try to do the best possible print. I'm not of the Ansel Adams school. "I spent two days that print and look at those silvers!" You don't have to. I don't do any of that stuff.

I'm an idea photographer. I'm concerned with my ideas being seen. That's the thing about photography. In painting you have the original, and that's a precious thing. But the joy of photography is that it can be reproduced thousands of times. The book of "Sequences" is fairly poorly printed. Sure I would have liked to have seen it printed in Switzerland and be 100% gorgeous. So it's 60% gorgeous, but the idea still reads. That's my concern.

That's not to say it's the right way. It's not that mine is the way things should be. I'm just one approach of many approaches. And that's not to say that print nuts are wrong and I'm right . . . it's just that they're print nuts and I'm not a print nut.

S.K. But your prints are so . . . they're very nice.

D.M. Yes, I'm a good printer, but I'm not involved in printing. You know, I don't relish going into the darkroom particularly. And printing sequences is absolute murder. You try printing six pictures in a row and try to get the same quality in each. It drives me bananas. I talk about not being a print person, but I spend a lot of time on the prints.

Speaking about that kind of dogma, the thing that makes me angry is when photographers say things like, "There is only one kind of photography and everything else is shit", and that's not true. There's no establishment.

S.K. It seems that it's usually the imitators who are dogmatic, rather than the person who initiated it. It's like so many of those beautiful prints from California that are dead pictures.

D.M. That's it, they're dead pictures, not a spark of anything in them.

And that's how the conversation ends, not with a rotund quote, but with Duane's dog, Babe, a gracefully aging cocker spaniel, climbing into his lap and grumbling into the microphone.

The whole talk seems to have addressed itself to the question of being a photographer rather than a supplier of photographs. The following story, if it isn't the last word, may at least indicate a good working attitude.

D.M. Years ago I had a terrible experience at Look Magazine when I first started out. I went in and I showed this lady all my things, and she was completely disinterested, and she said, 'Do you have anything on Little Mary Ann's First Holy Communion?' I said no, and she said, 'Well, we like family things. Why don't you go out and do me Little Billy's First Grade Experience and bring it back.' It's like she hadn't seen a thing, nothing at all. And I was really terrified, because I thought, I don't want to photograph that, how am I going to make a living?"

And how far did something like that set him back? "Well, when I walked out it upset me enormously for about an hour or two, then it went away."