

TODD WEINSTEIN · A Personal Narrative

My life in photography began thirty-six years ago, in 1966, in Detroit. I was a high school student fresh to the technique of 'cropping' images and managed to turn what initially seemed a worthless negative into an image that earned a state scholastic award. What follows is what followed: a full and blessed life of, as my mentor, Ernst Haas described photography, "dreaming with open eyes."

In 1969, still in Detroit, I studied photography at the Center of Creative Studies and supported myself by assisting Dick James, a prominent commercial photographer. James taught me the vital lesson that good commercial work was inherently creative, that it did not necessarily prevent or injure personal artistic vision. The following year, I became one of the first photographers for Cream Magazine, a venue on par with Rolling Stone for popular music. I also organized a group exhibition for the Detroit Public Library, "Ten Eyes in Washington." The exhibit documented Vietnam War protests and featured fifteen of my photographs.

In the fall of 1970, I left school and moved to New York City. I freelanced for the fashion photographer, Mel Dixon, who had been an assistant to Richard Avedon and Hiro. I apprenticed with Harvey Lloyd, an important innovator in multimedia presentation. I met André Kertész and Irving Penn. Most significantly, I met Ernst Haas. I became Haas' assistant in 1972, a post that lasted fourteen years. Haas added to Dick James' 'art coexisting with commerce' lesson by teaching me how to apply a private vision to commercial endeavors.

In 1973, I co-established Dove Studios, Inc. to develop multimedia programs for companies. AT&T was an early client. I also founded Todd Weinstein Productions to pursue personal projects. Over the next five years, I created multimedia shows for museums and corporations, including the Detroit Institute of Art, Rockefeller Center, New York Telephone, and the New York State Department of Parks and Recreation.

In 1978, owing to the success of my commercial work, I reached a crossroads. I either needed to expand the business to guarantee growth and wealth or scale the endeavor back so that I could pursue my artistic vision. Inspired by Ernst Haas, as well as my friends the artist Ben-Zion and Lillian Ben-Zion (who introduce me to Jewish themes in art), Louis Stettner, Helen Levitt and André Kertész, I knew that I needed to seek a better balance between my soul and my stomach and scaled back the company.

That I chose wisely became immediately apparent. After shooting the Winter Carnival de Quebec that same year (1978), I became convinced that slide film was inadequate for fully capturing the vivacity of people participating in outdoor events. With some experimentation, I found that the then newly developed high-speed color negative film allowed me to capture, at close range, the diversity of personal expression I was after. I could record the comedy and desperation of life in all its colors, textures, and immediacy, at all times of day and night, in any light situation. In short, I could live with my camera.

Throughout the 80s, I refined this mode of expression and exhibited my work regularly in such places as the Midtown "Y" Gallery, New York University, the Joseph I. Seagram & Sons Collection, Pace/MacGill Gallery, Avery Fischer Hall, and in my own Union Square Gallery. The essence of this work is collected in my book, *Todd Weinstein Personal Journalism: A Decade of Color Photography, 1980-1990*, Union Square Gallery Press. In the introduction to the book, Ernst Haas wrote, "To capture, within a moment, the essence of [New York's] tragic comedy needs a heart, a soul, and a well-reacting trigger finger . . . The pictures of Todd Weinstein prove he possesses these."

In 1980, I established the Union Square Gallery as an artist-run exhibition space dedicated to presenting both emerging and known artists, in various media. The gallery presented scores of shows and served as a social and artistic nexus for an ever-growing community of photographers and artists. Although I raised money from community sponsors, the gallery was primarily funded through my own resources. In a celebration of the tenth and final year of the gallery, Gregg Masters in a profile, wrote, "The longevity of the gallery is a result of Todd Weinstein's devotion to championing work that is beautiful and tough, searching and personal."

In 1983, I went to Washington, D.C. to witness a pilgrimage by 15,000 Holocaust survivors. One of the purposes of the gathering was to build a computer database of friends and relatives who had been separated during World War II. I ran into parents of childhood friends who had never mentioned their wartime horrors to us as we grew up. I was able to photograph them and hear their testimonials. I wondered how people found the strength to deal with such a horrific past and still want to keep living.

In 1994, I began to find an answer that wonder. I was invited by the German government to be an artist in residence. I began work on a six-year project, "Darkness into Light: Re-emergence of the Jewish Culture in Germany." The project not only helped me understand survivors' reasons for living, it also led me to examine my family and its religious history. I saw, and captured on film, the renaissance of Jewish culture in the very land that was soaked in Jewish blood. My desire to understand why Jews were returning to live in a place ridden with painful memories and anti-Semitism deepened my search and my being. I grew to believe that clues to overcoming and understanding racism could be found in modern Germany. By photographing Jewish culture reinvigorating itself in German society, I felt I was helping people expunge the racism in themselves and validating a new life. Likewise, I was personally reinvigorated by learning of my own roots and religious history.

The residency culminated in a final presentation, which consisted of fifty-five images and a slide show. The project eventually led to my photographing the 50th anniversary of the liberation from concentration camps. At Buchenwald, I met, and photographed, children of both survivors and perpetrators. I was inspired to continue to manifest the healing process by working with the organization "One by One," which aids Jews and Christians whose lives have been deeply affected by the Holocaust both as captive and captor. I have continued my work with this organization to this day, hoping that by profiling their German and Eastern European example I will help to show the way to an end of racial intolerance.

In 1995, while traveling in Poland, with stops at Cracow and Auschwitz, I began working outside the photo-journalistic conventions of documentation. I started photographing abstract faces that I saw hiding in the shadows and light of different locations. From these 'ghost' pictures, these rereadings of found objects, came a set of thirty-six photos titled "The Thirty-Six Unknown," a reference to the idea in the Talmud, the oral tradition of Judaism, that the world requires a minimum of thirty six righteous individuals in order to exist. In later lore, the thirty-six hidden ones have the power to save the world. They arrive at times of great peril. Finding their images in Cracow, Auschwitz, and elsewhere, continued my search for wholeness. Once again, I was forced to examine my life as a Jewish man at the end of the twentieth century as well as the tolls of history, both communal and personal, on our society at large. My "Thirty-Six Unknown" brought personal healing. From the pilgrimage in Washington, D.C. through the Jewish renaissance in Germany and working with Holocaust victims as well as visiting the camps, I moved from sharing the horror to recovering from it. "The Thirty-Six Unknown" was my attempt to restore and update the rich Jewish lore and to help deepen the context of a renewed society.

Throughout the 80s and 90s, there have been exhibitions, teaching seminars, book publications, and collection inclusions on the artistic side as well as the building of a strong and noted client's list on the commercial. Here are some stats that give an idea of the breadth of these ongoing artistic and commercial endeavors.

On the commercial front, I've dealt with more than 65 major clients. The list begins with American Express, Trish Brown Dance Co. and Canon and continues through to WR Grace and Western Electric. The list includes some serious initials: CIT, DKG, EDS, IBM, NBC and YMCA. My work has appeared in 21 magazines, including Ad Week, Forbes, German Life, Popular Photography, Time and Life. I've also photographed for 17 design firms.

More importantly, on the artistic front, I've had 11 solo exhibitions. I'm particularly proud that, since 1999, "The Thirty-Six Unknown" has been shown in seven different galleries in cities that include Detroit, New York, Vienna, and Grobzig (Germany). I've been in 5 two-person exhibitions, one of which was in Paris (2000) and another in Rome (2000). I have been a part of 26 group exhibits. My work has been reviewed in various magazines over 20 times. My work has been added to twelve major collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. There have been 2 books of my photos published.

I have also continued to teach, carrying on the "inspirational critique" I learned from my mentor Ernst Haas, encouraging individuals to develop their own personal visions. Among the places I have taught are the Tisch School of Photography, the Maine Photographic Workshop, the International Center of Photography, Queens College, the Pratt Institute, Fashion Institute of Technology. I have started doing workshops internationally in Ireland, Italy, Switzerland and have become very active in the Ostkreuz Schule in Berlin Germany.

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