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"For me, making the books is how I organize my brain in order to look at my work."

The Amsterdam-born, New York-based photographer Ari Marcopoulos has been prolific for decades. His website is a good way to keep up with his various projects, which include art books, zines, gallery and museum exhibitions, album art, videos, and a variety of collaborations with people like Matthew Barney, Jay Z, and Richard Prince, and bands like Trash Talk, Ratking, and the Beastie Boys. As of this typing, his most recent project was a video for Santigold, which he made with Kara Walker.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3738 words.

Tags: Art, Process.

Ari Marcopoulos on establishing a personal aesthetic

I'm curious about the creative energy you get from doing things quickly. You seemingly don't over-think things, treat your work preciously, or spend too much time on one particular project.

I'm very much an advocate of that. Often in my practice I work in ways where I'm not dealing with a middle man, or I'm not collaborating with somebody else. I have work, I put something together, and I go to the copy shop. They know me there now. I know exactly how I format things, it can be printed out, and I make five copies, 10 copies, 100… Usually not more than 100.

I have a lot books that will be done soon. Of course, we call these books "zines." I've always been inspired by zines, especially from the punk rock and skateboarding days. There were a lot of kids taking pictures and they needed an outlet for what they were doing. Specifically, for things that weren't covered in mainstream outlets.

There was an aesthetic that came with it before people had computers. They pasted things together. The text would be typewritten and then taped into the zine, and that's how it would come about. It had a very real, raw look that makes you feel directly connected to the subject you were dealing with. You would also have the voice without the middleman. There was the voice of the photographer or the skateboarder or the musician or the kid that was into punk rock.

I also just really like the way cheap Xerox prints look. For me, that developed into a practice where I'd go, "Okay, I love this set of photographs that I took the last two weeks, I'll lay it out, put it together and then I'm going to print it out."

Sometimes I would go on a trip with some prints or do a project with the prints… or I would only print four or five, just for the people that went along. Or I would print about 50 or 100 and distribute them myself, bring them to Dashwood Books, bring them to Printed Matter. I'd send them in the mail to Japan or Germany. They would have just 10 or 20 copies.

The same thing with seeing my photographs printed out. I started taking them into the copy shop where I used the large-format photocopy printer that usually architects use to enlarge their plans and their blueprints so they can look at them at a bigger scale and I thought: "Oh, this is an amazing machine that can just make big prints for five dollars each."

I could see my stuff at scale, to see if I liked it or not, or if it should be smaller or bigger. I bought a super cheap printer. I would say most photographers have nice Epson permanent ink printers that can run perfect color prints. I just have a cheap printer that only prints out black and white.

It isn't just a process, it's an aesthetic for me, and I captured people's attention. The zine is also an interesting format because you make 100, you make 50, so limited amounts of people have them. Some of them take on a legendary status. People say, "Oh, I got this one zine on this thing or that thing."

I feel that it's a nice way of putting my work out into the world and not mass producing it. I couldn't mass produce it—it would cost too much. It also defeats the purpose of making something cheaply. It would be too expensive to print hundreds of them; the cost would go up. The bookshops already mark these things up.

But, yeah, through this quick process, I would have a result, a concrete result—something you could hold in your hand and give to someone, and it would be an object that exists in the world.

You're known for this specific aesthetic. When you do certain for-hire or commercial projects, like the cover for Jay Z's _Magna Carta Holy Grail_, is the process different?

In cases like that, let's say it's good to have an example. It's good to have that Jay Z example because there we're dealing with a major recording artist, record company, a Creative Director, an Art Director. So the Creative Director was the overseer and then the Art Director is the person who goes about the actual laying out and fonts; he actually makes it under the guidance of the Creative Director.

So the Creative Director is the one person who puts everybody together. He suggested me as the photographer to Jay Z, showed him one of my books, and made it clear to him, "Here's the book and that's what you're going to get. You're not going to be telling him what to do or you're not going to be telling him to take a picture that he doesn't take." And Jay Z expressed that he didn't want to appear on the cover at all, not inside or outside.

Then the meeting was set up between Jay Z and me where we sat down and he talked about the lyrics of the songs, dealing with him being a father and not knowing how to be a dad because he didn't have a dad. Him being married, but he didn't grow up in a household with married people. The struggle of being very rich and from a poor neighborhood and how do you help the people you knew back then. So, there were a lot of things he was thinking about. You know, the meaning of gold chains, like why does he wear a gold chain and

how that is like a sign of success and it's showing that you made it and even though it gets sort of looked upon with a crooked eye by people.

This conversation went back and forth between him and me, expressing my opinions about marriage, children, life, money, music. We talked about veterans from the American wars, we talked about Wall Street. We talked about many things that were going on at the time and he was wondering how I would be able to express that in photographs and not just coming with photographs that I have in my archives but photographs made specifically for the project. Then, after we talked through the lyrics of all his songs, we had a talk about what kind of image would work with those lyrics or with that meaning of the song. So then I had a rough sketch, I'd suggest things, he'd suggest things, and then I just went about town and I photographed stuff.

I think I photographed some things that I would have never photographed, but it wasn't so far outside of my practice because I spend a lot of time walking around in the city and photographing peculiar things or things that are on my mind. This was more closely connected to the conversations we had, and then when the photographs came back, I put them together. I worked with the Art Director very closely on the booklet, on the order of where the pictures would appear, how they would look, how the booklet would look. Really, the cover that is known to people, if they download it from iTunes, is just the picture of the two sculptures turning away from each other. But the CD cover has two booklets in it with like 28 to 30 photographs in there. It's a big photo essay. In a way, the booklets looked very much like zines. They just look a little slicker than the zines, but it was very close to what I was doing.

I recently did a job for Gucci, and they wanted me to do a book of the outtakes I'd taken; there the subject was further away from my regular subject. Even though I approached the shoot in a way I usually take pictures. I would describe my approach as fairly straightforward. I don't go and lay on the floor to get a picture, and usually I put people in the middle of the frame. They are never really things off to the side… I don't think about the gutter or anything like that. Unless somebody tells me I have to. The gutter in a magazine or a book that I'm needing.

So, yes, there is a definite difference, but for the Jay Z thing, too, I was able to stick to my aesthetic. We talked when Mike Tyson got knocked out, what a fucking shock that was for everyone. For him, he couldn't believe it. He saw his hero, this fucking strong guy that was annihilating everybody, on his knees, in the ring with his mouthpiece hanging out his mouth being confused. He talked about that image. Then I said I wanted to do something with that image. So I rephotographed it off the computer and blew it up in four segments as a giant Xerox.

This is something I do in my own work, I make these large Xerox's and then I hang them on the wall, and they're in parts because the Xerox is only 36" wide. The Xerox has wide borders and I leave the wide borders in the way to emphasize the object and what it is. The paper's also thin and curly.

That's something we did, and then I installed it in my gallery. I rephotographed it in installation and then I used that in the artwork of the booklet. Later on, the same piece was in a show and a collector bought it. I was able to bridge this gap pretty well there.

Right before the cover was printed, there was a panic about it, and if it was the right cover or not. Jay called the Creative Director and he said something like "I'm not sure about this cover." Then the Creative Director called me in a big panic and asked for some other options for the cover. "I said, I can't give you any other options because that's the cover. We already discussed it he knows it's the cover, I know it's the cover, you know it's the cover so I don't really see a reason to do that." And the creative director said to me, just trust me, give me three other options for the cover.

I said okay, so I gave him three options and I sent it, and I said "But we all know what the cover is." The next day it was like… It just remained the same. Which me made me feel like something happened, I don't know what, but it must have been he showed it to all his people, all his friends, and they were like "What the fuck? You're going to put that on the cover?" For a second he was like, "Oh yeah, am I going to put that on the cover?," and he was thinking about it. Then when I got back to him, then he was like, "Okay I asked Ari to do this, and I trust him to do this, so we're going to do this."

I'm happy that it lives on as the cover of that album. And the process was pretty close to my practice, even though the pictures were done in discussion with him.

As technology's shifted have you been tempted to move into digital? Most people have a camera on their phone; people are walking around with little cameras, and everyone's a photographer. It's like the rest of the world is making fast photos now, too.

I think people have always taken photos. If you go a flea market, you'll always find older photographs. Sometimes these will be from a portrait studio, and occasionally you'll find vacation photos. Jacques Henri Lartigue, the French photographer, did pictures in the '20s, the '30s of his family. He took a lot of pictures, and they're a documentary of his life and of rich French people.

Then, at some point, you get digital cameras. More people are using digital cameras and, of course, you have phones and then phones like the iPhone, or whatever. These have cameras that have good quality. Then of, course Instagram, which is like the vehicle to put out images. So now they say that everybody's a photographer, but I think that maybe everybody is an observer. That has always happened.

People shared the experience of their lives. It's just that some people didn't share whatever they observed. Some people became writers, some people became show makers, some people became photographers, artists, musicians, whatever. Like, right now I'm sitting here by the Flatiron Building, and I see so many fucking people with their phones taking pictures and posting them on Instagram.

Everybody always asks me: "You got Instagram?" I don't know why I should have Instagram. I took a private Instagram because my girlfriend was on Instagram and my kids are on Instagram. I was sharing. If I'd go on a trip I would take some pictures, and that was a way to share with my family where I was and a closer group of friends.

I posted a lot of pictures on there and then people started getting angry with me… I didn't do it under my name. "Oh, you have an Instagram, because I heard you have an Instagram." Then people would write and ask if they could follow me. I wouldn't answer and then they'd be like "What's up, you're not my friend? I can't follow your Instagram?"

I said I have it, but it's not really for that, it's more like a way for me to be in touch with people. Then my agent for my commercial work said all the clients ask if you have an Instagram. Actually, two weeks ago, or last week, my girlfriend helped me setup a public Instagram account, and it's bizarre because all I put on there is more images I feel my agent can use in progression of my career as getting jobs. It's crazy because all of a sudden you have all these followers, then for a second you look at who is following you, and you look at the pictures.

After a while you're just like I don't want to look at this shit. I don't want to. There are a lot of interesting things on there, and there are a lot of interesting people that have interesting opinions and they take… they maybe take interesting photographs or they go to interesting places. But, in the end, you're just looking at postcards and postcards are honestly the most common denominator of what an image is.

Then you look at it and go, "Oh well, this person that I admire has an Instagram, and this person I admire doesn't have an Instagram." You kind of become comparative on it. But to speak to the fact of all these images… so many images are getting generated now and they're all getting put on the Cloud. On the fucking Cloud. I mean, where do these fucking pictures live? And they're not really photographs, they're just illusions like tons of illusions and it can drive people crazy, I think.

I'm not against taking pictures with a phone. I've taken some nice pictures with my phone, but I believe in my camera, and taking pictures with my camera. The most sickening thing is when you hear photographers say: "You know I never take my camera anymore I just take pictures with my phone." I'm like yeah, whatever, you do that.

It's too easy. Also, the phone is not a phone anymore; it's a camera. Who would think this instrument we used to use to be in touch with each other, through voice, became something that people don't want to be on anymore? People just want to text. People say, "Don't call me, just text me." Texting is a one-way communication. Because, let's say you have an argument with your kid or your partner, so then you write them, "Man you're a real fucking asshole for doing that." Then they write you back, "Yeah, you're an asshole, too." Okay, done. What?

Ari Marcopoulos recommends:

Eric Dolphy's *The Berlin Concerts*

Eleanor Coppola's *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*

Walker Evans "American Photographs"

Daido Moriyama's *Farewell, Photography*

Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*

coconut gelato

black licorice

Then you write why you think that is, and then they write you back, and then all of the sudden you're like "What am I communicating?" When you talk to each other you actually have to explain what you think and the other person can interrupt you and can say, "I hear what you're saying, but you're really looking at this in the wrong way."

That's how I look at Instagram and all the social media and Twitter. People just say shit. It's like they're looking in the mirror. They're only dealing with themselves. They're only talking to themselves. The other thing about this stuff, is if something terrible happens in the world, some terrorist act or somebody dies that you really love, all you can do is press a heart. You can't even press a broken heart.
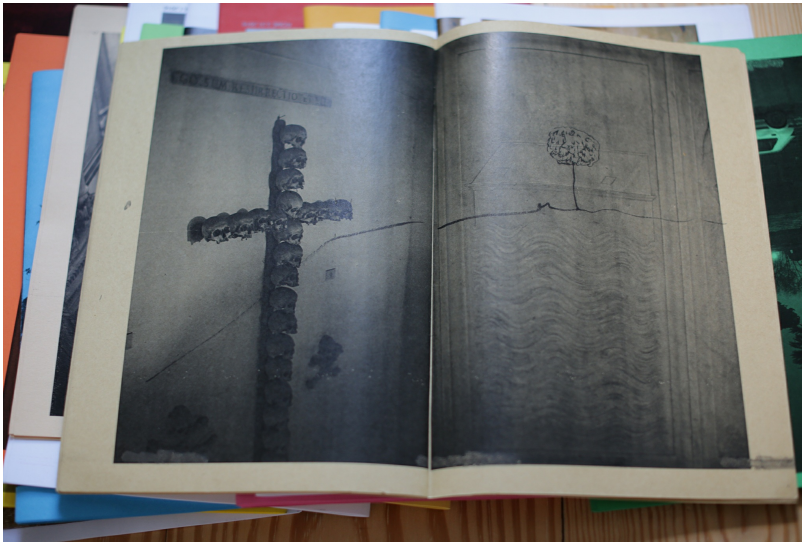
I did a book, *Directory*, a few years ago that addresses the accumulation of images. It's 1200 pages of photographs, fairly unedited, in a telephone book form. It addressed the idea of the multitude of imagery— and now we're living it. I don't really know what's going to happen to all these pictures and all this writing.

When something only exists in a digital sphere, someone can just flip a switch and then it's all gone.

Well, yeah. That's what's going to happen to all our text messages, too. I don't know—maybe amazing novelists are texting each other, or poets are writing amazing things to each other, and then all of a sudden their communication will be gone. I use a phone. You and I made our appointment on our phones, and it's cool, but I really feel that this idea that people are sharing things is wrong. Yes, they're sharing things, but they're really just sharing about themselves, they only talk to themselves.

I don't think you learn much from Instagram. "This woman likes these kind of clothes and she's wasted two times a week." "This dude likes skateboarding, and he has an ankle injury, and he's in the hospital." The information's too brief. I don't want to be a curmudgeon. I don't think they should stop it, but I also don't think that everybody's a photographer.

It's the same thing in the zine revolution. It's picked up lately, which is funny because at the same time print is dying. But a lot of young kids are making zines, and there is a lot more independent publishing. People say to me, "Isn't it amazing, independent publishing, so many good books." I say, "There are not that many good books. There's the same amount of good books as before."

Actually, it's more disturbing because it's way fucking harder to find good books because it's like the haystack that's so full. A lot of it is emulating something else, and when you see it in Printed Matter, it seems cool because it reminds you of other things, but then when you actually live with it, you're

like, "This is like the second time the tea bag got used in the cup, it's not really good."

It's not like just because now there's more rappers, there's more good music. You should see how much shit there is, like how many shit musicians are putting stuff on YouTube that you can't watch. You can't just go "dope rap" and then find "dope rap," someone has to tell you. Same with "dope photos."
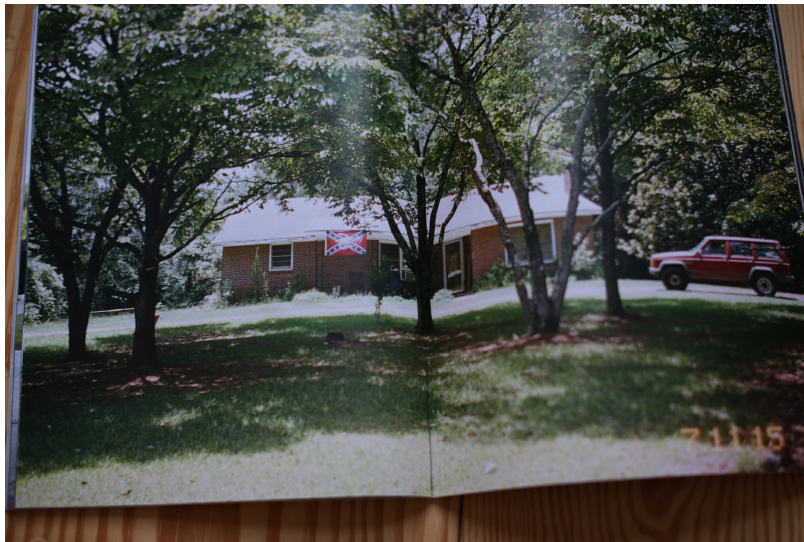
There *are* people who curate things on Instagram. They not only do their own pictures, they curate. They go, "I like this guy, he's got a good eye for Brutalist architecture. He's got an awesome site, that tells you where the buildings are." That's kind of cool.

Do you think the difference is that you're curating what you're doing, and having a reason to do it beyond saying what you did this weekend? You're documenting a culture or a scene or a time period.

For me, making the books is how I organize my brain in order to look at my work. I get interested in certain things, and then whatever comes along, I photograph it. I acquire images, then I think, "Okay, what did I just do? How do I organize it?" Then I organize it in book form. It's like semi nonlinear narratives, and then I look at them and I go, "Oh, this is good I could do more of this or that." It's a self-reflective way of looking and organizing my work in time, because I acquire so much of it. And then I don't mind sharing it. I'm not afraid to put something out there where everybody goes, "Oh, that's shit." We all need affirmation, of course, but I'm not scared to put something out there that's not, like, the

greatest thing since peanut butter.

Name
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Vocation
Photographer, Artist, Filmmaker, Videomaker, Zinemaker

Fact
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