

Photo-Dialogue: creating the word-image that makes the
difference
– by Steve Marshall

‘If your photographs aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.’
Robert Capa, Spanish Civil War photographer.

‘If your photographs aren’t good enough, you’re not reading enough.’
Tod Papageorge, American Street photographer.



Self Portrait. Steve Marshall

I think this 'selfie' is about right for now.
I constantly wonder what intervention might contribute to the change we all seem to seek.
I witness others struggling to make meaningful, generative contributions in organizations that
we all wish could be vibrant, engaging and that would serve us well.
Yes, I get a bit frustrated and impatient with it at times, too.

It has taken me a while to realize that I am interested in a different kind of vision. The common requirements of business consultancy to increase profit, develop market share, or become 'Number 1' seem to ring hollow

in a world where we are seeing the limits of economic growth, experiencing the damage we have inflicted on our eco-system and seem to suffer from an increasingly resilient social malaise. Most of the leaders with whom I work are clear that they face seemingly impossible circumstances and what to do next is, at best, a blurry, ill-defined puzzle. Increasingly, my clients are saying, "I don't know what to do – and I have no vision of what could work." In this context, my experience on ADOC has enabled me to understand that I am interested in working with the kind of vision that will support those of us who are wrestling with these apparently impenetrable problems and, perhaps, might underpin a vision of leadership that genuinely works to improve the human condition.

It has been several years since I was seized by the moment of astonishing clarity that flashed through dappled sunlight as I drove along a wooded ridge on my way to another inconsequential change management assignment. I remember it as a time when 'a decision took me.' Indeed, I had to stop the car and pause as the implications of the experience rattled through my bones. Suddenly, I had no choice and I left a guaranteed, pensionable, 'job for life' and moved into the countryside with a young family and a vague intent to try a different way of working as a consultant. A year later, when I had completed the Ashridge Masters in Organisation Consulting, I still had some money in the bank but my single-minded moment of coherence had been replaced by a list of ever more challenging questions. While I had made the first step towards the kind of work that mattered to me, a much bigger transition loomed. Today I can be eloquent and I describe my quest in terms of the 'significance' of the work I choose to undertake. At that time I was left simply wondering what the hell to do with my life. Then I heard that Ashridge might be offering a Doctorate along similar lines to the Master's and I decided that I had unfinished business.

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN HIGGINS:

JH: Why that photo? (Self Portrait)

SM: It came about after a long period of reflection – after seeing your write up of our last conversation. It was also at a time when I was getting scratchy and cross, something that usually happens if I haven't done anything creative for a while. I'd been on a high after doing some visual work with [a UK-based NGO], really feeling on top of my craft, and then spent some time supervising on the Ashridge Doctorate, supporting others creatively. While this is great work and very satisfying, it's not the same as attending to my own creativity and I'd been stuck in the office for two or three days...

I went back to what you'd written and felt bolstered by it, noticing different types of possibility and potential within both the writing and myself. I've been struggling for about a year now, too busy (ironically) to find a way to language what I do, and to present my work to the world.

PAUSE

I see my work as catalytic. But, because of what I do, the way I work with photography and taking pictures in the moment, I can't make any clear claims about the effect my work will have. I can describe the process, how I'll go about things, but to say: 'This will be the result,' feels wrong. I can't, after all, predict the future. I feel that what I do can be helpful, but whether it *really* makes a difference... that's problematic for me.

So, I don't 'sell' what I do. I put offers out there, suggestions... and when one of these offers or suggestions lands with someone, I follow it up.

BACK TO THE PHOTOGRAPH

What I'm trying to signify in the picture is the depth of my work, the sustained engagement I've made with the field that makes up my practice. I can find myself getting labeled as 'the bloke who does the photos,' but I'm not just photos, I'm into words as well as photos. The photos provoke dialogue. So it can be either words or images, or both – without ever knowing ahead of time what word or picture is the one that will land and make some shift possible.

In the image I made in preparation for this conversation I'm sitting on the floor. This is my natural territory. I like to take shots that are looking up at people... a flattering perspective. Sitting on the floor feels very congruent... it's how I sit when I'm working. I don't want to dominate the space where I work... which can be tricky as I'm six foot two and turn up festooned with photographic technology – which has an effect...

But on the floor I start to blend in, it feels more like I'm just hanging out with people.

JH: Could you explore this sitting on the floor a bit more?

SM: OK, this is what it feels like a lot of the time... I'm coming at things from a low angle, just looking over the tops of office desks. Sitting on the floor I become part of the background.

JH: Most consulting activity consist of pretty high status activities... there's often, even always, some sort of status game going on...

SM: I'm conscious of that... and the cameras infer a bit of power. I can do the bolshie photojournalist thing if I need to AND then I can switch status. Having got over the need to legitimize my role in people's workspace I can play the low status witness and documentary maker. Perhaps the most representative image of my actual working process might be one of me showing people the playback screen on the back of the camera and asking them if they're okay with the pictures I'm making.

JH: Consultants are usually enmeshed in the power/status/hierarchy game with their clients, what you do is different. What's the nature of the social contract you have with them?

SM: Rather than talk about contracts, let me talk about boundaries – the boundary conditions between clients and consultants are not straightforward. Clients often want a great deal of overlap between the consultant and themselves. They want to know that the consultant is 'one of them'; that the consultant has done what he's proposing before and that he can promise it'll work.

In my photographically based work I have the smallest overlap I can get away with – our boundaries just touch. I was working with a telecoms company and I know nothing of telecoms. What I was interested in was moments of personal creativity, the identity of the group and instances of 'quality' in their work. So, rather than get my validation from meeting the client's need for me to be like them, I get my sense of integrity from the knowledge of what I went through to get my Doctorate. Because of the hundreds of books I've read, that are behind me and in me, the reflexive process, the endless hours spent in the integration of experience, theory and practice, I can say with confidence that in the thousandth of a second it takes to take a picture I'll have something interesting to say about creativity or identity or quality or whatever....

Finding frame and focus

On the floor of this office is my under-graduate dissertation, yellowed pages more than 30 years old, typewritten (no word processors in those days) with a plastic binding that has all but given up the ghost. It's title, 'The Image and the Event,' referred to a critique of the photojournalism of the day but it might equally apply to how I now frame my consulting and leadership coaching work. Today I focus on the way we imagine and envision strategy, and how we deal with the unfolding events of our day-to-day reality. I realize that I have, for some time, been deeply concerned with *how* we see things and the impact of that 'seeing' process on our lives.

Ironically, it has taken a while for my own vision of 'Photo-Dialogue' to appear. It is as though I needed to continually wrestle with the questions that held real significance for me – that I needed to be sure of my ground and to be sure that I had paid my dues. As I moved from working as a photographer/journalist, wondering about the narrative impact of photographs and how I could change the world with just the right image, through my 'twenty and some' years as a military fighter pilot, or now as an 'organization consultant', my concern with the 'picture' that we share has stayed at the forefront. But since working my way through AMOC¹ and ADOC²,

¹ Ashridge Masters in Organisation Consulting (now Ashridge Masters in Organisational Change)

² Ashridge Doctorate in Organisation Consulting (now Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change)

another, more dialogic, conversational thread of inquiry has become equally present in my work. While imagery and vision might provide a window on the soul, we still need to talk our way through our stories and pictures. We need the words and narrative too.

During my ADOC inquiry, I became clear that my world has never followed the conventional narrative of telling me what is about to happen, telling me, and then telling me what just happened. Instead, my experiences and meaning-making are more complex, they intertwine, I make sense retrospectively and my learning seems to run forward or loop backwards, conversations run concurrently and, delightfully, random stuff just arrives.... So much for the linear, text-based platitudes and milestone plans that make for our Gant-charted corporate lives. But, post-ADOC, I am able to articulate my own personal process within a visually informed consulting practice that also enables clients to address the kind of complexity that informs their own lived experience as leaders, strategists and innovators.

Yet when I began to present the experience of a 4-year inquiry to a doctoral audience, it rapidly became clear that academia requires a particular, rather conventional version of events. A particular, conventional literary style is required and I rubbed inelegantly against the rules. So, I am writing my chapter of *The Change Doctors* as part of the thesis that never was; a braided tangle of writing and images, ideas, accounts of meetings, alongside fragments of thoughts and reflections from the conversations between John and myself. It feels real to me and reflects the way I work but I know there is also risk in this approach. When I wrote for the Ashridge publication 'Organisational Consulting @ the Edges of Possibility' with the instruction to 'tell your own story and say how it is to be you', it seems I got my story wrong and had to significantly edit the work. But now I'm a Doctor and so I guess this version of my own story will, at last, have some authority.

The Meeting: Reflections from John's notebook (1)

I'd been there before, the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern – working with Steve before his Doctorate, exploring the edges of his insight using postcards from the gift shop. We'd also sat together as he talked about his experience of being a father and being fathered – another time, another project, same place.

I came in through an unexpected entrance, walking through sepulchral gloom and up the ramp towards the light – not seeing him when he saw me. He called out once I'd passed by, after he'd taken some photos he'd show me later. My first sight of him was a white jumper³ with a long camera covering two thirds of his face – the unexpected portrait painter.

Steve's relationship to the Doctoral experience has not been straightforward. The ADOC process is not one of simple intellectual extension, it is at its heart a deeply

³ Rather delightfully, I don't own a white jumper.

existential experience, one that demands a degree of personal presence and examination not usually engaged with by traditional Doctoral processes. The traditional academic program is not well suited to cope with inquiry that sees the personal as professional, blurring and mixing together comfortable compartments that have kept the academic discourse safe from the messiness of embodied human experience. Steve's personal tension reflected the systemic tension of seeing a Doctoral process in a new way, while still connecting to its well-established and rigorous traditions.



John in the Turbine Hall. Steve Marshall

I hadn't seen him and he walked on past me. John is a big guy.
Solid.

And yet he manages to arrive silently.
Speak softly... I like that.

There is a subtlety in the power he has as our editor and so here is an acknowledgement
of the presence and framing he provides for our writing.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

SM: The big shock for me was what happened post dissertation. I remember the external examiner saying, 'Congratulations, Dr Marshall' and this provoked a real plunge into transition. What caught me out as I moved back into 'normal' life after the years of Doctoral inquiry was how much was still unraveled.

With the thesis out of the way and on my wife's instructions, I threw my energy into my consulting practice. She'd seen that I had been able to do

the Doctoral work, something she hadn't recognised as part of my natural make-up, and was firmly of the view that 'if you can do that, you can do anything.' When I wondered what my next challenge might be, her request was simple. She looked me in the eye and laughed. Then said, 'OK, so make a ton of money, please!' It's been a joke ever since – as well as a helpful reminder for me that the Doctorate took time, energy and finance away from other, more family orientated pursuits. It also helps me frame decisions about the ethics of my practice; money isn't much of a driver – I'm more interested in significant, creative, meaningful work.

I work very hard at making the whole business administration part seem very easy. I resent the intrusion, the compromise it can invoke. Don't get me wrong, I still like the spoils and fun of a successful business - but this 'splitting' is an old pattern. In writing my thesis I was holding on to what I wanted to represent, to my sense of integrity, whilst also working with what would do an 'academic' job. Again, I began to resent the intrusion and one of the external academics noted, 'You've said this thesis is about consulting. But you hardly mention it. Where's your practice?' Of course, I felt that the whole thing was about practice but I had to bite the bullet and edit to meet the academic requirements. Even if they were 'minor conditions,' it felt like a huge compromise.

JH: Could you say a little more about the nature of how you experienced post-Doctoral transition?

SM: I had always been really keen that a 'Professional Doctorate' should have some sort of practical business application but often felt a little censured among the ADOC community for using terms like 'ROI'⁴. However, I needed to achieve considerable distance from the work before I could do something businesslike with it. Only now, two years on, does it feel like I have found enough space... I'm still re-organising my office... It's also taken two years to think about going on holidays and, at last, to concentrate on seriously spending time with my family.

JH: It sounds like somewhere along the way you had lost your own sense of the focus?

SM: Absolutely... and my coping strategy was to fill the gap with activity. The last two years have felt headlong. I co-founded a new consulting partnership straight away after completing the doctorate. The business did well and made money, but ultimately, it was not how I saw my life unfolding. At the time, my fellow partners had considerable aspirations and saw themselves running a big organization employing lots of associates. I guess I was seduced by the idea but neglected to attend to what I was actually doing and how it fitted with my sense of self and practice. My role became soulless; finance, performance indicators, IT and business control. I was the one with an MBA and while I think I can do that kind of thing well, it's not how I choose to make my contribution.

⁴ Return On Investment

Those years were a salutary experience. I really had not appreciated how long it would take for work and identity to settle. My own vision for my Photo-Dialogue work was immature and I needed to ground what a more aesthetically informed, artful practice might mean. The thesis had been a way of sketching out that territory; turning it into a sustainable practice takes time... is taking *me* time.

Obsession and Optimism

Fighter pilots obsess over the 'picture;' the dynamic, unfolding image of high-speed, high stakes, tactical maneuvering and action that constitute their worlds. The picture emerges from a synthesis of careful pre-briefing and rehearsal, radar imagery, the voice of a ground controller, aircraft and weapon capability, visual sightings, and then, often screamed inter-cockpit instructions. As the immediate tactical scenario emerges, situational awareness forms, strategy develops and action follows. Back on the ground, we would endlessly replay our 'tapes' to understand what each of us had seen during the mission and how effective our collective efforts had been.

Such was the backdrop to my flying career and while today's pace of life, even in the most hectic client engagements, is more considered, opportunities to reflect on the nuance of life and practice can feel rare. There are no 'tapes' of my experience and the data is often incomplete, biased or simply forgotten. Yet I realize that I still operate like a fighter pilot, on a mixture of half-held hunches, an over-optimistic assessment of my chances of success and an unreasonable belief in my own ability. There are consequences to this kind of attitude and I recall the cartoonist Hugh MacLeod⁵ offering some kind of anchor point; "I work extremely hard doing what I love, mainly to ensure that I don't have to work extremely hard doing what I hate." With this in mind, returning back to the yellowed pages of 'The Image and The Event' feels like the a re-engagement with an artifact that continues to offer questions and inspiration for work that is a life-long calling.

Perhaps there was something of this sentiment rattling around my head as I arrived at Ashridge for my ADOC acceptance interview. I explained to faculty members Kathleen King and Robin Ladkin (who would both later become much-valued colleagues) that, rather than resolving questions of practice, AMOC had asked more, and that doing a doctorate would actually be less troublesome than not doing one. It was the best rationale that my 'work hard doing what you love' script could describe.

If AMOC had encouraged me to formulate a practice that offered a framing of decision-making and strategy through the lenses of complexity, improvisation and dialogue, I had hoped that ADOC would enable me to research an experience of

⁵ Cartoonist, author and internet publisher Hugh MacLeod: <http://www.gapingvoid.com>

organizational relationships seen aesthetically. I guess that an image of the past friendships and the close bonds of a fighter squadron was a clear, if unseen, point of reference as I began an inquiry into how relational quality might be an indicator of organizational performance.

CONSIDERING THE WORK

JH: If we begin to look more clearly at your practice, I'm still intrigued by the power that minimal overlap makes possible, compared to that of maximal overlap. What makes it possible for you to work with such a limited degree of familiar connection?

SM: Mmmm... What happens in those moments of photography? There's an essence of reality... People see a form of truth in a photo, there is a particular sense of relationship to the image. Working from a photograph, taken in an instant as I sit on the floor and they go about their work, we can then talk much more easily about some of the previously invisible, tacit dynamics that structure their context and relationships. People often don't feel these things are important enough to talk about because they don't count as a task or something that fits within the implicit assumption of what is valid 'knowing' within the business organization.



The red fingernail of detail. Steve Marshall

I was fascinated by the way these colleagues worked together.
Their conversation had an almost rhythmic song-like quality as they set out possibility,
boundaries, rigor and focused their attention.
That red fingernail became an emblem for the whole organization:
“We design well; we take our stuff very seriously.”

What my way of working makes possible is the capacity to have meaningful conversations more quickly. The imagery is designed to extend the range of what we normally count as organizational ‘data’ and enables a different kind of relational conversation. I guess that, ultimately, ‘creativity’ is my field and I need to be able to help people talk fluently about the nature of creativity in organizations. I have to be skilled at getting these conversations going because they are not the normal conversations my clients have. I’ve used the Doctorate to learn how.

In the pictures I take there will always be some sort of truth, some ‘red fingernail of detail’ that kick-starts the conversation, that builds fast, deep rapport in the consulting relationship. With rapport and resonance made possible by the picture, and the learning I’ve brought to that moment, we can really pay attention to what each of us see in the here and now of the image.

JH: What is distinctive about the conversations you have with people now compared to those you had before the Doctorate?

SM: Conversations go faster and deeper. We get into relevant material much more easily.

JH: Why do you think this is?

SM: Let me give you an example; I want to show you something that took me by surprise (Steve reaches for his iPad). I got some feedback when I did the [NGO] work. Before the start of the workshop, I’d asked the group to each take digital pictures that spoke to their professional practice and then send it to me. I printed them to a really high standard and handed them out as I began to set out our work. I had asked if we could use the pictures to start to our work together; I wanted to use visual images to set the dialogic ‘container’ and we got into interesting stuff straight away.

But now the feedback... “An amazingly fresh perspective.... Fantastic delivery, charisma and trust... Steve’s not worried about using the correct terminology – more concerned about what *we’re* saying... Very thought provoking...” And so on... And I can do this because we connect quickly through the imagery and, as you can see in the background of my own picture, with all those wretched books, I guess I know my stuff! But, honestly? It still surprises and delights me.

In terms of process, I can take a snippet of the client’s reality, a photograph, and then the person is differently present in the conversation. I can use their material and I’m not getting in their way –

because I'm not expert in their field. In my own field I'm very expert... but that's invisible to them... so when I turn up in someone's offices or place of work, the technology of photography means I'm actually in my own backyard, I'm on my ground and I can go wherever they want to go.

JH: I'm very taken with the idea of consultants having their own ground...

SM: It's a challenge to, or a reframing of, the traditional idea of meeting the client where they are. I remember an old HBR article about a Stanford Professor who explicitly tells groups when he meets with them, 'I will not be relevant... finding relevance, that's your work.' He also made no judgments about what his clients did; he provided just a minimal hook to generate a learning conversation between consultant and client. The hook between me and the world of my clients might be a thousandth of a second – and as a result of that fraction they will become manifest in the image I make.

JH: You're really seeing them.

SM: Well, yes... but I'm not matching expertise in the business sense... but we're meeting at the level of... the dimension of... human contact and identity.

JH: I'm thinking with a military hat on and the meaning of the salute... with its visible statement of "I see you"... In your work, you're seeing people, acknowledging them and their existence.

SM: I work with a different focus to traditional practitioners in the field of organisational aesthetics – I tend to find the work there a bit of a turn off. Most of organisational aesthetics seems to be concerned with shape of the speakerphone or the colour of the wallpaper and I'm just not interested in that sort of thing.

I'm interested in the aesthetics of organizational relationships... trying to find a way of bringing into the frame the aesthetic of relating within a particular setting. That's why portraits fascinate me! If I go back to the pictures of the people in the telecoms company, there's the guy who's lost in his world... I'm fascinated by the prospect of capturing that quality of engagement.

I think my portraits are simply appreciative images of people in their working contexts. I try to capture moments when people are expressing something amazing. I can point to them being at their best in their work and then I can ask, appreciatively, who is *this* person?



Lost in a world. Steve Marshall

I do this too.

I get lost in my world, a kind of 'flow' state where time stops and my concentration is entirely complete.

The question though, is how can we structure our organizations to enable this kind of process to happen more often?

Defining Form

“We are, of course, almost constantly surrounded by different sorts of visual technologies – photography, film, digital graphics, television, acrylics, for example – and the images they show us – TV programmes, advertisements, snapshots, Facebook pages, public sculpture, movies, closed circuit television footage, newspaper pictures, paintings. All these different technologies and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms.”

Rose, G. (2012:2)

Many writers make the claim that the visual is central to our experience, the most fundamental of all senses. In my undergraduate days, I remember John Berger (1972: 7) suggesting that ‘seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.’ In making the visual element of our experience integral to my practice, I aim to open up legitimize other ways of ‘knowing’ within our organizations and lived experience. Photographs are particularly useful to me in this

respect; the camera-phone and similar digital technologies are ubiquitous in our lives and our knowledge of the world, through established media or newer, 'social' forms is increasingly articulated visually.

Photo-Elicitation:



John provided my first exposure to photo-elicitation when I was at a 'stuck' point during my master's degree. We met at the Tate Modern and bought art cards from the gift shop, choosing them on the basis that they simply appealed to us, and then took turns to spread our collections out on the floor of the Turbine Hall. John asked me to tell the story of my consulting practice using the cards I had purchased. I was completely shocked by the words that came out of my mouth as I articulated a practice unlike any of the other models of consulting or coaching I had experienced.

One particular image has lived with me ever since, Sandy Skoglund's 'Fox Games', a bizarre scene where grey people in a grey restaurant seem to be oblivious the fact that the restaurant is overrun with red foxes jumping over the tables and chairs. For me, the red foxes seemed to symbolize a mischievous sense of the emotion and energy that grey organizations fail to recognize.

Organisational Reportage:

Working with a reportage brief is a luxury. In this kind of work I am following a contract devised with the client to look appreciatively for particular moments of relationship that would provide a prompt for dialogue into, for example, the

conditions that might promote or provoke organizational change and innovation or, in the example below, how we might lead and co-operate effectively by listening well and fully attending to those around us.



This image appeared as I wandered around a workshop where participants had been given a brief to interview each other. It was a productive, buzzy interlude for a group that were otherwise often dispersed or working on different shifts. The opportunity to meet and work together felt like a special moment that I wanted them to remember. The purpose behind these images is to both witness and honour the subjects, and to provide a spur for inquiry among participants. So I might be asking something along the lines of, “Is this what collaboration looks like?” or “How could we get more of this?”

Collaborative Images:

Kevin sent me a photograph that a friend had made of him as they walked in Highgate Cemetery. I was instantly intrigued; I’ve known Kevin for several years and he brings a somewhat elusive and mysterious sense of presence to his practice. I see him as deeply experienced and rather powerful in the way he ‘comes alongside’ his clients and their organizations.

He manages to ‘hold’ group and organizational processes as a ‘whole’ rather than breaking them down into their constituent parts and I know this takes enormous

effort and concentrated attention. I find his method curiously artistic and wanted to extend his image to that of a rather troubled philosopher or academic, so I cropped the picture to provoke the viewer's attention and increased the contrast to achieve a heightened sense of drama.



I imagine that the appearance of Karl Marx in this image is not an accident and it would have been easy for me to place it in the frame using Photo-shop or similar software. Yet there is, like any dialogic conversation, a need to suspend and hold back fantasy – but sometimes ‘the random stuff’ makes its presence felt!

Photo-Projections:

This is a process where I engage in a visual conversation with the client in (usually) a coaching environment. As we began to imagine how we might be ‘showing up’ as consultants in the early stage of producing this book, I started to work up images of my colleagues.

My process with this kind of work is to let my projections and fantasies run free – as I work with the pictures, I am able to ‘Photoshop’ and digitally manipulate the photo to my heart's content. The resultant image becomes a conversation piece; my projections of the ‘client’ play out and I offer them in an artistic spirit of inquiry.

When the client sees the image their projections and fantasies also come into play. In most conventional coaching conversations this kind of material works away in our unconscious processes. My aim is to artfully, often playfully, bring this material, which is at the basis of our human relating, to the fore.

Kathleen simply asked me to make an image when she was working at a conference. I had heard her describe her work as 'just meetings, really' and I felt that I would challenge that particular self-deprecatory version of her practice.



There is a bit of pop-star glamour going on here for me though the wrinkles around her eye hint at the depth and experience Kathleen brings to her work. I initially thought I might smooth them away – but didn't and duly endured the complaints! The deeper appreciation of Kathleen as a leader of ADOC remains and, I think, confronts some of her own denial of the agency of her role.

Co-constructed imagery:

Perhaps my most rewarding work takes place when I work with a client as we both enter the struggle of extending our sense of 'knowing' and together devise an image that begins to explore issues where words are ineffective. When I worked with Carla she immediately said that she did not want to be photographed.

We were inquiring into the nature of invisible, seamless 'service' and the quality of the working relationship that such a concept implies. We agreed that I would photograph her in a way that would be representative of her sense of anonymity. As Carla prepared one of the coffee bars that would be her responsibility for the day, I set the camera and began to make a series of images. We needed to find just the right amount of invisibility; where she could be polite and responsive to guests though where she might also maintain a respectful distance should she detect that

the guest needed space for contemplation or peace.



Participative Visual Inquiry

As much as possible, I try to hand the cameras over to the clients and participants. This is an important inversion of the normal power relationship invoked by a photographer 'taking' a picture.



If this is not possible, I invite them to be 'art director' as I tend to the technical issues and then bring them fully into the selection and editing process. In this gallery process the group is taking part in a visual variation of 'Appreciative Inquiry'. They are voting for images by putting stickers on them and using post-its or simply writing straight onto the images to record ideas that came to mind as a result of the work. The inquiry moved on from 'This is what creativity looks like...' to the structural and relational changes that would be required to support creativity and innovation in their organization. It was a conversation that would have been problematic in a more conventional form.

WHAT CHANGES?

JH: Tell me how it works as an organizational intervention.

SM: What I think I offer people is a way of being seen. Rather than the military salute, I think of the Zulu greeting... 'I see you' and the response, 'I am here'.

Many organizations make people invisible, or at least they make a large part of their lives invisible. I allow people to be present and be witnessed... and when that happens they open up and you have very different conversations with them about what they bring to their work, how they show up. My best pictures honour people.

JH: I'm aware of how different what you do is to much organizational practice... you're seeing individuals not units of production.

SM: I'm seeing people as creative, valuable, beautiful and vital.

JH: If people really are an organization's greatest asset then the first step you take as a senior manager is to see them as magnificent people. So much organizational language kills the presence of the individual.

SM: A while ago, I made this image of a guy working a printing machine. He was clearly very skilled and I loved the craft he brought to his work... there was a care and attention to what he did. I think of craft as being about something that you can never reduce away, an ability that can't be easily transferred. His craft came from years and years of being around printing. The picture I took really honours him. His manager took his picture, along with several others, and put them up in reception. It was as a simple gesture but it provided a shift in organizational identity, the 'this is who we are,' that was immediately visible to clients and visitors.

The visual process enabled something to happen. I had a long conversation with him about the nature of printing as a craft. It was a hundred year old firm and there was a lot of vintage machinery around. As we talked he told me "I've got a job to do and we'll use an old

machine.” As he worked it looked pretty ferocious with metal flying everywhere, “We don’t normally do this but it’s great to go back to it!” I was fascinated. He was literally making the tools to do the job. It was amazing to have a conversation with someone who’d done this printing job all his life and to explore with him the nature of his craft and what he was bringing to the organization.



Craftsman. Steve Marshall

I’m in awe of people who can still do ‘real work’.
One of the attractions of my own photographic craft is that I can actually give people something to take away with them as part of the intervention.
And I love it when they say, ‘Wow!’

JH: My daughter has just finished reading a Richard Sennett book on *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (Sennett, 2006), where he revisits much of his thinking about craft. He highlights how the consulting industry has no capacity to value in-depth, hard earned craft. The focus is on the capacity to acquire new skills not deepen existing ones. By valuing the craft of this man in the print shop you’re valuing the person. I’m wondering if what you’re touching on is the craft of being a good human being... is there such a craft?

SM: I would say there is. After the Doctorate I take the reflective process around this very seriously. It’s raised questions about what I’m

prepared to do with my life and who I'm prepared to be in the world. Where I've got to, and it sounds so corny, is that the purpose in the images I take and work I do with them is to bring witness to the lives of other people – that's the work I can do and should be doing. This is a calling for me and the question is how do I, and others, become good at our calling?

Lots of photographers do their best stuff when they get a bit older... there is a new confidence and the technical aspects disappear. A lot of my work as a younger man was derivative. Now I blend this activity with my academic work, which I struggle with... I struggle to be an academic in the traditional sense... I'm not interested in knowledge for its own sake. But I'm crafting a practice from academia and this practice is about working with the creativity of others. I want to make this practice my space.

The power of tangible transitional objects: Reflections from John's notebook (2)

For me, Steve's work is the antithesis of much of the excessively rational and worded work of consultants, which hardly ever does anything but take excitement and vitality out of the client/consultant encounter. His work seems to be in the service of what economists refer to as the animal spirits of ambition and creative expression – the messy, energizing material that doesn't look good in a two by two matrix or PowerPoint presentation, but without which none of the rational disciplines have any meaning or momentum.

It isn't just the transitional capability of the photos; they also provide something physical and tangible. Steve finds it difficult when coaching/consulting with no physical artefact or 'thing' to giveaway, there's something ancient or basic in the social habit of giving and receiving gifts. There is also something about the intention behind the photo. Steve is resolute in the intention behind his work as a way of honouring people's experience. It is about seeing people well and with positive regard – this was an important part of his thesis. Steve describes his orientation to the world as having a 'Zen like fascination with the beauty of potentially mundane things.' As I made my notes I noticed that he had become fascinated with the patterns of my pencil shavings – I take my notes during interviews using soft leaded pencils that need frequent sharpening.

Steve has the capacity to find beauty in the ordinary. This is in contrast to a world where so much is seen as not good enough. Maybe Steve's interest in beauty is connected to this capacity for seeking out the good enough, that which can be honoured and appreciated – which in turn will create a form of relationship and connection that will put his consulting and coaching work on a very different footing to a traditional, deficit based, practice.

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHY MAKES POSSIBLE

JH: I wonder if your photography helps slow your clients down so they can be more attentive to a situation?

SM: Yes, and I work with photography simply because I can't paint or draw! I'm trying to pay attention to details and the specifics of the relational context. Using photography, I can draw people's attention to things in ways I couldn't otherwise.'

I took some pictures of guys working in new product development... I found myself intrigued by the creative moments of conflict. It was all but invisible, and was certainly deniable if I'd referred to the dynamic after the event. But the group was used to me photographing them and I got some beautiful shots of people in confrontation in this meeting... so subtle, but it pushed them to speak to those moments.



Advocacy. Steve Marshall

A brief moment.

This confrontation was over before it had begun, dissolving into laughs and smiles.

But the point was well-made and the conflict was genuine.

It is in these moments where the power in a relational configuration is challenged and real innovation becomes possible.

JH: It seems that your practice is about is 'offering the moment,' in a way that has beauty about it.

SM: Beauty is helpful. I can use a picture like this to pose the question, 'What does creative conflict look like in this organization?' and be confident of a very different quality of insight to that which would arise if I simply said, 'Tell me about creative conflict in this organisation.'

JH: If I go back to the picture you took before I knew I'd walked past you in the Turbine Hall, I'm was struck by my being in the half-light, someone who lives in the shadows – exactly what it feels like when I'm engaged in this sort of inquiry, where I'm present with those I'm meeting but also not present. The picture is undoubtedly, your story, not mine, but I'm in it a bit, somewhere in the penumbra where I feel most comfortable.

Academic, Consultant, Artist

My initial sense of originality and academic contribution took a knock as soon as I found out that the field of 'organizational aesthetics' was alive and well without any input from me! But, as I read, I became frustrated with the tedious nature of much of what I found on the library shelves. An intellectual engagement with organizational aesthetics seemed to lead me towards dry texts that analyzed the function of the various artefacts found in modern workplaces.

There were, however, some glimpses of hope from kindred spirits. In her work on writing as a method of inquiry, Laurel Richardson observes:

'I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I have yawned my way through numerous exemplary qualitative studies. Countless numbers of texts have I abandoned half read, half scanned. I'll order a new book with great anticipation - the topic is one I'm interested in, the author is someone I want to read - only to find the text boring. Recently, I have been "coming out" to colleagues and students about my secret displeasure with much of quality writing, only to find a community of like-minded discontents.'

Richardson, L (1994:516)

I get the impression that the Action Research community has moments when it begins to make a dent in the normal, staid academic traditions, but then seems to retreat again as the wider circumstances dictate. While I realized that my inquiry could never be held in a conventionally positivist framing of organizational consulting and hoped that ADOC's action research approach offered the possibility of re-writing the rules, it would clearly not be straightforward. However, I clearly needed to work with an institution offering a research paradigm that would allow me to develop my own artistic as well as academic capabilities:

'There is an important specification which rules out any equivalence between the aesthetic approach and the passive reception of organisational life. Aesthetics is an

aid to observation, notes Odo Marquard (1989), and as such it is antithetical to *anaesthetica*, which means putting people to sleep; an outcome, according to Marquard, that aesthetics can also achieve. How, by transforming sensitivity into insensitivity, and art into somnolence by anaesthetising reality. Researchers who analyse organisational life using the aesthetic approach, therefore, must begin by arousing and refining their own sensory and receptive faculties.'

Linstead, S and Höpfl. H, (2000:17)

Yet it still feels like there is potential for ridicule as I push myself to make my creative offerings and interpretations more widely available in both academic and commercial environments. 'Being creative' is a role that is rarely taken seriously and it feels like the wider academic institutions are attempting to impose hard, quantitative measures and thus squeeze out any sense of creative difference. Thankfully, as Ashridge is an independent business school we have some autonomy and I can fall back on my sense of integrity and what I know to be valuable in professional practice.

There have been many calls to conduct inquiry into the more sensory and less rational sides of organisational reality. Taylor and Hansen (2005: 1227) ask aesthetically informed inquirers to be 'trained researchers and exploratory artists'. They note that, 'We see the use of artistic forms to look at these fundamentally aesthetic issues to have the potential to finally bring these important areas into the mainstream of organisational research and practice.'

So, while I find the academic justification for my organisational practice heartening, I am most attracted by the mischief of writers like Laura Sewall who (perhaps with a nod to my wife) elegantly frames the realities of an arts-based creative practice:

'Artists, we presume, live on some faulty edge of reality, poets are essentially unrealistic, sensualists are not to be taken seriously, and, by the way, can't you make a little money?'

Sewall, L (1999:81)

COFFEE BREAK

JH: Where are you now?

SM: I'm getting increasingly serious about craft, which is an orientation towards my ongoing developmental work that I find helpful.

JH: Because...

SM: It legitimizes what I'd seen as self-indulgent. The discipline and practice of going off and reading the texts that I really enjoy, rigorously developing my organizational practice and taking pictures. Calling it craft has a magical connotation, a kind of wizardry that touches on the subversive element in what I do. I realise that, as someone invested in change, I am both working with and being in conflict with organisations.

JH: Why is part of you in conflict with organisations?

SM: Well, I don't think I was particularly in conflict until quite late in my military career. Although the military is something big, my immediate organisation was very small. The stakes were high in what we did and not much was hidden – we were mostly concerned with doing a good job and staying alive. There was something of the purity of the warrior, an honesty and integrity, and we worked bloody hard at looking after each other.

After a promotion, I found myself in the HQ. Suddenly I was subject to politics, oppression and a different way of organising – very similar to the process in a normal business organisation. I became disappointed at my inability to make much of a difference. I also knew I was becoming quite subversive in order to get the job done... the formal organisational processes were getting in the way of doing the work. It was also clear that rank and status were an issue. Out in the field, up against the real work, this hadn't mattered. But in the HQ, I felt that the organisational politics and processes created a distorted form of exploitative relationship between people... and I decided that kind of environment was not my thing. And I needed to do something about it...

JH: What's the difference you want to make to the lives of people you work with?

SM: I really want them to show up, to be fully present... absorbed and excited by their work – and also contribute towards great, supporting, relationships. It seems to me that when we can get this right work stops being difficult. Instead, it becomes creative and fun. Enabling people is what I'm about and this is how I reconcile my work with organisations whose outputs I'm ambivalent towards. My craft focuses on the relationships between people within the organization.

JH: What advice would you give me about the craft of editing this book?

SM: What I hope for you is that your voice will be fully present... that you find a way of expressing your story, telling it in a way that is coherent and authentic to you. Take a few risks... be present in the work...even if you do make your place in the shadows.

JH: How do you want to show up in this book?

SM: How can I show up without spotlighting myself? I don't appear in most the photos I take... it's good to have influence and power but my work is more to be the witness not the witnessed

JH: What's the title of your section?

SM: Something around the sense of being seen but not the focus. I need a title that talks to enabling people to be seen, but not by being the see-er. When I'm working, showing people images to them, they are the see-er and the seen. I'm inviting people into reflexivity.

JH: How about 'The Seen and the Seer'?

SM: Does that sounds 'Doctorly' enough? A bit too 'Witch-Doctorly', maybe...? I think I'd like to focus on the notion that words and images can make a difference to organizations and relationships.

A CLOSING REFLECTION, A FINAL IMAGE

Our process of working together, as a doctoral cohort, assembling the writing for this book has been curiously fragmented. When we were hard into the doctoral inquiry process, Robin Ladkin, our supervisor, ran a tight ship and Jill, Sarah, Kevin and I would, without fail, join him to make space, meet and work together. Now, however, it seems that we are involved in various professional projects, have different family and social demands, and like many of our clients, are subject to the chaotic forces of the business world. Perhaps the window for our co-inquiry opened in a timely and generous way but has now started to close again.

In a grabbed conversation at Ashridge, Sarah and I briefly compared notes about the process. She had read my draft chapter and, with a rather knowing smile, said, "...and there's not enough of you in it!" Her point landed well. Throughout my inquiry, I had struggled to 'show up' in my work to the extent that my colleagues demanded. As I wrestled with the notion of further explications of my embryonic creative processes, I remember complaining that 'my guts are already on the floor...!' I was showing pictures of myself, my family, my home, my inquiry, my practice... what else could possibly be required?

Working with the images, I am deeply conscious that what is on the screen or on the page is as much a reflection of what is 'in here' as much as 'out there'. I recall once more my final viva and the challenge from one of the external examiners that I had not properly explored the nature of my consulting practice. In my response, I tried to evoke the notion of the fish in the water; practice, in terms of identity and the way consultants might 'show up' imbued everything I had offered.

Perhaps if I have not 'shown up' sufficiently for my colleagues in this writing it is because I have offered John's voice in addition to my own. As I continue to refine my work, I am aware that I am often touched by 'others' who catalyse a significant shift in both my thinking and practice. The conversation and dialogues with John, irregular as they are, always seem to provide that kind of 'nudge'. And so, if I 'write myself in' to a

greater degree, I risk writing 'others' out in a way that feels deeply incoherent with my work.

So here is my final offer: a portrait that begins to hint at some of the deeper power dynamics within my practice.



Portrait: Steve Marshall. Al Moffat

Al, a previous client and now good friend, took this photograph during a lighting test. He calls it the 'Warlord' picture.

As he too is an ex-military man, I can forgive the analogy but the implications for the framing of the consulting relationship remains.

As I turn my focus inwards, I imagine a character finding little attraction in the glare of the spotlight and who occupies a liminal, peripheral space. He looks out of the shadows, focusing on the illumination of a distant scene. So, finally, I realize that I am much clearer now about how I show up in client systems and I don't make the mistake of always correlating power and leadership with visibility.

Bibliography:

Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC/Penguin

Linstead, H. & Höpfl, H. (Eds) (2000) *The Aesthetics of Organization*. London: Sage

Richardson, L. (1994) "Writing: A method of inquiry", in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. Ch 32.

Rose, G. (2012) *Visual Methodologies (3rd Edition)*. London: Sage

Sennett, R. (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. Yale University

Sewall, L. (1999) *Sight and Sensibility: the ecopsychology of perception*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam

Taylor, S and Hansen, H. (2005) "Finding Form: Looking at the Field of Organizational Aesthetics" in *Journal of Management Studies*, 2005, Vol 42, No.6 pp1211-1231