

How Contemporary is the Royal Photographic Society?

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In 1989, the Royal Photographic Society established a special interest 'Contemporary Group' to bring the society up to date and accommodate members with a more progressive view of photography. Twenty years on, what is the place of the Contemporary Group (CG) in the RPS, and the relevance of the Society itself today?

The RPS has survived for over 150 years and currently has a membership of around 10,000. It describes its role as 'to promote the Art and Science of Photography', however the interpretation of this definition has always been disputed. In the 1890s the Brotherhood of the Linked Ring, who felt that the Society was too preoccupied with technical developments, broke away to promote photography as an art form. Ironically, shortly after this split, the Society adopted the Linked Ring's pictorialist aesthetics and today they still define the typical style of the majority of its members.

In the late 1980s the RPS recognised that a group should be established for photography as a medium for contemporary fine art practice. This was partly the result of articles criticising the Society written by Paul Hill, who was on the Arts Council's photography sub-committee at the time. Edward Bowman was the architect of the Contemporary Group and suggested Paul Hill become the Group's first chairman. Bowman is highly critical of the RPS at that period: 'The Council of the RPS completely ignored the all the revolutionary changes both in photographic practice and in the visual arts generally. I had hoped that such a group might stimulate them into trying some new approaches to photographic work and so guide them into mainstream photography as it is practiced outside the RPS corral.'

Much of the Society's appeal and activity centres on its Distinctions system. Paul Hill describes the Distinctions as the Society's main selling point, as it gives their members something to aim for with their work. Stuart Blake, the current RPS Director General admits that the Distinctions are not a formal qualification but give an indication to the level of a member's technical and visual ability. He says that

applications for Distinctions continue to be high, adding that they 'give members a feel-good factor'.

In 1989, the CG felt that the structure of the RPS needed modernising, and several attempts were made to do so. One such effort was Paul Hill's suggestion that Photography BA graduates should be awarded with Associate Distinction status automatically, without the submission of a portfolio of work. Hill hoped that this would persuade younger photographers to get involved in the RPS, and make them feel that their contribution was valued; 'I hoped that this would also persuade lecturers and others that the RPS wanted to regain its position as a "learned society"'. Sadly I do not think the amateurs, who are the majority, quite got what we were trying to do.' However, the RPS Council did eventually adopt this policy.

The way that Edward Bowman and Paul Hill structured the CG was radical compared to other specialist interest groups. For example, Bowman proposed that members should define the parameters of how their work should be assessed in a 300 word text. In addition to this the CG Distinction Panels were held as open meetings rather than behind closed doors. According to Bowman, the meetings were '...used as a teaching opportunity. We were easily able to satisfy the failed candidates as to why their submissions were rejected and also to explain to them how to go about improving their work.' The Visual Art group (originally called the Pictorial group) tried open meetings, but when one or two went unfavourably for applicants and the meetings ended in uproar, the Council declared that *all* future Fellowship Distinction meetings should be held privately'.

Paul Hill describes one of the key objectives of the CG and its lasting legacy as encouraging members to think about producing a body of work; rather than dealing with the singular, 'easel art' image, which typified the pictorial approach; and asking what members were trying to say, rather than what they were trying to show. This really defines how the ideology of CG differs from the other groups within the RPS, most significantly the Visual Arts group. Visual Arts is the third most popular specialist interest group in the RPS, Nature is the second largest and the Digital Imaging has the greatest number of members.

Today, the Contemporary Group is still very active. The group held a symposium at Cheltenham in May 2009 entitled *The Brilliance of Photography*, whose keynote speaker was Gerry Badger (author of the book of the TV series *The Genius of*

Photography). Barry Senior, then RPS President commented; 'this is the type of event that the RPS should put on'. A similar event, called *Spirit of the Age*, will be held in May at Birmingham City University. Several practitioners have been booked, including Brian Griffin, Joy Gregory, Tom Hunter, Helen Sear and Simon Roberts.

Although Barry Senior's approving nod towards the CG's symposium would suggest the contrary, the echelons of power in the RPS Council have been a thorn in the side of the CG's attempts to progress the Society. Several prominent members of the CG described their dismay when the RPS Council declared that the distinctions panel could not make any changes to their assessment criteria without the permission of a new, higher panel. This was following changes to the CG's distinctions criteria which accommodated books or installations as a form of submission. This particular measure caused one long-serving member of the CG's Distinction panel, Virginia Khuri, to step down. At the same time, the Council declared that a new panel would be formed to consider *all* Fellowship Distinctions. In Edward Bowman's words 'this *uber* panel, consisting of all the chairpersons of all the Distinctions panels, felt that they had sufficient judgment and knowledge to pass opinions on the other specialised panels. In effect it was the usual canard presumably... they knew what they liked.' This was the final straw for Bowman, who resigned from the Society.

Relations between the Contemporary Group and the RPS Council today do not seem to be as volatile. Chris Morris, the current chairman of the CG describes only two sorts of responses towards the Group from other members; 'those who are unclear about what we represent and would like to know more, and those who do understand and are supportive, even if the CG does not represent their particular interests.' Rosemary Wilman, the current President of the Society speaks highly of the CG. Referring to the forthcoming event in May, Wilman said 'quality events are exactly what the Society wants to present... I am very much looking forward to attending.'

The RPS has clearly modernised since the 1980s and it is likely that some of this is owed to the influence of the Contemporary Group, not only upon technicalities of the Society's procedures, but more importantly towards its definition of 'contemporary' photography. Last year the Society gave its highest award for the art of photography, the Centenary Medal, to Martin Parr. Some will regard the Award as overdue, considering Parr has been part of the art

establishment for well over a decade. For others this shows that at the highest level, the Society has an awareness of contemporary practitioners. This year, chiming with another marker of the 'contemporary' in photography, the Deutsche Börse Prize, Honorary Fellowships were awarded to, among others, Jem Southem and Paul Graham.