

A Telephone Conversation with Mike Mandel

On April 15th, 2008, I called up Mike Mandel and spoke with him about his career in photography and public art. The following interview was transcribed from this conversation.

Shane Lavalette: The first question that I want to ask you is, what initially attracted you to photography?

Mike Mandel: That's a hard one to pinpoint. I was not thinking of myself as an artist. I was not going to school thinking that I was going to go into art. I was actually thinking I was going to go into law and what probably got me involved with becoming a photographer was just the times—being a student during the late sixties, early seventies, during the Vietnam era where a lot of kids my age were reassessing their values and their sense of how their life experience was going to redefine their career and future.

And so I moved toward photography more as a thing out of my suburban experience. Just by chance, basically. Photography was also something that a lot of people were interested in that I was hanging around with. It was kind of a fashion of the times and I think I just kind of gravitated to it. Photography seemed like a really great opportunity for me to be more expressive and creative than I had ever been in any other aspect of my life up until that point and I began to take it quite seriously.

SL: Your earliest work—*Myself: Timed Exposures* [1971], *Seven Never Before Published Portraits of Edward Weston* [1974], *The Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards* [1975]—bravely concerns itself with concept over craft, sharing a certain sense of humor that is reminiscent of Ed Ruscha's deadpan studies, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [1962] or *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* [1966]. Where were you influenced by Ruscha?

MM: I was in Los Angeles and certainly aware of his work. I had been to see a number of his exhibitions and openings and met him. I was certainly inspired by the banality of the subject matter, which kind of related to me and my feelings about what L.A. was about. I think the times were such that a lot of artists were rejecting the—well, actually, what was happening was that

photography was yet to be folded into the big art market. It was that cusp where photography hadn't gotten that status in the real expensive "high art" world. And so to see Ruscha's work really underscored that feeling for me, that photography was something that didn't have to be a part of the fine art world or part of that commercial world. You could self publish these little books and find an audience. At that time, you could distribute the books yourself, in museums and photo galleries— and you didn't have to put much money out to do it. And so it seemed like a very democratizing way to exhibit your work. That definitely had a lot of appeal to me.

The work that I was doing—you mentioned the Weston project and *The Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards*—those two projects were very much about satirizing the fact that photography was becoming a more celebrity or "celebrated" part of the art world and I was making fun of that. The *Myself* project was my first project and it was really kind of a cross between an appreciation for Lee Friedlander's self portraits, Ruscha's deadpan humor, and Jacques-Henri Lartigue's child-like innocence in his photography. I think that's what informed that work.

SL: Tell me about first meeting Larry Sultan. How did the two of you decide to collaborate?

MM: Well, we were grad students together at the Art Institute in San Francisco and we were both making pictures concerning billboards at the time. We just decided that we would like to perhaps pursue making a billboard together—something that we probably wouldn't have done by ourselves because it seemed daunting to do something on that scale. It gave us a sense of power to band together and do something like that.

So we made our first billboard while we were grad students. It was an image that was sort of across the street from where the billboard was located. What was nice about that piece was that a lot of people that lived in the neighborhood showed up for the event that we had to celebrate it, and that gave us a sense of connection to the idea of making an artwork that wasn't for a gallery or an art audience but for a wider audience, in that case a community.

SL: What are some of the other projects that led up to *Evidence* [1977]?

MM: I think, again, you have to see all of this stuff in context, especially in Los Angeles—there was a big show of his work while we were students there. And I think Duchamp's sense of re-contextualization was certainly on our minds. There was also a book that had come out, a book about snapshots that a couple of Bay Area artists had done, Ken Graves and Mitchell Payne. I think it was *American Snapshots* [1977] or something like that. There was also *From the Picture Press* [1973] that Szarkowski put out at that time, which was a collection of press photographs. So there were a lot of things in the air about recognizing that photography was more than just the modernist practice of fine-tuning your style and way of seeing, but that photography was a cultural phenomenon and existed in all kinds of different forms. I think Walker Evans was really well known for collecting real estate photographs and post cards and we were aware of those things as well. And, again, we were looking at Ruscha's aesthetic, which was a very snapshot, drugstore photography aesthetic that related back to more of a vernacular kind of photography. So all of those things were in the air.

When we started out, we worked on a project called *Replaced*, where we gathered a lot of pictures made for medical journals, which showed people as they were being placed on x-ray machines or examined for different kinds of diseases. But there were a lot of other subtexts that were in the images if you took them out of the context of the "clinical" and looked at them just as evocative photographs. So we started with that show and that got us going and then we found all of these mail-order catalog images that became *How to Read Music in One Evening*, where we literally, in one day, cut up all these pictures that we found in the backs of women's magazines and mail-order catalogs and took them out of context—without captions— so that they could just be more free floating. That, again, was a confirmation that there was something there that was valuable.

And then we realized that there were all of these other possibilities out there in the world where people, companies or agencies had archives of photographs. We weren't really sure what we

would find but our idea was strong enough to warrant an NEA artist fellowship. We contacted places like Bechtel, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, police departments, and fire departments and we included in our correspondence that we had a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which at that time was a great supporter of innovative work and had not yet been demonized by the likes of Jesse Helms. So, when a company identified us as having a grant from National Endowment for the Arts, it sounded like something that they should take notice of. And we did say we were creating an exhibition of some of the “best industrial documentary photography,” which we ended up doing at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—it just wasn’t what they thought we were doing.

SL: So you had confirmed that show already?

MM: I think we did. Some of that work we had shown already to John Humphrey, who was the curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and he was definitely supportive. I don’t know if he had guaranteed us a show at that point, but it seemed like we were going to fulfill that.

But, at any rate, we got in and it was a great opportunity just to look at a lot of these files that nobody really cared much about. Some of these companies were working on defense contracts, so they wouldn’t let us see pictures that were made within the last ten or fifteen years. We were able to look through lots of 4 x 5 contact prints because, again, ten or fifteen years previous—which takes us back to the mid sixties—a lot of the documentation was done with 4 x 5. The large format enabled us to really look at the pictures. If we were looking at 35mm or digital, it might have been harder for us to go through things quickly, whereas in this case we could just flip through these files in file cabinets or in books and they were all contact prints, big enough so that you could see them clearly. So we could look through pictures twelve at a time or fifteen at a time if they were in books and just visually scan them. Sometimes we looked through tens of thousands of pictures in a day, or even more—hundreds of thousands of pictures a day.

SL: What criteria did you use to decide which images would be included in the project?

MM: I think we came to that just by intuition. At the outset, we knew that there was something there. We definitely knew what we did not want. We didn’t want pictures that would be very clearly understood in their own terms, in their own context. If we saw a picture from a police department of someone that was lying on the ground dead, or a woman that had been burned because of domestic violence, we wouldn’t easily be able to take that picture out of context. It would very much be what it was.

We learned pretty quickly that if we were going to use a police photograph, it would have to be something that was a little more ambiguous and more questioning. The engineering photographs were easier because we were looking at these hi-tech projects, so for the most part we didn’t really know what we were looking at anyway. There were a lot of devices for measuring and hi-tech little machines that we didn’t understand, so we figured nobody else understood what they were either. But they were evocative, just by the way that the photograph was made. Just by the quality of the photograph, the perspective, the composition or what was there. There were all kinds of possible poetic interpretations

The criterion was simply, “how could the picture perhaps make a different kind of meaning if it were looked at on its own?” Or beyond that—not just on its own, but in relationship with other pictures. And it was clear that the subjects were hi-tech agencies, so the subject matter was going to be about this kind of new scientific, progressive world of building a future. We were looking at pictures that might question that and might even subvert that positivist attitude about the future. It seemed clear to us that we were looking at these hi-tech engineering firms that were building missiles and building new cities but really what was going on front of us was not that, but more of an alienation that was going on in the culture. We could use the images that were supposed to be documents about this bright future, and could be manipulated to express the poetic opposite of that idea.

I think that's the power of the project, that the pictures are documents. They're just what they are, we didn't make them ourselves. But, on the other hand, because we took them out of context they become malleable. They become reinvested with meaning because of the new context of the book form and of the sequence. And they seem to be ironic or they stand on their heads because they're supposed to be one thing but really mean another.

SL: What about the decision to lay the book out in pairs of images on opposite pages?

MM: We had about 500 pictures that we collected. We would lay them all out and just start identifying images that could relate to each other sequentially or in some way. I think we were influenced by looking at sequential projects like Ralph Gibson's books, certainly Walker Evans' *American Photographs* [1938] and Robert Frank's *The Americans* [1958]. We had a sense of the value of doing something that was sequential and the value of putting images that might influence each other on facing pages.

So we just started doing that and we didn't know how it was going to turn out, but I think that's just the process that photographers go through, even with their own personal work. We had this raw material that we had collected and we began to work out a sequence. It's hard to describe in a logical progression. You just begin to see relationships and begin to see how things can start to build up to a certain kind of climax perhaps, and the work becomes integrated and complex.

SL: *Evidence* has been displayed both in a museum setting—originally in 1977 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—and distributed widely as a book. How would you say the work functions differently in each of these venues?

MM: Well, the artwork is really the book. That's how it was intended to be, the carefully controlled understanding of the artwork—the look of the binding, the blue library-looking, clinical cover and the typeface. In fact, when we introduced all of the organizations where the pictures come from, we used three pages to do that when we could've probably used one. We did that as another aesthetic statement to make the viewer feel that the pictures really were representative of all of these places. And then just how the pictures are sequenced, where maybe some of the closer connections appear when you turn the page. We didn't want to have a lot of real strong thematic connections on facing pages because it would just be too formal of a way to organize the work.

So the careful articulation of the project is really as a book. The exhibition is more of a general sequence. Sometimes we don't even have control over the exhibition because the curator of the museum puts on the exhibition and starts to identify thematic relationships that we would have avoided. And so often times, we felt that we were not pleased with the way the exhibition looked—that we didn't have absolute control over the project as we did over the book.

But I think the show is valuable so the viewer has the opportunity to see the artifact. They see that the photographs are not turned into something else, they're not 20 x 24 or 60 x 80. They're little 8 x 10s and they are not made by us. They can see that the quality of the images, the quality of the artifact, of the surface, changes from one picture to another. All of the pictures were made by the agencies, except for maybe a half-a-dozen of the agencies that gave us the negatives, which we then made prints from. But most of the time we just took what they gave us and, as I said, most of them were from 4 x 5 negatives so they have a lot of clarity and sharpness to them, which gives them a little bit more "importance" as an artifact.

SL: *Evidence* is arguably one of the most important books of photographs ever printed. If nothing else, it changed the way that many of us look at photographs and consider the power of concept and context. Did you know at the time that what you were doing was so significant to the world of photography?

MM: Well, I'm not sure if it's the most important photography book that's even been made. [laughs] But I think what's important about it is that it happened at that particular moment in

time, where this modernist practice of photography was not strong enough—it was not big enough—to hold what photography really was going to be about, what it was going to be defined as in the future. So we were there at the right moment and we were smart enough to take advantage of the moment, to have the insight to do the project. I think we knew it was going to be something significant because the conceptual photography books that were out there at the time were few and far between.

There weren't a lot of artist's books. I mentioned Ruscha's books, and then there were people like Ralph Gibson. But a lot of the other art photographers' books were traditional monographs or a retrospective. So we knew what we were doing had a little bit more of a meaningful concept as an artist book than what was happening. I think the bookstore Printed Matter started its operation in New York at about that time. There were a number of artists recognizing the value of doing something in book form. The Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York was also doing a lot of work enabling artists to make books.

So we weren't by ourselves in this. I think we recognized that what we were doing was unique and a real contribution to the dialogue about what the nature of photography should be. And I think there were a lot of people that recognized this immediately. We did get a lot of opportunities to speak about *Evidence*, to travel and give lectures. It did make a dent. But, again, it was a small world at that time and I don't think you can make a project like this again because we're not at that historical moment, you know—we've passed that a million times over. So I don't know what the next real exciting translation of the photographic statement really is at this point.

SL: Well, the book world has definitely changed since the '70s. It seems that with the convergence of the Internet and online publishing, it has made it really easy for people to make and distribute books.

MM: Yes, but I think what was possible then is impossible now. You could take a book that you published and you could put it in places that were part of the commercial network. You could literally go and get a museum bookstore to take your book because there were just so few like it. If you did that today, no one would look at you unless you had already been validated by this "art-industrial complex," we'll call it, the "art-commercial complex." [laughs] You can certainly go to all of these internet publishing houses—Lulu.com and Blurb, these places where you can just print your book on demand—but it's like anything, if you can't get it out into the world, if people don't know about it, if they don't see it in a shop or it hasn't been validated by all the appropriate validation methods, then you just can't sell it.

It's a little bit of a false sense of democratization, what's happening. I think what's happened is that it's gotten much, much worse. There are really just a few people now that get recognized. They're young people that get out of grad school and there are these vultures of the commercial art market that choose these particular artists. They get the shows, they get published and everyone else is ignored.

So I'm much more cynical about the art world these days. [laughs] It's kind of like being a basketball star; you might get your place if you've got some good ideas, you get lucky and get taken up by, you know, Deitch Projects or somebody like that and they put you out there and you have your little five-year run and if you don't have a lot of really exciting ideas or you get a little bit too old, then you just get thrown away. And there are plenty more people out of grad school to take your place. So it's more of a disposable culture and I'm really saddened by that.

SL: In the early '90s, you made a shift from "fine art" to "public art" with your photographic mosaics. Is this why you made the transition?

MM: Well, Larry and I kind of went different directions. Larry was able to connect into the fine art and commercial world and get support that way—and more power to him, I think he's had great success. But it didn't seem like that was the right place for me. Also, I've had a mixed experience within the world of academics. I had my own journey as far as how to be a

“professional,” I guess. Since I’m a male and I didn’t choose to go into academia when I got out of grad school, it was a little more difficult for me to get a job teaching because, at that point, there was a big push for minorities and women to get their place at the table. So a lot of people—like me—who might have been able to get into academia earlier, had much more of a difficult time in the ‘80s.

I was pushed out of a lot of different opportunities. I didn’t really like the fine art world, I didn’t have much of an opportunity for teaching and then this public art world came along and, you know, Larry and I had been doing some public work right along, doing the billboards. I was thinking that this was what I really wanted to do as an artist, to be able to work in a “non-art” space. The computer was a great tool, to be able to use the photographic image as a group of pixels where each pixel could represent a mosaic tile, and you could make these big mosaic tile murals that could be out in the world. That seemed like a great opportunity for me, so I went in that direction and I’ve been doing that for, well, Larry and I did our first one in ‘93 and I’ve been working in public art ever since.

But, again, that world has become problematic as well. When you make your own work, you choose exactly what you want to do and you just simply do it. Public art is a committee process. It’s a very political committee, made up of people from all different aspects of the political spectrum—from government to lay people, art professions, the person on the street. What you end up with is a work of art that is not as confrontational or problematic as your own personal work might be. It’s just not going to have the kind of “edge” you might choose to have if you were doing something completely on your own. What public art has enabled me to do is at least make part of a living, which is an important thing to be able to do. But I’ve recognized the limitations of this world.

SL: After doing six with Larry, you’ve since completed fourteen of these public mosaic projects on your own. Are there any in particular that are the most successful to you?

MM: In Lubbock, at Texas Tech University, one of the murals is comprised of four photographs of football players from the ‘30s, posing for a photographer after practice or something. It looks like something we would all recognize as some kind of an iconic football-type position but it was all fake, it was all for the photograph. The artwork implicates photography as part of the construction of our understanding of history. So here we have these fake poses... it’s as if they were playing football but they’re not really playing football. I think that’s one of my favorite ones because it has so much to do with the nature of photography.

There are other ones that are interesting to me for different reasons, maybe because they are a little unexpected. I did a piece for the Tampa International Airport where people are just sitting on an airplane. You have this sequential series of images of people sitting and just being quiet or reading. In public art, you expect something that’s very emblematic of the city— you know, you make some reference to how wonderful Tampa, Florida is as a destination—but in this case, I chose to focus on the experience of flying and, after 9/11, maybe how we are all a little bit more contemplative about what it means to get into an airplane. So I think that has a resonance to me that is a little more understated and meditative than some of the other pieces.

SL: Both *Evidence* and the subject matter for your mosaics are heavily based on research and exploration into photographic archives. Why do you think that working this way has spanned the length of your career? In other words, what would you say makes photographs such significant and powerful resources for all of your work?

MM: I think that once we came up with the recognition that the culture was a reservoir of photographic imagery, we couldn’t go back from that. Photography did become different after *Evidence* and it did recognize that there were many kinds of photography that define the notion of “photography.” So it’s just natural for me to look at postcards or to look at cultural material and think of that as subject matter that is resource material, whenever I do any kind of project.

Right now, I'm working with my wife on a project for a piece about Turkish culture and it's looking at imagery of this heroic figure in Turkey, Atatürk. My wife is Turkish, so that's why we began a project about him—his sculptures are all over Turkey and his images are in all the shops in Turkey. He's a symbol for a secular society. There was a secular revolution that happened after World War I. It was really clear that a lot of these popular images out there are functioning as symbols for people who are living in the society, so that is our subject matter. We are making our own photographs about that and documenting the sculptures and photographing other aspects of Turkish culture, but that was sort of the starting point — looking at popular imagery and building a photography project around how this popular imagery functions in a culture.

I think *Evidence* was the germination of that insight. Once you've got that, I don't think you go back to a beautifully stylized way of seeing. That's just not what it's about for me. It's not about making "great photographs," it's about trying to make photographs, collect photographs, collect all kinds of other stuff, interview people, connect with the way they speak and use all the kinds of entrances you can into a project, into a subject, and pull all of that together into a piece.

SL: Since much of your work is about appropriating images or a particular aesthetic—and, in the case of *Evidence*, re-presenting "non-art" photographs as "art"— where does your own artistic identity lie?

MM: I think the whole point of all of this work is to say that your identity as an artist doesn't have to be within just the stuff you make on your own. It's about the way you come up with an idea and how you organize your idea to include all kinds of different materials and put that together into a final object. It's saying that being an artist is more than just making your own personal images out of your own little personal camera. I mean, Duchamp—he has it right. You've got to take the guy seriously. If you take the urinal and put it in the gallery, well, it's his piece. It's not a urinal anymore, it's something else. Duchamp's simple action enabled that thing to become his personal work. So, all of my work is personal whether or not I use material that is collected or I make it myself, it doesn't matter to me.

SL: Can we expect to see more book projects from you?

MM: Yes. I mentioned the project that my wife, Chantal, and I are working on called Atatürk in the Picture, about how this image of Atatürk is understood and played out in Turkey at the moment. It's a selection of personal photographs, of collected pictures and interviews.

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