

FAP:O #6 May 8, 2013

Transcript of Post-Presentation discussion with Mike Tardioli School for Photographic Art (SPAO).

From a Podcast recorded by Michael Vuckovic for FAP:O at Pressed Cafe, Gladstone Rd. Ottawa

Transcript by Michele L begins at the 33:30mn mark.

Note: this is not a completely verbatim transcript. Every effort has been made to ensure that the opinions of participants have been correctly expressed.

Cleanup edit by Jake M.

Michele got the sense of most of it and I think it covers what we need for continued discussion. If anyone knows what they said that is missing or that they have been misquoted please let me know.

Louis Helbig: I want to thank you Michael, because I think your approach, which is to support, encourage and advocate on behalf of artist I think is just phenomenal, commendable.... Unlike, I think, any other art-oriented organization, whether public or private, NGO or whatever, I think you, and by extension SPAO, is the only organization that I am aware of that actually runs with that kind of ethos... all the other ones that I know of are there for themselves They sustain themselves, there's an internal bureaucracy, whatever it might be... that is the imperative around which these people operate that work in these places, and they are not particularly interested in artists or art per se... They are more interested in sustaining themselves off of that. The worst example of that, I suppose, is the forever request that I certainly get as an artist ... where people are continually being asked to donate work to support these organizations that supposedly support artists.

So, highly commendable; I think that the approach [at SPAO]... you are unique.

One of the things that I puzzle with, and I see you grappling with in your presentation... It's like you are projecting into something of a **vacuum in terms of visual literacy**, in terms of a broader understanding of what this means, to be an artist and to engage in this, not only with craft, but to engage in terms of craft and content and vision, those three words that are the motto of SPAO... I think maybe that there is almost a complete vacuum, or a lack of places where you can get traction around the content and around the vision part in terms of there being ways to find hooks to in turn make SPAO grow and in turn feed back and make something happen in the broader art community or the broader community for the public writ large... a place where you belong as well ... its not just a peculiar art community... I wonder if you have some comments about that... **How do we project into that space, how to create that conversation that will give what we do currency, which I don't think we have?**

Michael: Here I am working with artists and getting some critical work out of them, and producing some very strong bodies of work ... flawed because there is someone like myself and a few other people who are stamping a SPAO aesthetic... everyone talks about the SPAO look and we've been working years to get rid of it... So we build this all up and ... where are those bridges? It has been a project of mine to **secure relationships with West Side Studio**, some of the **galleries here** and a **few places in New York**...but that's very slow and I don't have the physical time to do this ... I am in meetings with **former graduates that are looking at creating a representation culture** ... to [help students] get to that next level... 10 - 20 years...

Like there was a gallery in Westboro that closed down, a nice gallery... I don't think his expectations were real... he thought he could turn a gallery over in a year... He's got to build a stable of clients... like Pierre Luc of St-Laurent + Hill one of the best gallerists we have... he's not there for the vanity, he's there to make money ... and he moves product ...he doesn't look at photography very much but he makes money for his artists. We need more people like that here.

Jake Morrison: Can you talk about Patrick Mikhail?

One of my first students ...Jonathan Hobbin... he apprenticed with me for a year. He was offered Pierre Luke and he was offered Patrick Mikhail ... he went with Patrick Mikhail [Gallery] because of his critical presence in the art community... but Patrick is not moving product. There's no question about that; his sales are not good.

Jim Lamont : There's not a lot of galleries that sell photography in Ottawa...

Jake Morrison: He has a lot of photography... he has Michael Schreyer? (No, he left him.)

Jim Lamont : There is not a lot of galleries that sell photography in Ottawa... I have at least one close-up perspective to one gallery owner, Claude Bertrand... who we know personally...

Jake Morrison: What's the gallery? (It's right near the National Gallery – St. Patrick's – la sale?).

Jim Lamont: I had a conversation about selling photographs...Now, I don't know whether he's changed since ...but my impression talking to him was very simple. Look, he said that he was running full speed, full tilt trying to keep track of what's happening in the painting world and trying to make sure that he's making money for his artists, that he just doesn't think he can afford to spend any time, and I mean any time, worrying about photography because he just doesn't think it's going to sell. So it's not so much the gallery owner... it's the buying public in Ottawa... he just didn't think he could sell the photographs.

Elisabeth Lees: I wonder how Art and Architecture did... ?

Jake Morrison: They didn't sell... not much sales...

Michael: Again, one of the mandates of the school... There is a high concentration of what I call **process-driven** work as **opposed to content-driven work**. **Content driven work has a tough time in allowing that artist to go forward**... If I looked at the sales from the Grad show this year, that were quite high this

year, it was all process-driven work that went out the door. And very, very accessible work... a glass plate and a pineapple, not a lot of subtext there...where something like **Reena's work, filled with subtext...** **Markets here specifically don't support it...** whereas the process-driven work... the wet plates, the large format work, the still lives... a guy like Peter Simpson when we had our print show... he chose a beautiful landscape...

???: Who is this?

Jake Morrison: Peter Simpson - he's an arts reporter at the Citizen

Raymond Aubin: Is it, in your opinion, a question of market size? It seems to me that in Europe, for example, or some markets in the US, they seem to have more traction.... But here, this is a one million plus city...

Jim desRivieres: Its a very well educated city

Michael: I don't think we have the markets... people that buy art. ... **We don't have enough collectors,** I mean we have some, we have really supportive collectors... actually, the Collector's Group of Canada, the group that's here, fantastic. They have been so gracious to us....

This is my harp... simply put... **the lay public doesn't have access to an 8x10 camera,** the products that we send out, so there is newness to it, maybe. **..Why are the large format sales still going okay?...** Burtynsky... why is he not switching to the SLR... takes the master techniques... big prints and language... its large format capture.

Louis Helbig: One thing I find frustrating is that **I make a living selling fine art photography...** I'm not making a lot of money... but I do scratch by and make a living. And I make that living **almost entirely from people who have very little to do with the art world.** They come in and they see my work and they respond to it. They respond to its aesthetic, they respond to its content or some combination thereof... and from there the stuff soars.

Michael: But Louis, you're agreeing with me then. **Your camera is not your camera; your camera is your airplane...** not too many people have an airplane.

Louis Helbig: I agree that there is a little bit of a wrinkle that I bring to it that helps me, but that isn't the full story. The full story is that **people identify with the imagery** and **it starts a conversation that starts within them that they relate to, that in turn, they project.** They project that into an image and then they make a decision to actually purchase, or to seek me out to have a conversation.

... I'm not the only person doing this kind of thing... but yet from there I am able to take it further and it's because of the response I get from people. ... form, if you will, of a craft ... to some extent, an aesthetic, but also the content and some combination thereof...

...What frustrates me is that I hear "Ottawa, there's no support here... let's go to Toronto, New York, or something." I disagree. **I think it's our problem that we are not creating the conversation, which gets**

back to my idea about there being a vacuum... not creating a conversation in which we then are participants and/or protagonists to create a market for ourselves. Sure the people need representation ... but I don't see us ourselves projecting what it is that we do in a fashion that actually has an appeal to people... There's something there and it has to do with content and it has to do with not generating conversations around the material that we produce... what your students produce, some of them... produce some content and yet it is being pushed out into a vacuum. Unless we create some kind of a conversation that engages, broadly put, we're not going to get anywhere... there's a million people in this market. They are well educated... it is our own responsibility at some level ...and I think SPAO is, at some level ... to create that kind of conversation.

Michael: That final vision of the school... the last part of the puzzle... is creating an audience, and educating an audience... I am graduating 10, and only 5 or 4 or 6 are working... I realize that those other three now have a language ... they might be part of that growing audience but ... that's not going to happen tomorrow...It's can the school persevere and build up a bigger audience for fine art photography tomorrow?

Raymond Aubin: We've been talking about Fine Art Photography, selling in galleries... You just mentioned the question of language and going back to your own experience of how you started... Isn't there also something where someone going into some form of commercial photography comes in with a language, and distances everybody else... doesn't have a single print in any gallery... [but] has a view, a perspective that nobody else has...

Michael: I support it a thousand percent. If I could get more people interested... Ottawa is a tough place now, commercially... We don't have a big marketing culture... we don't have a publishing industry... we don't have a manufacturing industry... Most of my graduates who decide to do commercial work will for the most part have to get on a plane... the ones who can stick it out here... 10 or 12 that are making their ways... I think we underestimate the value of doing applied photography, whether its weddings, portraits, food, events... I think there is so much value in that because it keeps you ... in this game... I really support that – we [SPAO]don't do that enough. ... I come from a design background... they want creatives out of their commercial photographers. I think that that word "commercial" is becoming a bad word and it shouldn't be. Do you remember when we had a term "Commercial Artists"?... They were recognized...

???: How do you see the relationship of SPAO with the university photography programs, the Ottawa School of Art programs...?

Michael: We work a little bit with them, certainly Ottawa U, there's certainly communication there. The vocational... Algonquin College, we don't, there's no real relationship there... we've done some projects. How do I view it? Lorraine Gilbert came to our show one year and said to me that the problem with the relationship with you guys is that I can't get students like you. The program doesn't allow for that type of work to come out because one it's a big program. They just don't have the attention available ... Every now and then I do dream about... Ottawa U or Carleton U is going to pick us up and just drop us in their market... and we run out of them. This is something that we've talked to the university about, just in a

very casual way, to have the School for Photographic Art as part of the University but independent within...

We're a funny little school...we get criticized by the colleges for being too artsy; we get criticized by the universities for being too polished. . . I like the connection to the university more than the colleges because of the critical language they might be able to help us with... The colleges I stay away from because I personally worry about technologically driven courses and that culture because I've got kids coming in that ... can learn Lightroom in an hour. ..I'd rather connect with the university cultures, the language and a critical/theoretical point of view than "How do I use this new program that's coming out?"

Louis Helbig: Just an observation ... **in terms of the connection to commercial work ... The fact that you are open to it, I think, is instructive.** I think that what happens in the university culture there - that is in fact part of that culture - is to close the door to things that it deems to be beneath it. It is almost a reflection, a mirror, of that barrier between vocational and university training... Is there something there in terms of that kind of continuum that could then be extended further, that then projects into the realm of ideas and the conceptual at the university? Because I think part of the problem is that ... **we end up with these little silos...** its a way of breaking that down, so that some of the social milieu, some of the social whatever that causes people to want to talk to each gets broken down.

Michael: ...The **university language** for me, what I see, is that **there's a mandate to show what art can be. Look: Art can be this –Art can be that.** The school operates on a different level where we ... are not too concerned with that; **we want our students to just forget about it and just make the art.** I'm finding that I want my students coming out with an inventory of artwork, that they forget about it and that they make the art. ... Universities should be that Mount Olympus of education, that hierarchy... Universities have to push forward.

Raymond Aubin: I think there's something else that I hear...**The connections at the level of the institutions don't work so well.** I think **the connection at the level of individuals is more likely to succeed...** so an individual Ottawa U Art student going to the year end show at SPAO.. . **I think what's going on with universities is that over the last 50 years, maybe more, is that craftsmanship is not of value... It's an historical fact: [Fine] Art has thrown out craftsmanship as a value.**

Doris : I think that that's too much... **there are universities where craftsmanship is still highly valued.** ... I agree with you though... When I was in New York... the big show at the Whitney Art exhibition, it was so interesting to see the art and everybody was talking about why they hated it except for a few pieces ... because of the craftsmanship... I remember reading in the Village Voice about how the critic couldn't say that this was crap... It's what is happening in the art world right now... is that **you get a gag order if you criticize anybody...** There still is still a lot of very good craftsmanship... **To talk about the fact that the kids are not doing their own prints – Oh my God I am so afraid of the craftsmanship...**

Michael: For me, **the inkjet print is front ended.** You do your **work on a monitor**, you **improvise**, you **make changes**, you're **on**, you're **off**, you **come back to it.** Frankly, **I'm praying that the same feel comes out of my printer.** I can't touch that printer. My printer is a photocopying machine to me at times

because I am visioning it all on this electronic thing... We get so bored with ink jet printers... we did a whole thing where we were waxing ink jet prints, and we're spraying them with varnish... because we want to touch them. But what I want is to touch it... I'm a printmaker

Doris: When you follow the traditional darkroom process... it's all about that print.

Michael: The apple printers ... with the right type of profiles... you do that type of printing up front... We can't give everyone a printer, it's a big difference between putting out a tray of developer... Bleaching is a form of photoshop without the chemistry. ..

Louis Helbig: Technique stuff aside, I think this little interchange is very useful... what I see in the reactions is a conversation... Cudo's to you, Jake, for I think you are the inspiration behind this... When I came to one or two of the presentations before I gave my own presentation, I was just bowled right over because there was this very intelligent thoughtful conversation going on, and yes, there was some argument. I think that that is in fact the answer - that's the discussion. We learn from that - it's not just non-criticism... Canadian Art apparently doesn't do criticism anymore - it's a magazine. So maybe this is in fact the model. If indeed it is, **what's sad then at some level is that your whole flock of students isn't here and hasn't been at these things.** For some reason, the social signals that have been sent are such that they are not going to show up here when in fact they should be here... generating conversations, where we plum into each other's experiences, which ultimately what I think that this is about.

Jake Morrison: I really like what you're bringing up - filling the void - this is part of it [FAP: O], SPAO is part of it - so **where do we push it? I think we have to push it out to the public.**

Raymond Aubin: **Festival X is a great event that pushes photography out to the public - a 10 day conversation.**

Jake Morrison: **Festival X is very good.** But its **once every 2 years.**

Michael: I think there's a lot of pressure on the artists today... their degree of difficulty somewhere in their process... somewhere down the line there's a difficult part to it that will allow them to go forward. POP Art show at the NGC - Damien Hirst/Warhol example... I loved it... Damien Hirst is tight... Warhol is tight... the core of the show is strong and it was difficult to do.

Louis Helbig: **In my view, for my part, the lights are on but there's nobody home at the National Gallery.**

Raymond Aubin: ... If you look at non-commercial galleries, you'll see more and more photography than ever... Look at the new show at the National Gallery [Builders: Canadian Bicentennial]... I was floored to see how many photo-based pieces there were... 25%...

Michael: I wonder **whether people are educated enough** to know that there are **vanity galleries**, there are **private galleries** ... **Public galleries have different mandates**; it's not a sales culture. **They have social mandates; they have to engage the public somehow through art...**

Reena Kokotailo: They are also very content driven.

Michael: I talked to Jonathan Brown, who runs the City Acquisitions. In talking to me he said that they are looking at making, at pushing photography as our centre in visual arts... whether it be the Karsh legacy... He said to me ... more and more photography is looked way more than it ever has. It's maybe this mandate that photography centres Ottawa.

Jake Morrison: That would be huge.

Michael: Their budgets are low.

Jake Morrison: \$100K/year

Michael: I think its 2

Louis Helbig: Is there something that can be done out of this environment here. Change only happens if you make it happen. It comes through debate and conversation. Is there something that can be done?...

Michael: Here's my worry – how do you take care of the reclusive artists? Not all of us are like Tony [Fouse]... How do you take care of the quiet person? ... Do you really think Jackson Pollock came out to these types of things? ... Someone loved him enough to lend his work out.

Louis Helbig: But Michael, what I see here, in that very comment, is precisely that which is needed to support artists, to generate and create content, ultimately, that in turn feeds conversation, that in turn makes what we are doing have traction, and in turn we know it becomes marketable, etc.. I think there needs to be, if you will, a kind of a waterfront conversation that kicks off little elements that are part of this. Whether it is specifics like the ones you have discussed... whether its technique... talking about the role of public galleries... there are so many different facets that are involved. I think there's a nucleus here. What I see at SPAO inspires me. What I see here also inspires me. I think that there are some bits and pieces - if we collectively put some thought into this, pick some of the things off, collectively, I think there is the possibility of making a change. The nucleus to turn this place, Ottawa, into a Santa Fe – it's here – there's no reason why that can't happen here.

Jake Morrison: Yah, let's do it.

Michael: The digital culture has saturated a little bit, in that it brought people out, they got their feet wet, who have saturated the market. It's people like Morrison here, he perseveres, he sticks it out... a lot of people here, you stick it out, right or wrong, its hard, it's not easy... Do you have a gallery ...Who's helping? ...

Raymond Aubin: My sense here is that we are into a very long term process... generations.... If you have been brought up in an environment where the notion of photography as an art form doesn't exist, it is going to be very hard to change. The question I have is, people who have been brought up in an

environment where its completely submerged with pictures, is this going to help or hinder their appreciation of photography as a “art form”?

Michael: We do make a huge distinction between the image and the photograph. The image is something else: the photograph is what we are after, the piece is what we are after. We are bombarded with images, images don't mean as much as the photograph.

Raymond Aubin: By photograph you mean the hard object, the print.

Michael: ...Kahlia...We were trying to come up with the school of thought that is SPAO. What is our school... we were playing around with new pictorialism... the photograph as the object.

Reena Kokotailo: How can it possible do that if you don't have people who actually print?

Michael: I just need to come up with some more money ... Is this the only criticism I'm going to get? ...

Doris: How do you define the school of photography?

Michael: I define it as technique.

Jim Lamont: SPAO has got digital printmaking course, in which people do print. It's not as though they don't actually print.

Michael: It's a management issue [more talk about the cost of printing...] My role is to give them reference. ...

Jake Morrison: I'm so efficient with my paper. I do little prints for proofing.

Michael: But you've been doing it for a while.

Jake Morrison: I'll teach them.

Doris: Let's go back... I am not satisfied with the answer of how you define the school itself.... At some point I can look at a picture and say that is a SPAO picture... you are guilty... But how do you define that? At some point, you have to define yourself as an artist... The complement I received is “I put you through two years of hell but I never broke you.” Is the school to train people? What is it? What defines it?

Michael: I think what defines SPAO in the nitty gritty, is that we are a compositional school... my interest for every student that comes to the school is getting them visually organized... to get to a point where they get so visually organized they can injure their compositions... We are a composition school, that's what we do. We account for every piece that comes out, for the most part... But there is a rebellion within SPAO all the time.... We have students who want to come to the school, then when they see what's going on, they say Mike, stay away from me... and I let them...

Doris: That's more like ... Ottawa U.. to push ...

Michael: I have to judge this on an individual basis... I don't believe in total freedom... Some people are visually gifted, while there are students who just can't do anything. There is a level of emulation... a process... the goal is that each student has to find their own process... I love the criticism, trust me, I learn a lot from it; we get a lot out of it... **I'm looking at the school from an apprenticeship point of view** a little bit... In the end, I am collaborating with them [students] and I have to make that judgement call .

Doris: That's the way of the art school.

Michael: The more civilized the school becomes, the less civilized I want it to be.

Louis Helbig: Is that friction generating content? How many of your students are generating content.

Michael: I'm not sure some of them have the life experience... The biggest criticism of the place is that some of the students do their best work while they are at SPAO and that's a big problem. They don't go on. That's a criticism of me and the School.

Michele Wozny: I have taken some fantastic printing workshops at SPAO and commend you for the work that you are doing. I don't think SPAO can be everything to everyone in Ottawa. I'm not from here, so I will throw this question out to everyone: Has there ever been an artist-run-centre model that focused on photographic art? Because that is where the students would logically go after school. That is where critical dialogue is generated. One of the struggles I had when I moved here was where to get access to a darkroom; I took a silver gelatin printing workshop just so that I could print some stuff.

Michael: That's a great point - I think the EBA model is interesting – why don't we have a place like that? Because **that's the biggest problem: the loneliness that occurs as an artist**. Some can handle it, but ... let's face it, **25% of the part-time culture** is what we call **hybrid classes – they form little groups so be together**, so **that people do not have to be alone**.

Michele Wozny: I think what Ottawa needs in the step after school for temporary access to the darkroom, or whatever you need, is **a space where artists can come together**, like the space we have created here for ourselves. But beyond the discussion, the critical dialogue, which is very important, the life blood of any art form, is **that kind of access to something that pumps**. Then the exhibition, distribution comes out of it.

Michael: Digital technology sort of hurts that a little bit. There used to be a place called Process Photo Centre, remember that?

Elizabeth Lees: Yeah – you could rent out by the hour.

Michael: And it was a place where you could do your own colour printing. What a club that was. Professionals went there and we met once or twice a week... that was in a sense some sort of an artist run centre. Digital technologies... everyone is working at home.

Raymond Aubin: There is a darkroom in an artist-run centre in Gatineau, **DAIMON** - you can become a member, use the darkroom...

Michael: Yeah, but your not going to find Louis Helbig there.

Louis Helbig: I was a member for a while, and it was absolutely not supportive. There was a language barrier for one, but I didn't cut the mustard as far as whatever it was that I needed to cut to be taken to be part of the group. I tried...

Michele Wozny: Because DAIMON is part of a larger umbrella group, the Independent Media Arts Alliance [a media art moving image based community, as opposed to the visual art, community, where photography has traditionally laid] this Canada-wide organization and it links its arm to SAW, IFCO (the Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of Ottawa) I just came from a board meeting there. Now, if they get Art's Court on the ball, and IFCO has the foresight to build a darkroom, that's a place where [emulsion based artists can create community].... Because let's face it, moving image art, the art of filmmaking, is now emulsion-based, and for those of us who work with emulsion, that is where we need to be – that's one place for us to be. If you want to make mediated art, digital art, I'm not sure there's a place for that anymore in funded artist-run centres. I think funders are backing away from that because, as you say, the tools are in the hands of the people. I find this very interesting.

Jim Lamont: I'd like to put a caveat on that – they are and they aren't. In fact to own a wide-bed printer is not in the hands of general people. If you want to do anything greater than 17" wide, you need a wide-bed printer and you better be running a lot of prints or that printer becomes a large expensive brick in about two weeks. In fact most people can't print large works themselves, they do need a place. But there are businesses, mine included, that will let them do that. But still, it's not that everyone has the tools...

Michele Wozny: That's a good point. I take it then that there has never been a non-commercial photography-oriented artist run centre around here?

Jim Lamont: ... Raymond has got some experience...

Raymond: In reality, **in the early 1990s**, there were **quite a number of artist-run centres that started photography** because **it was the 150th year** anniversary and the art world had moved toward photography... But most of them took side paths and went somewhere else... video, this that... **there are very few left in Canada that are dedicated to photography.**

Louis Helbig: Again, I think this is wonderful – I disagree with some of what was said just now, for sure, but the fact is that we are having a conversation about it ... Sure, there are lots of printers out there... its an artist's decision and also a commercial decision... But the fact is that most of us don't know how to use those printers... We could do very well by coming together around our large-format printers, to generate a conversation around technique or whatever else. It's yet one other little part of the whole puzzle.

And again, in this conversation here, **this stuff is popping up... What to do about those things to then move this whole thing forward.** For ourselves but also for the students that come out of SPAO, for SPAO itself, the **general public**, for **the idiots that run the public institutions** ... There is a failure of imagination

in places where I would hope there would be imagination... **What can we do to push that along? Identify these issues and make something happen?**

Jake Morrison: Might I suggest that someone type it up...the pop ups that have emerged?

...

Michele: I will transcribe the session.

Louis Helbig: That actually might be just the way to do it. I'd like to also commend Michael Vuckovic for doing this, for recording, for taking his skills in broadcast... It's just one more piece of the larger jigsaw, the skill set we each bring to this whole.

Jake Morrison: For those who haven't noticed, Michael has Photo Kibbitz. It's a fascinating blog cite; he's very serious about it and he has been doing very well with it.

Michael Vuckovic: It was in the top 100 of New & Noteworthy ????

Michael Tardioli: Thanks.

Clapping