

# DUANE MICHALS: ASKING QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

**D**UANE MICHALS is that rarest of beings in the world of photography now, a true original. And in common with the other few remaining originals, he was born in the early years of the Depression, when the crumbling of a way of life caused many to question given patterns of thought. However, he came of age in the decade of conformism in the cause of comfort, the Fifties, when a serious photographer faced only one choice, of whether to imitate Ansel Adams, Henri Cartier-Bresson, or Robert Frank.

Michals chose to go his own way even then and so became the first photographer to stage events for the camera, to work in sequences, to place himself in the picture, to make double exposures, and to paint and write on his photographs.

The legacy he leaves for younger photographers is immense and it has been too easily forgotten, so when Michals appeared in London for an exhibition at Hamiltons Gallery of his latest project, *Questions Without Answers*, I took the opportunity to set the record straight. As he showed in his lecture at the gallery, Michals is as voluble a speaker as he is deep a thinker.

**Karin:** Duane, how did you come to be Duane Michals as we know him today?

**Duane:** With me, it's all been about thinking. I don't walk around with a camera waiting for something to take a picture of. I never did. Essentially, I've always been introspective, and it's always been there, the notion that the mind is the source of everything. I'm an anomaly in photography because I don't believe in the eyes!

**Karin:** Rather than a traditional photographer waiting for the perfect moment, you've been more of a philosopher

expressing your concerns through the camera?

**Duane:** It's not just a matter of photography, it's the way I view life in general. I view it as an incredible mystery and an amazement rather than just something to look at. Photographers are always just looking at life.

But let me put it this way: in the West we believe in a big dichotomy, that I'm here in this place called London and I'm looking at you. In the East, wise people know that there is an event, that they are the event, that I'm a participant in the event, and not an observer.

It's much like quantum physics in the sense that when people observe an experiment, the act of observing the experiment affects the experiment. There is no innocent observer.

**Karin:** So was there an event or situation that got you starting to think for yourself?

**Duane:** There's never been a *Eureka!* moment. It's been a constant evolution and I see no end to it.

We could be talking ten years from now and I would be coming from the same place, but I would expect my view of it all to be even wider than it is now. I think photographers have a very narrow view of the world, always being cast as the spectator.

I see most of them as being newspaper reporters, and myself as a short story writer. That's not to say we have no need for newspaper reporters, but that I do what I do because I'm a natural at this and I don't have to stretch myself.

**Karin:** How is Duane Michals now different to Duane Michals at 20?

**Duane:** At 64 I have a large hunk of history and that's when you begin to notice things. When you're 20 you have no history, just your family's.

Most people start out at 20 to conquer the world, and I love that moment, the traditional one of the young man as adventurer going out to find the Holy Grail, to find his place in life, and to find out who he is. At this point I've found out a lot of that, and I'm three-quarters of the way through it.

I've had a history. When you've had that, you can see your idiosyncrasies and your patterns of behaviour unless you're so deadened by the culture and bought every lie the culture ever sold you, which is what most people do. The biggest lie is fame, the big success, the dazzling success, the

Warhol success, the name-above-the title success which is eventually hollow and fraudulent.

**Karin:** You knew Warhol, and in fact you both came from the same town near Pittsburgh.

**Duane:** He was born in McKeesport too, and my father was a steelworker. We were from that same milieu. I'm Slovak, and so was Andy, although he used to tell everybody he was Czech because that was classier.

He was such an upwardly mobile blue-collar snob. I met him when I came to New York. He was already well known as a graphic designer, and he was very, very ambitious. All his dreams came true, every one he had!

Andy wanted to be what he became, a famous artist. Unfortunately he was a terrible artist, and did more to trivialise art than anyone else other than Marcel Duchamp.

I always think of Andy as the quintessential American painter of the twentieth century, the same way as Thomas Eakins was the quintessential American painter of the nineteenth century. Andy was a first generation immigrant, he was a victim of violence, he was shot, he was a product of publicity, his work was done in a factory by other people, he was a great manipulator, he stole everybody's ideas, and he ended up being very wealthy.

How American can you get? The idea of quality never enters into it, though, and I find his work shabby.

**Karin:** You were a magazine art director, then you picked up a camera with serious intent. How come?

**Duane:** It was always a matter of need. I think all the best impulses grow out of the need to express something.

When I came on the scene I knew nothing about photography. I never went to a photography school, which was my saving grace. I didn't know that you weren't supposed to write on a photograph, and I didn't have to unlearn all the rules that schools teach you.

I was an OK photographer at reportage, and to be a photographer then meant you had to do that, so when I did an exhibit where I began to tell stories half the people walked out. It was a very tight little world.

**Karin:** You were a real photographic iconoclast in those days.

**Duane:** Things that are now considered almost traditional to do in photography schools, I was the first one to do them!

I'm saying that because I know when things get written up, in books on sequences, I'm just a footnote. It's outrageous, and it pisses me off!

**Karin:** So what do you love about photography?

**Duane:** The sense of invention. I think photography by and large is an art, but it will be considered a minor art because as practised by most photographers it lacks the essential ingredient of all major art, total invention.

When a writer comes to a piece of empty paper, everything that goes on the paper he imagines. When a painter comes to an empty canvas, everything that he draws and paints on that canvas is a total invention.

Photographers walk around with a camera, looking for something that looks like a photograph, to take a picture of. I'm talking about reportage.

The point I'm making is that what I did grew out of the need to express something, because what interested me was always life after death. My whole life is preparing myself for my death.

My inquiries, the way I view and question life, is all about the nature of life, but you can't examine the nature of life without wondering about the nature of death. It's yin and yang, you can't separate the one from the other.

And, since we spend more time not being than we do being, then I find not being utterly fascinating. In a universe of three trillion million years, we spend 80 years alive, a nanosecond of breath which is our consciousness, and we spend this time unexamined.

Most people are not even alive, they're on automatic, totally, with no consciousness of being.

It's the same with photographers. They look but they don't pay attention, and what they see is what they're told it's OK to see by critics or by official bona fide certifiers of photographs.

But they're also examining somebody else's life, something they know nothing about. They hardly know anything about their own lives, and it's presumptuous for me to go to Harlem and photograph black people and pretend I know anything about them.

But they only see in clichés. We live our lives in terms of clichés. We live very secondhand lives. You know what it's like? It's like reading a hundred love stories, and then falling in love.

It's two different things, two different experiences. Photographers are artists reading love stories, they're always looking at other people's emotions, other people's

passions without really knowing their own true passions, which is harder to do.

All of that is how much of my writing comes about, like when I ask “What is the universe?” That’s a big question.

Who the hell knows what the universe is? I still don’t know. If you ask that question five years from now, my answer would be different. I’ve already rewritten some of those things, the texts that go with my photographs, and that’s what I love, the continuity of the imagination and the expansion of the imagination. I keep absorbing.

At 64, my mind is better than it’s ever been in my whole life, my imagination is better, there’s no end in sight. My mind is so ripe now than what it was ten years ago, and I expect it to be better ten years from now, and it’ll happen because I expect it to happen.

I program myself to do that. I’ve always done that, and I’ve gotten everything I’ve wanted because I’ve believed it was possible and then I went out and made it happen. It’s all a matter of programming myself.

The Catholic Church programmed me to be a perfect Catholic, totally. That’s why I had to unlearn the first twenty years of my life and I had to realise that I wasn’t my mother and my father.

When I stopped seeing them as Mom and Dad, and I started seeing them as John and Margaret, two screwed up people having to deal with their own problems, life became more realistic, and it was a much healthier relationship. I questioned my way out of the Catholic Church, simply asked questions, and more questions, and found their answers ridiculous.

So what do you believe in? That’s how these questions came about. People don’t ask questions, and they’re completely brainwashed. You have to let them know that it’s their birthright. I tell these kids at school “Listen, if you leave this institution asking fewer questions than when you arrived, you haven’t been educated.”

You can’t go through life bowing your head and accepting what someone in supposed authority tells you. That’s being an automaton. The great marvel of being alive is that one does have the right to ask questions and be audacious in the questions. But, authority does not like anybody to ask questions.

Karin: You seem rather angry about that!

**Duane:** Anger is a legitimate emotion. When I did *Christ In New York*, that was anger. I did that in 1980, 1982.

It deals with religious hypocrisy, and abortion, and

homosexuality, all the buzzwords in American culture. Everything should be subject to photography, not just the polite things like moonrise and sunsets and tits and ass. I mean everything, your dreams and your nightmares and Margaret Thatcher.

I am lucky because I guess when you become older you get more childish in a way. Actually, not childish but childlike. It's a balance. That's what's so charming and original about children. They ask completely original questions like "How high is up?"

**Karin:** Have you had any role models at all?

**Duane:** There are those few people who have been important to me but usually they're poets and painters. There are those photographers whom I like, but my real source and inspiration has always come from elsewhere.

Walt Whitman is of course number one. Magritte is very important to me, and Balthus the French painter too.

**Karin:** You always seem to be as busy with your personal work as your commercial work.

**Duane:** I've always done my own projects. I've done over 20 books and I have three probably right now in the works. I'm always working on something. I'm not a photographer the moment I pick up the camera.

When I pick one up, the hard work's already been done. The hard part for me is what do I think, what do I care enough about for me to do a photograph?

**Karin:** What comes next, after this show?

**Duane:** The Whitman book, that's due out next year. At this point it's called *Salut, Walt Whitman*.

He once did a poem called *Salut du Monde*, and the other artist I have enormous respect for is Robert Frank, who used to write *Letter From New York* for the old *Creative Camera* magazine, that he signed off with "Salut!"

This [he gestures at the walls of the gallery, where *Questions Without Answers* is installed] this is going to be a book too. I'm now writing *What Is Art?*, which is a real ballbreaker! Heh, heh, hah, hah. Devils rush in where angels fear to tread!