

The Irish Times

Tue, Jan 10, 2017

The John Berger album: a 50-year photo-essay

Photographer Jean Mohr's long friendship with the late writer and art critic meant he was able to produce images full of biographical insight



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John Berger in 2014: he lived in a French village for many years after the success of the book and TV series *Ways of Seeing* in the 1970s. Photograph: Jean Mohr

John Berger was, to borrow the title of one of his collaborative books with the photographer Jean Mohr, a fortunate man. The enduring success of the book based on his celebrated 1972 television series, *Ways of Seeing*, afforded him the means of setting his own agenda in his approach to life and work. That approach was consistent only in its

unpredictability and unconventionality. An exceptionally vital, independent-minded, clear-headed, opinionated and charismatic figure, he was never constrained by orthodoxy and always capable of coming up with the unexpected.

It's impossible to overstate the influence of *Ways of Seeing* on succeeding generations of artists and, perhaps even more so, on curators. It seemed to offer an analytical path to engagement with the real world of social and political issues. Berger set himself against an increasingly exclusive, formalist interpretation of the evolution of artistic style.

He argued against the dominant aesthetic exemplified by Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* on one hand and Clement Greenberg's art criticism on the other. Drawing on the writing of Walter Benjamin, *Ways of Seeing* put social and political values firmly at the heart of art-historical and critical analysis. The art object was, Berger illustrated, an ideologically invested entity rather than somehow standing apart from such concerns.

Some years ago, Berger responded with typical generosity to a proposal from a small Irish imprint that it publish an anthology of his writings on drawing. Occasional Press is an artist-run publisher, and for both the artists concerned, Jim Savage and David Lilburn, drawing is the core of their work. *Berger on Drawing* has been a mainstay for Occasional, and they were keen to follow up on it.

Close friends

Jean Mohr and Berger had been close friends since 1962, when they met by chance in an artist's studio in Geneva. Mohr took a photograph of Berger on that occasion, and has fairly consistently taken countless others over the years, "without any ulterior purpose in mind", building up an amazing archive.

Berger was against any overtly biographical projects during his lifetime, but he was cautiously open to Mohr using his images as a photo-essay on ageing. The photographer was not too keen on that. Then Berger came around to the idea of "a sort of family album in which he is the main subject". Amazingly, he stood back from exercising any editorial control over both images and text. And, in the midst of a number of high-profile publications celebrating Berger's 90th birthday, Occasional Press had a scoop on its hands: *John by Jean*, an extended biographical photo-essay covering his life from 1962 to 2014. Mohr aimed to convey his friend's "total commitment in such diverse areas as politics, country life, family, writing and the arts". He has certainly succeeded in doing that. Mohr's instinctive photographic approach is informal, intimate, conversational, and his "extended visual portrait" ranges freely from the public Berger to numerous aspects of the private individual. If there remains something elusive, that has to do with the man himself, who always liked the idea of the powerful motorbike standing ready to carry him away. Even the choice of a relatively low-profile publisher seems characteristic of Berger, a means of slipping under the radar.

Mohr does not over-elaborate in his notes and captions, but there is a great deal of biographical insight in his images and one gets a sense of an immensely complex life. Remarkably, for example, Mohr records what seems to be the very first encounter between Berger and Beverly Bancroft. As a publishing agent, she was dispatched by Penguin Books to keep the hotheaded author in line at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1973. The images, in which he is all attitude, suggest she had her work cut out. But they clicked, became partners for life and had a son, Yves. Bancroft died in 2013.

Surprise decision

In the mid-1970s, after quite a nomadic decade during which, nominally based in Geneva, Berger had moved restlessly around Europe, he and Bancroft made the surprise decision to spend time in the rural Alpine setting of the Haute-Savoie, eventually settling in a house in

the small village of Quincy in 1980. He immersed himself in peasant life, which might sound patronising, but, as Mohr's photographs demonstrate, certainly wasn't.

Berger may not have worked quite as hard as his farming neighbours, as he said, but he was not shy about physical labour. A major part of his gift was his capacity for immersion: listening, observing, bearing witness. He remained based in Quincy, living a substantially rural life until very recently.

Each life, as Berger observed in *Here Is Where We Meet*, involves the intersection of an incalculable number of other lives, and he had an enhanced capacity for drawing people into his emotional orbit. There is a novelistic sweep to *John by Jean*, with friends, family and neighbours appearing periodically as the decades pass. Berger's collaborative books with Mohr are great achievements. As with much of the rest of his writing, they decline to accept conventional constraints and approach the question of how to tell a story or tackle a subject – the life of a community doctor, migratory labour in Europe – in entirely fresh ways. We glimpse their process in *John by Jean*.

On the face of it, Berger's remark that he had himself given up painting – he went to art school, not university – because there were more important things to do indicated his advocacy of more politicised modes of artistic practice. In fact, his position was much more nuanced. He retained, he said, a painter's eye, and he remained a lively, insightful, opinionated writer on painting. And he pointed out that to paint, say, a pastoral landscape, or a flower, was no less valid or less political than to tackle an explicitly political agenda. Such painting related to a valuable, enriching part of life – and that included the lives of workers.

John by Jean: Fifty Years of Friendship, by Jean Mohr, is available from occasionalpress.net