

BRIAN ARNOLD

## A Pond that Never Dries

*A Conversation with Tate Shaw about Afterimage and Visual Studies Workshop after the Lyoneses*

Joanna Heatwole and Tate Shaw

“Big Fish in a Very Small Pond: Interview with Joan Lyons”

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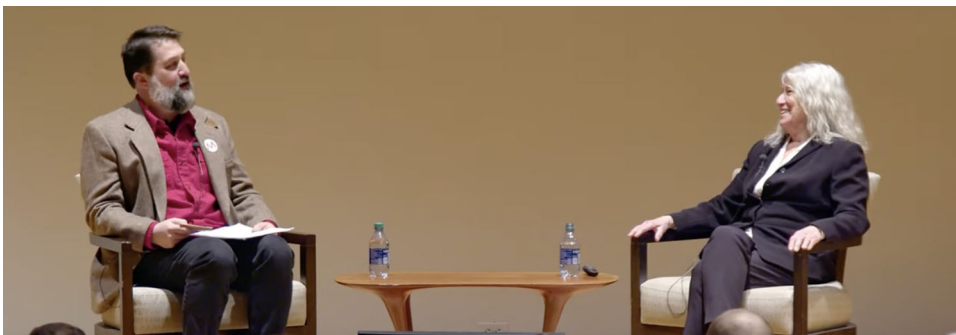
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In the March/April 2005 issue of *Afterimage*, two former Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) graduate students, Tate Shaw and Joanna Heatwole, interviewed Joan Lyons. At the time, Joan Lyons—artist, advocate, and educator, as well as Nathan Lyons’s partner in life—had just retired from her position at VSW in Rochester, New York [Nathan founded VSW in 1969, and launched *Afterimage* in 1972, serving as its first editor]. To commemorate the fiftieth volume of *Afterimage*, I immediately knew I wanted to do something with Tate Shaw, an artist and educator I’ve long admired, who took over the programming at VSW from the Lyonses in 2005. I revisited “Big Fish in a Very Small Pond: Interview with Joan Lyons” and was able to see it as a milestone marker, a publication acknowledging a significant change in VSW’s history as the founders stepped aside and Shaw assumed the VSW Director position. “Big Fish in a Very Small Pond” was conducted a year after Joan Lyons’s retirement, when she had some chance to reflect on her legacy; this interview with Tate was conducted a year after he stepped down as Director of VSW and provides a similar reflection on the legacies of *Afterimage* and VSW. Interviews have played an integral role in the journal from the beginning, offering conversations with important leaders of the field.

To provide more context, *Afterimage* was born at VSW in 1972 as a vehicle to further express Nathan Lyons’s visions for photography and photographic education. In 2018, as part of ongoing administrative restructuring at VSW, the journal transitioned to the University of California Press. I title this 2023 interview with Shaw “A Pond that Never Dries” to both make a direct link to the earlier interview with Joan Lyons but also to acknowledge VSW, a program with enough vision and tenacity to endure and evolve for decades, and where *Afterimage* has its roots. This interview was conducted through a series of emails I exchanged with Tate between April and October 2023.

**BRIAN ARNOLD: When did you first get involved with Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) and what was your attraction to the program?**

**TATE SHAW:** In the mid 1990s I became infatuated with books as art and radical publishing. I first learned about VSW from reading *The Century of Artists’ Books* by Johanna Drucker, published in 1995 by Granary Books. VSW Press titles appeared in every section of Drucker’s study and Joan Lyons was referenced throughout. VSW had an



Tate Shaw interviewing Joan Lyons on stage at the Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York, February 26, 2023.

early website and online bookstore that I frequently searched. The first book I ordered from the Press was *The Position of the Author* (1993) by Buzz Spector. Spector's book brought together historical and critical writing with a personal essay and a conceptual-visual framework. It and certain other VSW Press publications were representative of what I imagined my own practice to be and that motivated me to attend workshops at VSW and eventually enroll in the SUNY–Brockport MFA in Visual Studies at VSW in 2003. As a student I volunteered for the press, fulfilling book orders and selling back catalog titles and back issues of *Afterimage*, traveling to art book fairs and events like Society of Photographic Education conferences. Joan published a book of mine titled *String Lessons* in 2004 and I learned to catalog and digitize artists' books in what is now called the Joan Lyons Independent Press Archive. VSW's publishing activity drew me to the place, and the myriad ways artist publishing is supported are why VSW has been my creative community in a variety of capacities for the past twenty years.<sup>1</sup>

**BA: When did Joan and Nathan Lyons retire? When did you become director of the program?**

**TS:** I was part of Joan's last cohort for the MFA at VSW when she retired in 2004. Nathan had retired from the Workshop in 2000 [and died in 2016]. He founded VSW in 1969 to grow the then burgeoning field of photography and established many programs, including *Afterimage*, to accomplish that broad goal. VSW was designed to have a stimulative environment where graduate students would come and study. But that meant VSW had to keep creating and maintaining cultural programs beyond providing the MFA. Several years after Joan and Nathan retired most of the core programs had ended or were struggling, and the MFA was threatened. I became the director in 2008, along with Kristen Merola, who was co-director. In 2012 Kris relocated to Los Angeles and is now Project Manager for the Film Foundation.

I stepped down from the director role in 2022 when SUNY discontinued the MFA at VSW. Looking back with more experience, I can see that the progressive approach of much of what VSW has produced was not reflected in the administrative structure. Nathan was a full-time academic at SUNY with full benefits and a pension while Joan and other staff, including the staff of *Afterimage*, were arts workers employed by VSW and earning below-living wages, with no benefits, and were dealt furloughs without pay six weeks a year or more. Aside from the director, who acted as the volunteer director of VSW to maintain the association, all faculty were adjuncts earning stipends per class or workshop. It was clearly an inequitable and unsustainable model. Now the Workshop has its own executive director without direct SUNY ties, Jessica Johnston; a curator and director of programs, Tara Merenda Nelson; an associate curator of education and public programs, Hernease Davis; as well as two other key staff members. All are paid living wages with benefits including paid time off and no furloughs. It is a more equitable approach and place, although there is always hard work to be done on that front.

**BA: What was your first exposure to *Afterimage* and how do you think the journal represented the original vision of VSW?**

**TS:** *Afterimage* issues were in the packet of materials I received upon being accepted to the MFA at VSW, including one on the theme of Visual Studies [*Afterimage* 31, no. 1,

1. For more on VSW's programming and membership opportunities, see [www.vsw.org](http://www.vsw.org).

July/August 2003] guest edited by Chris Burnett, director of VSW from 2001 to 2007. Chris had an unorthodox approach to the history of photography and new media writing. That issue included an essay by Drucker, whose work I already followed, and an interview with Brian Wallis, then chief curator of Photography at the International Center of Photography. Wallis had edited *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writing by Contemporary Artists* (1987), which I already loved. I knew I was heading to the right place.

In my second year of the MFA, Karen vanMeenen resumed the editor role and was working to convert the journal from a tabloid to a codex format. I volunteered to do the layout and design for the next couple of volumes and occasionally contributed a report or review. Working for Karen, and the other editors and writers on *Afterimage*, is how I learned to collaborate. I saw firsthand the state of texts and images when they came into *Afterimage* and how many stages and state changes were required to finalize texts, portfolios, covers, and graphic layouts for publication. Assuming the role of layout and design meant I was responsible for making the corrections and changes in final print files. I was witness to editors checking and re-checking every mark that would be on the pages. It is experience I draw from and revisit when I am deciding to take on the responsibility of publishing someone's work or when I'm in the middle of a publication and questioning how many edits and drafts I'm producing to complete a piece.

I came to VSW to learn from and work for VSW Press but learned as much from *Afterimage* and I know many people came to the Workshop because *Afterimage* was published there. There have been many overlapping people, activities, and programs between *Afterimage* and VSW over the years including MFA faculty or special issues of the journal that became program events at VSW and vice versa. From my perspective, *Afterimage* has aptly fulfilled the needs of the greater media arts field at different times. Early on it reported on technology developments, exhibitions, and opportunities for those interested in photography and related media. As the field filled out *Afterimage* provided more theoretical and feminist grounding and was stalwart in its activist coverage during the culture wars of the 1980s, for example.

**BA: I recently read the interview you conducted with Joan Lyons in 2005, and I know you interviewed her again in 2023. Can you tell us a little about your relationship with Joan?**

**TS:** Yes, I recently interviewed Joan publicly at the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery, where she had a form of retrospective on view.<sup>2</sup> It was Joan's books and what she published that originally drew me into her orbit but these days I'm more taken with her photographic practice and ability to make extraordinarily expressive non-silver and process-oriented works. We're friends. We share books and ideas and sometimes discuss schemes to keep aspects of VSW going. She's the matriarch and elder of my creative community and is hugely significant in my own art lineage.

Despite being more comfortable and friendly with Joan after two decades, I was more intimidated to interview her the second time, earlier this year. As a student, I believed I knew more than I did about her practice and publishing approach. She is often described as a feminist artist—and she is—but I had a narrow, masculinist view of what that meant. I've been party to Joan's commitment and fierceness firsthand and have always heard stories

2. *Joan Lyons*, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York, February 25–August 13, 2023.



Spread from the artist's book *String Lessons* (2004) by Tate Shaw, published by VSW Press.

about her willingness to wade into conflicts. I think I anticipated she would be assertive and authoritative about her role as an editor and publisher. Back then I wanted her to tell me the secret to selecting and shaping books to be published because that's exactly what I wanted to do, and I wanted to be seen as such an authority in the field. But she basically said that she worked in service to artists' visions and midwifed productions into being. And after learning to do just that for years with VSW Press, I understood Joan's approach more from lived experience, which is humbling and edifying. I see more of the pluralism in Joan's feminism now and attempted in our most recent interview to reframe that same question for her to discuss how she helped ground and support a plurality of voices through her work as an artist, printer, and publisher.

**BA: Can you share something about the ongoing evolution of VSW Press?**

**TS:** VSW Press started with literal printing presses and Joan learning and teaching offset printing to artists to make small press publications and new work by artists in book form. As she mentioned in the 2005 interview, she sold the presses at the turn of the century when digital offset and other means made artist editions easier and more affordable without the significant labor costs. She suggested then that it's as if digital printing was made for artists. When Joan retired, the Press had published over four hundred artists' books and some important critical volumes including collections of critical writing on artists' books that she edited. That period is well chronicled in the bibliography she also edited, *Artists' Books: Visual Studies Workshop Press 1971–2008* (2009).

I'm now the editor of VSW Press. As mentioned, like Joan, I am less an editor and more a facilitator of artists' visions for a publication made with available means. In the 2005





points to Hampton's more radical take on history and criticism for that field. From 2013 to 2016, as VSW Director, I coordinated an annual special issue of *Afterimage* that compiled essays, interviews, and portfolios by artists or related to activities VSW had supported. Those issues enabled me to creatively commission writers to engage with artists and initiate primary material that I think of more highly than my own writing in the journal. Included in those issues are several pieces that came out of the Photo-Bookworks Symposium that I coordinated and curated at VSW, which I'm proud of and think contributed to criticism for photobooks. A model for those symposia was the Options in Independent Publishing conference held at VSW in 1979. There is a report on that conference by Adam Weinberg called "Art Between the Covers" in *Afterimage* 7, no. 6 (January 1980) and you can see in it the international network that formed artist publishing as we know it today, including the basic outlines of Joan's selection of critical writings for the anthology she edited, *Artists' Books*. Recent exhibitions and scholarship—I'm thinking here of curatorial work by people like Megan Liberty and Kathy Walkup for the Center for Book Arts in New York City and other institutions—rely upon *Afterimage* as one of the only significant repositories of highly relevant historical traces found in its published interviews, reviews, and show listings for book art. ■

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BRIAN ARNOLD is a photographer, writer, and translator based in Ithaca, New York. He has written three books on photography, most recently *A History of Photography in Indonesia: From the Colonial Era to the Digital Age* (2022), co-published by Afterhours Books in Jakarta and Amsterdam University Press.