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## TEJU COLE EXAMINES PAIRING PICTURES AND PROSE IN 'BLIND SPOT'

By The Dinner Party Download, July 21, 2017



*Teju Cole is a true polymath. His novel, "Open City," won the PEN/Hemingway award. And he writes about photography in a column for The New York Times Magazine, which makes sense since he also exhibits his own photography around the world.*

*His new book, "Blind Spot," combines all these pursuits into one publication. It's a beautiful green volume. Each page on the left contains writing related to an image on the page to the right, and each pairing is named after a location. The images are composed but mundane — no landmarks, and rarely any people. When Brendan spoke with Teju, he asked why.*

**Teju Cole:** I really believe that places retain traces of the things that happen in them. That the past is not a past. So, one of the central conceits of the book in a sense is: when I'm looking at a street corner in New York, I'm not just looking at a street corner in New York in 2017, I'm looking at a place where a lot of things have been happening for a century or two.

So that the photo in the book is— you turn the page and you're like, "OK that's interesting, not much seems to be going on." Then you read the text, and it's either quite a lot happened in that space, or quite a lot is going on compositionally, or quite a lot is going on in my mind at that moment when I take the picture. OR quite a lot is going on in the moment when I

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sit down to look at the picture long after I have taken it. So, it's gesturing to the idea that there's a lot rushing under even what looks like there's not much going on.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** Why give the text and the image equal billing? Traditionally, I think people, when they think of photography, they think of captions. These don't strike me as captions at all. They seem—

**Teju Cole:** They're not captions.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** And they're set visually in their own place.

**Teju Cole:** Absolutely. They're not captions at all. The simple reason for it is that... I try to be gangsta, you know? I want to say, "I'm a writer. I'm a photographer. Equal billing." Not dabbling in writing. Not, you know, doing photography in my spare time. This is my work.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** So, to give people an idea of how this all comes together in your book, I want to turn to page 50, actually. So, we're in Zurich, we know that because there's the title, but that's it.

**Teju Cole:** But you could not have told it was in Zurich, absolutely not. I love this photo [laughs].

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** It's a stencil of a gun slinging cowboy on top of a rectangle on the side of a building. Then you see also a window and in it, reflected a tree. And the text, though, this is an example of you just kind of thinking about Zurich and what you can see and what you can't see.

**Teju Cole:** As plain as the surface is, it's a photograph that exists within a certain language in the history of photography of seemingly banal everyday life, where a lot of the pressure, then, [is] actually on the composition. I don't want to take a photo of the two main cathedral bell towers in Zurich to prove to you that it's Zurich. This is just as Zurich as that would be. So I'm interested in that neglected angle of the face of the city.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** And the text alongside this photo focuses on something similar. In it, instead of just talking about the peaceful and calm Switzerland people imagine or that you imagine, you focus on their history as mercenaries for hire and how they have an arms industry.

**Teju Cole:** Because of their quality control and precision work, they're very good at making weapons. And so, it's interesting you pull this out, because it brings together a lot of concerns in the book. Like that photograph is very typical of my style, and the meditation on a placid surface that is concealing tremendous violence is very typical of what I'm trying to think about in the book.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** Well I want to look at another facet of your style. Let's turn to page 296. And this photo is an example of another common motif in your work, it's a photograph, partially, of another photograph. You do this again and again.

**Teju Cole:** Yeah, shall I describe the image to you?

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** Yeah, please.

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**Teju Cole:** So this is Place de la Concorde in Paris, at a corner of that plaza. At the top there, a column, maybe from Napoleonic times, possibly. On the left, a crowd of people. Then, in front of them, there's a building, you see the building in the distance. Above it, those clouds. Then right at the bottom center of the image, is a sign for churros.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** Oh, they're churros?

**Teju Cole:** They're churros!

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** I didn't think of Paris ...

**Teju Cole:** Right, but it's a street vendor selling churros. And one of these guys in the crowd, a group of people we only see from behind, his shadow falls exactly on this sign.

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** So then, to this, you tell a story.

**Teju Cole:** I'll read it very quickly, it's really quite short. "Paris: In April, 1981, at Sophie Calle's request, Calle's mother hires a private detective to follow Calle around to report on her daily activities and provide photographic evidence of her life. The private detective does not know that the person he's following has paid to have herself followed. He thinks that of the three of them: himself, Calle, and Calle's mother, he knows the most about the situation. In fact, he knows the least. She leads him around Paris, showing him her favorite places. He sees only what she wants him to see."

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** Feels like a fable or something, what do you think?

**Teju Cole:** One of the things I'm doing is— there's a whole series of pictures in the book, the way we see people from behind. I just wanted to think through different layers of that. I'm thinking about what it means for somebody to turn away. I'm thinking about for someone to have a sort of privacy in a public space.

But then I'm also thinking about when I'm looking at somebody, you know, the back of the head or whatever, I feel as if I have some kind of measure of control. I know what's up. And I just thought Sophie Calle's story was a warning, "Where my blindspot? How do I know at that very moment, somebody's not behind me, taking a picture of the back of my head?"

**Brendan Francis Newnam:** I was wondering why you were putting this book together, where you were leading yourself or if you didn't learn some dimension of Teju and your travels.

**Teju Cole:** I think so. When you're editing, you start saying "Oh, wow. I sure shot a lot of ladders!" Some of it is intentional, and some of it you end up discovering.

So, one major, let's say, blindspot, in this book, is for a book that's dealing with blindness and what you can't quite see, it has a very, very few shots taken at night in the dark. It's all daylight. Major blindspot.