

Chatterbox

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Alexandra Bortkiewicz

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This month my conversation is with **Alexandra Bortkiewicz**, Director of Photography at [Alamy](#) Stock Agency, where she recently celebrated her 10-year anniversary. Prior to [Alamy](#), Alex worked with Tony Stone Images, which later became a part of Getty's stable. We met a few years ago through British photographer Barnaby Hall, and we hit it off right away. I asked her what she likes best about what she does and she said, *"I like the fact that I started right at the beginning, being right there and involved as Alamy evolved from a concept into a successful stock agency that has over 20 million images, thousands of photographers, over 500 agencies and clients from all over the world. I don't ever remember a slack moment - I'm always very busy."* I asked Alex why a client would come to them, rather than another agency and she replied, *"We sell to the whole gamut of clients and markets on a global basis and our two main attractions for customers would be the breadth of content that we have and the other would be our strong customer service, including picture research. The agency is also quite unique in that it donates 89% of its profits to Medical Research."*

She also gives credit to her wonderful colleagues, and the opportunity to work with so many different photographers and collections, constantly seeing images that both surprise and delight. Alex conducts portfolio reviews every year mainly in the UK, France and the U.S., and enjoys going on extended trips to the States and to the Alamy office in Brooklyn, to recruit U.S. photographers. She said, *“Perhaps this is probably what I enjoy most, the interaction and talking about images.”* I also asked her if there was anything she does not like about her job and she said, *“I do miss the more lively locations of previous offices I have worked in. A business park in ‘Didcot’ does not quite match the dynamism of London’s Camden Town, the Magnificent Mile in Chicago, or Hollywood, California, but sure Didcot will have its time. I do have opportunities to go to our Dumbo office .”*

With more than a few years under belt, I asked Alex what changes she has seen in our industry, and more specifically, the stock photo industry. And here are some of her thoughts:

- 1. The most obvious change has been the total embrace of the digital platform and departure from the analog model. This has impacted everything from selling images, marketing, availability and access of imagery, to photographer work flow, the cost of shooting and pricing of stock photography and so on.*
- 2. The entry of the amateur photographer into the stock photography market as digital cameras dramatically improve on the technical front.*
- 3. The changing dynamic in the relationship between the stock photography agency and the photographers they represent. I would currently recommend photographers to have a number of agencies rather than just one and they should develop more business orientated skills and knowledge of the market.*
- 4. The diversity and breadth of content that is available to image buyers now - It is not just cut outs and contemporary lifestyle and business images on offer - image buyers can now access collections from book publishers and research companies, niche specialist collections, historical content as well as museum, film and music collections and newspaper archives. Alamy have collections from the Mirror-pix press, Guardian, Natural History museum and the V & A, Mary Evans Picture Library to name a few. All are collections that would not have the extensive distribution network or exposure of these amazing images pre digital times.*
- 5. The inclusion of multi media, moving images, and audio in photographers’ portfolios, Web sites and integral to developing concept in ongoing creative projects. The great thing about all the new technology is the way you can more seamlessly use different medias for your creative projects and promote your work in a more in depth way.*
- 6. The use of social networking sites to promote photography – photographers used to rely on their agency to do most of the marketing of their work. Not any more!”*

I asked Alex if she has noticed any particular trends that photographers should be aware of. *“One substantial trend that stock photography agencies are identifying is creating authenticity in stock photography and departure from unbelievably perfect, posed lifestyle shots. This reflects a definite push towards more real life imagery that is model released, but with a documentary, almost Facebook sensibility. The tricky bit is to do it with a certain amount of polish in terms of production. So to be on trend, business shots should exude a more empathetic and softer style than say an image of a triumphant CEO who might be gloating over profits. It’s a trend that has gathered momentum in the recession but seeds of it have been around for a while. Alamy is working on producing some new iPad apps and dedicated collections early this year to highlight our breadth in this area of real life content.”*

And I also asked what she is looking for in terms of recruiting new talent. *“The main factor driving my recruitment is if I think a photographer has potential to make money through stock photography. I may really like their work but if it is a bit too obscure or works better as a narrative or series, then Alamy might not be the best place for it. I look for ultra contemporary work that reflects the main concepts and themes used in ad campaigns, but also reflects the social and economic trends in society today. A real bonus is when you find a photographer that has used a less formulaic and more unusual approach to illustrate a concept - or just sweeps the viewer away with a gorgeous use of technique and style.”*

And of course I wanted to know where she looks for her photographers. *“I look at many of the excellent online photography portfolio Web sites like Workbook, Visual Pro, Altpick and of course PhotoServe! Also there are many burgeoning creative sources via Blogs, which highlight new talent. Of late I have additionally been tapping into creative online resources such as Wonderful Machine and Trunk Archive, and portfolio reviews are also great for sourcing photographer talent – for example I go to Visa Pour L’Image in Perpignan, Southern France to recruit photojournalists and reportage photographers, and I still use print sources and clock photographers being used in magazines, in particular the national UK newspapers and weekend supplements.”*

And last but not least we have the **ChatterDozen** quick questions:

- 1) Do you have any favorite photographer(s) right now? *I am a big fan of fashion photographer Tim Walker because of the whimsical nature of his work and use of fantasy elements. I am also fascinated by the photography explorations of film director David Lynch. On Alamy, I have quite a few favorites but Roger Bamber immediately comes to mind, a documentary photographer who makes the mundane and everyday look visually arresting, and Jens Haas, a fine art photographer - his style is macro and textured and has visually explored topics such as - What it is like to be a Traffic Cone!"*
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? *"Mad Men, Curb your Enthusiasm and the new Sherlock Holmes with Benedict Cumberbatch."*
- 3) What was the last movie you saw? *"The Illusionist – an animation with original screenplay by Jacques Tati, (I'm a huge fan of Jacques Tati) It's a very charming bitter sweet story revealing how the old style of entertainment is superceded by more brash forms."*
- 4) When is your birthday? *"December 14th" (so Alex is a travel-loving Sagittarius)*
- 5) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, where would you fly to and why? *"Tokyo. I have been once and just fell in love with the place, people and food, even though I cannot speak the language. It has museums dedicated to all kinds of stuff from more obscure like kites and electricity to more mainstream art and culture. I also love the brash insistent modernity combined with the very formal ritualistic culture thriving seemingly well together."*
- 6) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? *"Hard to pinpoint one person but I would say David Attenborough and the unassuming, erudite way he has educated and enthralled viewers with his nature programs. I love it when he goes on about creatures foraging for nourishment and nutrients! He has gently revealed all we have to lose in nature and the environment just by simply showing how complex, orderly and beautiful nature is."*
- 7) What would you do if you weren't a Photography Director? *"Something related to the Great Outdoors, perhaps assistant to David Attenborough! My other passions would have been to be a cinematographer or play an instrument in an orchestra. I also years ago wanted to be a forensic scientist but don't think that would have worked as I get very squeamish watching CSI!"*
- 8) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? *"Paris always intrigues and fascinates me and I recently heard a radio program about Paris in the 1940's - surprisingly, despite WWII and the Nazi occupation, the whole cultural, artistic and music scene still flourished for some, making it an interesting period in terms of how art was used as power pawn between the French and the Germans. But cannot get round the brutal backdrop so I would wait till post-war Paris in the late 40's and early 50's to lurk in Paris and experience the resurgence in the arts and cultural renaissance and as a stomping ground for philosophers, musicians, writers and artists."*

9) What is your favorite food? *"I love most food (except offal) so impossible to say a favorite, but I am very partial to spuds (me too!) - new potatoes, baked ones, Dauphinois, chips (or French Fries), roast... I am getting hungry as I write..."*

10) And your favorite color? *"Blue has been my lifetime favorite color but I have been becoming increasingly obsessed with red of late!"*

11) How about your favorite animal? *"My favorite animal since yesterday are bats – I saw the most amazing image in the UK papers of four baby bats nestling in Jcloths after being rescued from the floods in Queensland. When I am not so fickle then my favorite long term creatures are owls."*

12) If I handed you an Oscar, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? *"My bloke Barry as he always tells me something interesting every day. Is he my muse - I think so. Tony Stone and his daughter Sarah who I worked with for many years – it was inspiring times in the stock industry and Tony was at the forefront – I gained so much knowledge and happily percolated in this creative and exciting environment we worked in. My colleague and mentor Barbara Smetzer who I worked with in the Tony Stone Chicago office. My father Alex (or Olek in Polish) who from an early age instilled a sense of aesthetic in me whether it was music, design, books, language, cinema, or fashion – one day I remember him dragging me out to his Alfa to show me how complex and beautiful a car engine is and its workings. I remember being very mesmerized and thinking how sculptural it was! My sis Krystyna has been very influential because she is so eloquent, knowledgeable and enthusiastic when she talks about the arts that I just get carried away too and that is a great feeling! A close friend though we have not known each other for that long, Nish Kampfner, who among many things has worked on the Times picture desk. I just love going to photography openings with her because she has feisty opinions, high standards and refuses to like something because it is trendy or in vogue. You find yourself raising the bar which can only be a good thing*

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