

Photography as Art

A photographer down in St Bart
Took a snap of the local tart.
As a plan, it was tough,
cos damn – she was rough,
but he cunningly labelled it Art!

Why should we care whether a photograph is Art? Some possible answers to that question are:

1. The WA Photographic Judges Association rubric reserves silver and gold awards for “art photography”, and bronze is for images which “approach” art photography;
2. Photo judges everywhere instinctively discriminate against what they see as “record shots”, in favour of images which they can interpret, or which tell a story;
3. It is much easier to sell an image which is not just a record, since buyers want something they have not already seen repeatedly; something which “speaks” to them;
4. A picture of something which is of little intrinsic interest (perhaps because the subject is a cliché, or is an ordinary thing in ordinary light), without conveying anything more than a literal representation, then the image may be more of a photocopy than a photograph.

5. Some of us may harbor a desire to contribute to the world of artistic creativity, in the hope, perhaps, of staking our own small claim to immortality.

What is Art?

Let's attempt a working definition of "art".



not att - acoustiblok.com

Yousuf Karsh

Should we regard a portrait of a person as having greater potential to be art? Let's return to this question after examining some relevant issues.

In the earliest times, technical skill in drawing or painting a "likeness" may have qualified (or disqualified) a work as art, and as painters developed the techniques for making their work more realistic, they claimed greater

recognition as artists. However, photography was *born* with the natural capacity to create a “photographic likeness”; an accurate reproduction of the subject was never more than a starting point, right from the beginnings of photography in the early nineteenth century.

In “Photography as a Fine Art” by Charles Caffin, published in 1901, the author – a prominent American art critic of the time – stated that a claim to recognition as a fine artist requires two things:

1. A sound knowledge of the principles of picture making, and
2. The power to put personal expression into the picture.

He explained that, first, it is not enough that the photographer have the sensibility of an artist, but he must be able to control the stages of the photographic process so that the print “shall embody the evidence of his own character and purpose”. This view recognizes the knowledge and technique of the artisan (including the skill of composition).

The second element - “personal expression” - is the vision which the technique should *serve*. It’s this second step which takes the photo from one *of* something, to one *about* something (a neat distinction drawn by UK writer Niall Benvie).

Later in Caffin’s book, he says:

“The goal of the best photographers, as of all true artists, is not merely to make a picture, but to record in their print and transmit to others the impression which they experience in the presence of the subject...In a broad sense all artists are impressionists. They do not picture the object itself, but what they are conscious of seeing...the chief beauty in a work of art, be it painting, photograph, or silver salt-cellar, is the evidence of an artist’s expression of himself. It is manifested diversely. In a portrait...it shows itself in ability to sympathize with the subject, to penetrate

behind the mask of the features, and to present an epitome of character as well as of appearance..." (page 90).

Caffin gives examples of artfulness; he refers to how painters capture details of light and shade, subtle facial expressions and body positions. He refers also to manipulation of photographic images, such as dodging and burning.

In Caffin's view, art isn't *only* about technique (including composition), but must carry an emotional charge; it is not just a competent record of a subject.

Leo Tolstoy expressed a similar view in 1890:

"To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced, and...then, by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling – this is the activity of art."

The painter, James Whistler (who was a contemporary of Caffin's) said:

"The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer"

(We have to forgive Whistler this swipe at photographers: perhaps at that time there weren't many examples of photography that attempted something other than an accurate record of the subject).

Although Caffin was originally a commentator on painting, he became, after discourse with the famous photographer, Alfred Steiglitz, a champion

of photographers as artists, and his book did not distinguish between painting and photography when he made the remarks mentioned above.

Caffin makes the point that the difference between an artist and anyone else is that the artist has the technique to embody in physical form the impressions which all people can appreciate but which few can convey to others.

I would add to this that an artist more readily *notices* and *appreciates* things which create these impressions. The wonderfully humorous photographer, Elliott Erwitt, said:

"To me, photography is an art of observation. It's about finding something interesting in an ordinary place...I've found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them."

This is not an innate sensitivity. Photographers, like other artists, train themselves to notice and appreciate artistic possibilities both by actively looking for them, and also by studying existing art in whatever forms it takes.

An artist, then, is someone who not only conceives an idea or impression, but also has the technical skill to create a physical embodiment of the idea, and *communicate* it to others.

A person who *recognizes* potential art, might lay claim to be an artist. This is what judges mean when they say something was "well seen". It's a comment on the author's artistic *taste*. In fact, our taste (meaning the artistic sensibilities which inform the myriad choices we make in the photographic process) is an artistic tool which we can train by studying the work of

others. Our minds need to be stocked with images which help us to see or imagine our own potential images.

However, a photographer has to do better than just recognize potential art; there are no awards for judges and critics, but only for those who actually communicate the idea or emotion.



Returning now to our portrait of the grasshopper, it meets Caffein's first test in that we have a more or less technically competent photograph; but does it carry some "impression" - something that makes you look, or feel, or think, beyond simply appreciating the technique? It may or may not, depending on the viewer's experience and interests: perhaps art is in the eye of the beholder. However, because most people relate to other humans more than they do to insects, the chances of conveying some "impression" are much greater in the case of the human portrait. If, for example, the insect were about to be devoured by a bigger animal, the interest which that would create might transform the grasshopper image into what most people would accept as art.



jennie stock

So, can sport, nature and photojournalism ever be art? Applying the Caffen criteria discussed above, if technique has been applied to communicate an impression, then certainly.



nick ut

Is this art?

Many would say it can't be art because it's ugly, or represents ugliness. These people would agree that the photo was influential and created a strong response, as indeed it still does, but it's nothing you would ever put on your wall. Such a response suggests that art should be attractive and pleasing to at least some viewers.

It's here where we have to get tough! Here is the dividing line. Can a work whose primary aim is to be repugnant ever be art?

In his famous text on art, Sir Ernst Gombrich said (in 1949), "*the beauty of a picture does not really lie in the beauty of its subject matter*".

However, when one looks for definitions of art on the internet, many entries refer to the quality of beauty or pleasantness. On the Aeon website, we find the following passages:

Darrell Hartman

16 December 2014

It has become routine to praise "ugly" art. But do we really think such art is ugly? If we did, I'm not sure it would even get its foot in the door of the "great" conversation. When we say a great work of art is ugly these days, we simply mean its beauty is unconventional.

For much of history, it seems to me the goal of art has been more unabashedly aesthetic—art has been made to delight, inspire, move—than has been the case in the Western-dominated art world in the last half-century or so. You had ideal forms, devotional figures, things pleasing to the eye. Portraits commissioned by the sitter, and thus often designed to flatter. (This is not to say that the works of, say, Holbein or Sargent are superficial. Au contraire.) With modernism, things changed. Patrons (individuals, galleries, etc) ASKED for art to break from the past, to be challenging, to shock. And so high art now is more likely to deal in the imperfect, the incomplete, the conceptual, the aggressively political. I'd argue that time will show much of this art to be not "great." Also, that the art that does endure is not, and will not be, considered ugly. Put differently: If it were truly

“ugly,” there would be no reason for this art to endure. Of course these are all shifting terms. But the underlying energy, or order, or essence, or whatever you want to call it...this is perhaps more stable than we think. I realize this may not be a common view nowadays.

An example: Picasso’s “Guernica” depicts one of the most horrific scenes we can imagine. War, the piece shows, is the ultimate ugly. But the piece itself has an incredible presence. If “genius” sounds over the top, then maybe go with “beauty.” If the piece itself were truly ugly, I don’t think it would affect us the way it does. And, despite our often-avowed desire for the ugly truth, we simply wouldn’t have the heart to add it to the canon.



Pablo Picasso

On the other hand, we also find the following:

Mick Miller

3 May 2015

In the same way that fear is not the opposite of bravery, beauty is not the opposite of ugly. Beauty is that which wakes us up inside. Ugly is a major component of that. Think photos of victims of genocide, cathedral gargoyles, urban blight ... undeniably ugly, but still beautiful. A true artist makes the ugly and the grotesque appealing, beautiful, essential.

An artist that only works with the “pretty” is playing it safe. And in doing so he is doing his art and himself a great disservice. I’m not advocating that artists have

to only create repulsive art, but that when the vision comes to them and they have a need to express something not everyone (or anyone) wants to see, ugly can be great art.

Mr Miller would hold the Vietnam war photo to be art. Mr Hartman *might* say the photo's apparent ugliness is really a kind of beauty, but I suspect he would not accept it as "great" art. Similarly, most commentators on the internet consider that art must be aesthetically pleasing. They would not accept the Vietnamese girl picture as art, no matter how moving it is.

Any approach based on finding ugliness in beauty and beauty in ugliness is tainted by the nagging suspicion that we're just arbitrarily redefining one as the other, playing with semantics rather than tackling the substantive problem. Why can't we just apply Caffein's formula: has the author applied technical skill to create a work which communicates the author's idea, to create an "impression" in the viewer? On that approach, beauty and ugliness are irrelevant, and our Vietnam photo is art.

This is tough talk, out of step with these post modern times, but we really need some firm precepts, not vague feelgood political correctness. If a sports or nature picture inspires an emotional response in the viewer, why is it any less artful than a landscape or a portrait?

But let's look at the problem from a different point of view:



Not art

Is this art?

Unlike the Vietnam girl, this shows something pleasant (at least to some viewers), and there is no doubt that the photographer has applied technical skill to create an impression in the viewer.

And yet, some viewers will struggle to accept this as art. Is that because, for them, this image's commercial intentions lack integrity? Is that why we tend to dismiss mass produced paintings on black velvet of the kind to be found in two dollar shops; and those Paris street scene oils which are peddled door to door? Do we reject such "kitsch" as artistic *pretension*, not *real* art? Is this because kitsch appeals to people who find "real" art too highbrow for their vulgar taste? Is this debate driven by snobbery and class consciousness?

In any case, if you think cheesecake like the image above cannot claim to be art, do you also reject comicbook illustrations, anime and graffiti as art?

Critics of Caffein's formula will say that its application would admit some glamour, comicbook and other popular visual works, as art. Can we live with such a wide definition? If we admit too much into the dress circle of

art, do we subvert the merit of art? It's like Groucho Marx's comment that: "*I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member*".

The answer to this question is probably bound up with the answer to another question, namely how many people have to agree that something is art, before it is? If only the author of the playboy photo thinks his work is art, do we have to say that it's art for *him*, or can we aspire to a more objective standard? In the interest of reaching a *useful* definition of art, we need to do better than "art is in the eye of the beholder"; people who make art their career or life, would reject such a flexible approach as unhelpful, lazy or even offensive. They would say that art must be received as such by the cognoscenti (that is: them). The trouble is, they would have an attack of the vapours at the suggestion that a sport or nature image could be art, since they've never had to confront such a notion.

Could photographers agree that an image is art if, to a substantial number of informed impartial observers, the image meets the Caffen criteria? This is vague, but at least it's adaptable to a wide range of circumstances. A WAPJA judge would presumably know instinctively if an image would be accepted as art by more than one or two people. There's no need to conduct a survey.

Let's try to draw a few of these threads together. First, an artistic image begins with an artistic vision - an idea or perception in the author. Next, the author has to apply technical skill to embody the idea in a physical form. Finally, that form has to excite an impression, emotion or reaction in a substantial number of informed impartial viewers, or at least be judged as capable of doing so, and must not lack integrity. This approach means that art photography does not have to be "*arty*", and could be humorous.

Finally, at what point in time must all these elements coalesce? Must art survive the test of time, and remain potent, or can fashionable/pop art qualify? To this writer, the only practical answer is that the artistic merit of the image must be assessed when it is judged: a judge cannot guess how long the impact of the image will endure.

The combination of all these elements will produce a work of art, by definition. Will it win a competition? Not necessarily! Art is necessary but not sufficient to win. Some of us might regard the mere act of creation as more important than winning competitions, especially when photographic judging can appear to be so capricious.

Artful Dodging

Let's look at some techniques photographers use, consciously or not, to make their efforts more artful, when the subject matter alone is not enough.

To begin with, any distortion of reality is potentially a step in the "art" direction. For example, conversion to mono, high key, low key, shallow depth of field, blur, and unusual cropping can help to evoke an impression.

An unusual point of view can "make you look".

A common, but effective technique is to create an unexpected association of ideas or objects, as seen in surrealism.

Multiple light sources and other lighting not usually encountered in reality, are often seen in professional work.

Another technique is unusual colours and colour harmony.

Photographers are always on the lookout for compositional aids, such as framing, leading lines, repetitive elements and actual or implied diagonal lines.

Sometimes the author's framing of the subject makes it look like something else, making the image a metaphor.

Removal of normal detail can make an image more abstract.

Is a soulful portrait art because it makes you stop and think? Does it motivate you to imagine the backstory? An image which suggests a story might claim to be art, just as the Vietnam girl did.

Realism in Art

It should not be thought that a photograph cannot be artistic unless it distorts reality to present an impression or interpretation of it. The greatest advantage enjoyed by photography over painting is the fact that photography is based on something *real*. Some photos achieve their artistic credentials by making the viewer perceive reality in a different way.

According to a 1980s essay by Douglas Davis (a New York artist and critic active in the late 20th century), Edward Weston's realism exceeded the powers of the human eye. He said:

Are Weston's shells, his plants, his nude figures real? Super real? Look again. Realism implies that we understand what we see in terms of our own lives, that the object perceived in the photograph is an object known – in advance – to us. But Weston's images are often so close to the lens, so divorced from the context of ordinary living, so abstract – in essence – that they have no objective meaning...even the "social realists," even Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange... reduced and refined their means and methods, as Weston advised...time and again, in their lust for perfection (which drove them to select, refine and simplify subject matter), they produced epithets, isolated faces, peeling wallpaper, rusting automobiles, not realism. Pretending to be recorders of the world, they recorded their own visions."

His conclusion on the subject of photography as fine art, was:

Yes, of course photography is a medium in which the finest minds can act. Of course it is a fine art; but, at the same time, it isn't a fine art at all, if we mean by "fine" something high, noble, lofty, divorced from the world of the living; no, this photography can never be. It is far too provocative a medium for that. Like Janus, the photograph looks two ways at once – up, towards the vision of a pure, photographic beauty, as Edward Weston would say, and down, alas, beyond the mundane reality of fact, toward something even deeper. We know that whatever we see before us in the photograph has appeared at a specific moment in time before the lens of that camera...Paintings are masters of their moments, imposed on time; photographs are servants of time, and in their presence we are reminded of ourselves, of our own servitude, our own mortality. Let's conclude, then: Photography is not completely a fine art, in the traditional sense....Photography is finer than art.

So, to reach our own conclusion, photography is a communication; it can communicate basic information – how a thing looks, but it can also communicate a feeling or a thought. When it does the latter - especially when it does it perfectly and with integrity – it is Art. That feeling or thought does not have to be pleasant: neither does literature. An image does not have to win competitions to be artistic, but an image won't win competitions unless it is artistic, in the sense described above.

Mark Greenland

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