Is photography still art?

By Byrd Williams, Published March 8, 2010

"There are too many images, too many cameras now. We're all being watched. It gets sillier and sillier. As if all action is meaningful. Nothing is really all that special. It's just life. If all moments are recorded, then nothing is beautiful and maybe photography is not art anymore. Maybe it never was."

—Robert Frank

When Robert Frank, one of the most prolific photographers of the 20th century, questions the art of photography, we know times have changed.

Frank was the Jack Kerouac of photography. He believed in shooting lots of film. Of course, lots of film in the 1950s meant 200 to 300 photographs a day. Technology has radically altered the numbers of images that people take. In the late 1800s, photographers took one or two photographs a day. They spent their time coating glass and making sun prints.

Personally, in 1997, I shot 200 to 300 negatives. In 2000, I shot somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 image files. We have officially reached image vertigo.

What to do with all the pictures

We are surveying the whole world. Everyone with cell phones is snapping images. We are all being watched and recorded. Cell-phone users look at photos journalism away from journalists.

As a professor, I used to be able to view 36 or 72 photos to see what the students were thinking. Now with 300 plus images, they have to edit the images before I see them. The problem is that beginning students are poor editors. They edit out the gems.

Students do not know what to do with the gargantuan number of images any more than I do. One day I looked for a particular photo and realized that 40 pictures back. I started thinking about my taxes, and there were still 12,000 more to sift through.

To access a certain shot from two years ago is really difficult. Is it on this hard drive, CD, DVD, zip drive? It used to be a on a shelf, and you could pull it out. Now, there are millions of images. All of a sudden, photographers have to become librarians. It looks like "image management" may need to become a stand-alone course. I have a friend who no longer shoots but just keeps organizing images. Is he still a photographer, an artist, if he is no longer shooting?

Photography is more than Photoshop
Today, a photography department requires state-of-the-art computer classrooms and a print reproduction facility. However, the darkroom isn’t totally going away because advanced students on their way to art school still use it.

Most of my students are familiar with Photoshop. Eighteen- to 20-year-olds are digital natives. They came to consciousness at a monitor versus their baby boomer analog predecessors. Today, students are adept at learning the software fast. They take on gadget operation as naturally as breathing. What strikes me as exceptionally odd is that they know the software but not the camera. They use professional cameras for point and shoot images. Professors have to teach them how to make the equipment do what they want it to do. Everybody thinks photographs are automatic. That could not be further from the truth. You have to take responsibility for the content.

We teach students how the settings affect visual information. We teach framing, composition and timing. We teach them to erase the original experience from their minds and let the photograph speak for itself. We teach thinking about the image before shooting the picture. We ask students what they are trying to say with a particular photo.

Selectivity of moments is gone

We are recording each other constantly with security cameras. At what point is the moment important? Robert Frank’s commentary is disturbing. Ironically, the Robert Frank stream-of-consciousness-photography days are here with a vengeance.

Surprisingly, while the technology has certainly changed photography, many of the tenants of teaching photography have remained the same. I believe the best photographers today share qualities with their predecessors. They are well-read, bring experience to bear on a scene, shoot for concept and bring intelligence to what they shoot. They take an educated approach and shoot with heart and intellect.

If everyone had the software and the camera equipment, we are back to what photography really always was—illustrating ideas. Emerging photographers, like those that came before them, have to find their own voice, their own style.

Of course the twist is that the new photographers have to be software experts, accountants and organizers as well as creative geniuses.

Defining art

What is art and what is not? And who has the authority to make that decision? Does it hold true for everyone? These questions may never be answered because individuals continue to change their definitions of art as they are exposed to new ideas. Perhaps photographer Danny Lyon summs it up best when he points out that art is always in the eye of the beholder:

“Then I take it. the little photograph, and give it away, a gift, to the person pictured in it, a return for what they have given me. Thirty years pass. People die. Children grow old. They keep the little piece, stuck up on a wall with thumbtacks, creased and stained. themselves, young and alive, forever. That is photography.”

Williams is a third-generation photographer and professor of photography at Collin College (Texas).

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