

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Why take photographs?

1. Snapshots - impulse to preserve / document specific important people / events
2. Fine Art - expressionistically articulate / conceptualize who we are / what we think of the world
3. Documentary – Spread of information
4. Commercial - see the product
5. Scientific – visualize the unseen

Words cannot always provide a satisfactory way to express our relationship to the world.

Human nature is to want to shape the ordinary into the special

Participation helps us feel capable of expression, validate us as individuals and assist us in finding a sense of well being.

Photographs may be enigmatic – allow a viewer access to something remarkable that might not have been understood any other way.

Isadora Duncan – mother of modern dance *“If I could explain to you what I meant there would be no reason to dance.”*

Photographs are conversations among the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Meaning is based on the context of how words are spoken, to whom they are spoken, the body language of the participants, and the environment in which the conversation takes place.

Visual conversation can lead to definition. Definition allows us to acknowledge, take responsibility, and act to problem solve, respond to the aesthetics, or reach a conclusion about what the image maker deemed significant

How does photography work?

A camera utilized light and form to record an image that is then interpreted through societal visual cues that have evolved over centuries of image making.

Photography does not just capture a slice of time, but can manipulate it to enlarge our ideas of what makes up reality.

Learning how to operate the camera, gaining an awareness of how light can suppress or reveal a subject's attributes, and then making a print or other form of visual presentation are the first steps in transforming an abstract idea into a physical (photographic) reality.

Once a basic understanding of picture making is obtained, control over the process can begin.

One needs to think about how photography can be used to construct meaningful expression: **PROCESS MUST BE PUT IN SERVICE OF CONCEPT!**

No point to possessing technical prowess if there is no idea for it to bring into existence.

How does one become a photographer?

Since the past informs the future, looking at those photographs already made should be a primary activity. The classics have been deemed such as their artistic, conceptual and technical content serves as a model that has been useful over time. Contemporary work is experimenting with different ways of expressing ideas.

DON'T MAKE TECHNICAL LEARNING YOUR SOLE PRIORITY. FORM AN IDEA FIRST.

German performance artist Joseph Beuys: *"Once you've got an idea, the rest is simple."*

Become a perpetual tourist: view the familiar objectively to better understand it.

A lack of commitment to the medium translates into indifference in one's work. Talking, writing, and thinking about photographs is vital to understanding the process, but to be a photographer one must act and fully engage in the process of making photographs by taking lots of them.

Which equipment is best?

It doesn't matter. Every camera is fine: it's how you use it.

Travel photographer Peter Adams said: "Photography is not about cameras, gadgets and gizmos. Photography is about photographers. A camera didn't make a great picture any more than a typewriter wrote a good novel."

Why is photography important?

People photograph to save and commemorate a subject of personal importance.

An image may be a memory jog in an attempt to stop the ravages of time.

Part of a photographer's job is to be actively engaged in the condition of looking for something. They are made unique in how this act of looking is organized.

Why is it important to find an audience for your work?

A photographer's goal should be to interact and stimulate thinking within the community of not just artists but the world at large.

What can images do that language cannot do?

An accomplished photographer can communicate ideas that remain adamantly defiant to words.

Albert Camus: *"If we understood the enigmas of life there would be no need for art."*

Photographs convey the sensation and emotional weight of the subject without being bound by its physical content. (The thing itself may not be the significant meaning behind what is symbolized. The word dog refers to the animal, but the concept of a dog may make one think of fidelity [Ever wonder where the name Fido came from?])

What makes a photograph interesting?

Empathy allows a viewer cognitive and emotional understanding of the subject.

Value of a photograph is not limited to its depiction of people, places, things and feelings akin to those in our life. An engaging photograph contains within it the capacity to sensitize and stimulate our latent exploratory senses.

An interesting photograph asserts ideas and perceptions that we recognize as our own but could never have given concrete form to without having first seen that image.

How is the meaning of a photograph determined?

Meaning is not intrinsic. It is established through a cognitive and emotional relationship among the maker, the photograph, and the viewer.

The structure of a photograph can communicate before it is understood.

A good image teaches the viewer how to read it by provoking responses from the viewers' inventory of life experiences. Meaning is local: viewers interpret images based on their own understanding of the world.

Meaning is not always found in things, but sometimes between them.

How can photographers know and define truth and beauty?

In the 21st century, irony has been the major form of artistic expression with issues of gender, globalization, identity, race, and sexuality being predominant because they had previously been suppressed. Truth and beauty have receded into the background.

Truth and beauty are based in time and may only exist for an instant, but photographers can capture a trace of this interaction. Such images can authenticate an experience and allow a viewer to reflect upon it to gain a deeper meaning.

Beauty is that which stimulates visual pleasure.

From Dictionary.com:

beau·ty [byoo-tee] –noun, plural -ties.

1. the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest).

Beauty is not a myth in the sense of being a cultural construction or creation of manipulative advertisers. It's a basic hard-wired part of human nature; just because it can't be scientifically measured it doesn't mean it should be invalidated.

According to Plato, the three wishes of every person is: *"to be healthy, to be rich by honest means, and to be beautiful."*

Truth is a conclusion without a doubt.

From Dictionary.com

Truth [trooth] –noun, plural truths

1. the true or actual state of a matter: He tried to find out the truth.
2. conformity with fact or reality; verity: the truth of a statement.
3. a verified or indisputable fact, proposition, principle, or the like: mathematical truths.

Truth produces a sense of clarity and certainty that eliminates the need for future questioning.

What are the advantage of digital imaging over silver-based (traditional) photography?

You don't need a physical darkroom with running water and expensive enlarging equipment that exposes you to the dangers of handling chemicals.

Digital imaging allows truth to be made up by whatever people deem important and whatever they choose to subvert. They may begin with a blank slate and work additively, building a reality that may have never existed through digital means.

Traditional silver-based photographers work subtractively: they begin with everything they find in the world and need to pare it down to the essentials to convey their idea.

What are the disadvantages of digital imaging?

The vast majority of digital images continue to be a reworking of past strategies that do not articulate any new ideas.

Manufacturers promoted the fantasy that all it takes to be an artist is just a few clicks of a mouse applying a preprogrammed filter.

Will there be a convenient way of viewing images saved only as digital files in the future? Or will they share the fate of floppy disks with data no one can access any longer? Silver based photographs exist physically while digital photographs are somewhat theoretical.

Digital imaging tends to remove the maker from the photographic process; the physical exhilaration of being physically creative as your mind and body work together to produce a tangible image in a darkroom is lost. Also lost is the sense of artistry in making prints: chemical processing of silver based papers and films created unique pieces while digital printing produces exactly replicated multiples.

How can I find something interesting to photograph?

Meaning is not always linked to the subject matter being represented.

Photography is excellent at capturing the surfaces of things but can also effectively get below it, too. It's the treatment of the subject matter, not the actual subject matter itself, that can affect the viewer the most.

Light and shadow are vital components of every photograph.

One of the inventors of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot, said: *"The subject matter is subordinate to the exploration of space and light."*

The quality of light striking a subject can reveal or conceal its characteristics.

Light is the principal subject of every photograph which image makers must strive to control and depict no matter whether it is natural or artificial.

William Henry Fox Talbot: *"A painter's eye is often arrested where ordinary people see nothing remarkable. A casual gleam of sunshine, or a shadow thrown across his path, a time withered oak, or a moss covered stone may awaken a train of thoughts and feelings, and picturesque imaginings."*

THE SUBJECT MATTER IN FRONT OF THE LENS IS NOT ALWAYS THE ONLY SUBJECT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH.

Hasn't it already been done before?

From Dictionary.com:

cli·ché [klee-shey] –noun

anything that has become trite or commonplace through overuse.

To accept the notion that it's all been done before is to embrace clichés. The problem with clichés is that they are oversimplified and superficial articulations of complex concepts.

The simple act of taking a photograph is no guarantee that one has communicated what is essential about that subject. By deeply exploring a theme and challenging clichés, a good photographer can reconstruct their sight of distorted, neglected or other contextual issues that surround a subject and its meaning to gain a fresh awareness and understanding.

What if I'm not in the mood to make photographs?

At times when pain and suffering are inescapable, it is important to remember that this is part of the process by which we gain knowledge.

There are things in life (once called wisdom) that one must discover for themselves through private journeys which are unique, incomprehensible experiences to anyone but you. No one can possibly share the same exact experiences but that doesn't mean no one else can relate to them.

Stress can be channeled into a creative force, producing a sense of inquisitiveness and an incentive for change.

Thinking through making photographs can help us place our pain in context; allowing us to understand its source, catalog its scope, adapt ourselves to its presence, and devise ways to control it.

Stress can open up possibilities for intelligent and imaginative inquiries and solutions which otherwise may have been overlooked.

What happens if I have difficulty figuring out how to photograph a subject?

Try changing your thinking patterns. Approach the subject objectively. Experiment. Push yourself past the most easily evident solution to creative problem solve.

Why is it important to understand and be proficient in your medium?

Mastery of craft allows one the control to be flexible, to sharpen the main focus, and discard extraneous material. This requires that you reexamine your initial impulse and refine your original idea by incorporating new / overlooked points of view.

An artist who invests the extra time to incubate fresh ideas, learn new technical skills, try different materials and experiment with additional approaches can achieve a fuller aesthetic form and a richer critical depth.

You must reach into a different part of yourself than that you display in your daily demeanor (thinking outside the box).

How much visual information do I need to provide a viewer to sustain meaning?

Two stylistic approaches for transmitting photographic information:

1. Open approach: a great deal of visual information is presented. The viewer selects and responds to those portions which relate to their experiences.
2. Closed / Expressionistic approach: selected portions of a subject are presented with the idea of directing a viewer toward a more specific response.

Selecting a single stylistic method provides a basic template for organizing your thoughts and producing a body of work that has a tighter focus of concentration.

How much of my output is likely to be “good”?

American poet Randall Jarrel wrote: *“A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great.”*

American photographer Ansel Adams said he was satisfied if he made one “good” image a month.

French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson said: *“It’s seldom you make a great picture. You have to milk a cow quite a lot and get plenty of milk to make a little cheese.”*

Part of being an artist is working through the process. Artists take risks but recognize that everything they do is not going to be successful.

Constructive criticism can be beneficial in helping to resolve a project.

How do photographers explore complex relationships of time, space and scale and their role in generating meaning?

The process of making pictures involves keeping an open mind to single and serial image constructions, narrative and non-narrative formats, in-camera juxtapositions and post-camera manipulations.

1. How does changing the sense of scale, the size you expect something to be, affect viewer reaction? Does the unusual scale evoke humor, mystery or horror? How does this make you rethink the subject?
2. How does image size affect viewer response?
3. How would changing to black and white or color affect the image's emotional outcome?
4. Does one photograph placed next to another modify the meaning of both?
5. What happens if text is added to an image?
6. How can meaning shift with a title as opposed to leaving a photograph untitled?
7. What is the most effective form of presentation and what is the appropriate venue?

Why study the history of photography?

History is how we define ourselves based on what we make of the past, which then in turn determines our future relationships.

By knowing what has already been done, an image maker learns the basic skills needed to critically examine photographs: description, interpretation and evaluation.

Irish writer Oscar Wilde: *"The duty we owe to history is to rewrite it."*

What are the limitations in studying the images of others?

While understanding the work of others can help us to better understand what we feel, it is our own thoughts that we need to develop, even if it is someone else's picture that assists us through this process.

French novelist Marcel Proust: *"There is no better way of coming to be aware of what feels than by trying to recreate in oneself what a master has felt."*

Looking at work can open your eyes but it cannot make you aware enough of the significances of your own experiences because the image maker was not you.

To become a better photographer you must cast aside any preconceived notions of what makes a photograph good.

Can too much knowledge interfere with making photographs?

Beware of those who do not think independently but rely on established aesthetic and technical know-how as their pedigree establishing them as an "artist".

You do not have to know all the answers before you begin. Do not get overwhelmed by what you do not yet know; asking questions for which you have no immediate answers can be the gateway for a dynamic body of work.

Acknowledge that there is always more to know and learning should be a life-long process.

Is it necessary to explain my photographs?

Yes, it is vital to give your viewers a toe-hold with an artist statement. This process allows a photographer to learn if the audience agrees with the stated intentions of the work.

However, while useful, an artist's statement offers only a single perspective for understanding work. By remaining open to different interpretations, photographers may discover additional meanings.

Enigma remains an essential quality of art making.

English painter, Francis Bacon, believed that the power of a work lay in its ability to be alluring yet elusive. Once it could be explained in words, it became an illustration. *"If one could explain it, why go to the trouble of painting it?"*

What is the role of critics and critique?

The real importance of criticism is for the work is criticized. It forces one to justify what they have done.

What do good teachers teach?

Any teacher is responsible for instilling a sense of responsibility, generosity, and discipline no matter what the subject is.

Art teachers encourage students to be curiously critical, to find the means to accomplish their goals by their own means, and to be respectful of others working in their medium.

How do photographers earn a living?

Less than 1% of artists can live on what they earn from sales of their artwork alone.

The visual arts community is a very small field; hard work and networking skills can benefit you.

Take advantage of being a student to focus on identifying your artistic style and create an inventory of work that can sustain you for a few years after graduation. Access to studio space and having the time to dedicate yourself to making art might be limited as you find your place in the world.

Complete an internship: they can lead to entry level jobs in some instances aside from giving you real-life experience to cite on your resume.

Do not burn any bridges and keep in contact with those you have grown to know: not only are your professors good for letters of recommendation, but they as well as your fellow peers might in the future be able to assist you with furthering your goals.

This handout was heavily referenced from *Light and Lens* by Robert Hirsh.