

VISUAL LITERACY: REVOLUTION, ARTS, & MIRRORS

FROM THE BOOK OF ALTERNATIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESSES: 2ND EDITION

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You've arrived at an interesting point in this process. I've nearly exhausted the menu of photographic processes that I had planned to include and have incorporated about as many images as the publisher will allow. The book is significantly larger in text, content, and imagery than the first edition but there are still a few things I need to say about visual literacy, arts education, and where alternative processes fit in the grand design. This may seem out of context for a book dealing with alternative processes but it actually couldn't be more relevant. With digital imaging hosting the new "mushy democracy" of photographic expression; where the equipment finds the faces, exposes for neutral feeling, and then makes the perfect print, there is a (forgive the theater in the next word) *hunger* for the accident, the raw imperfect light and texture of life. Alternative process image making grows ever stronger in this environment and perhaps that is why you are reading this page.

Photography is the one universal form of expression in which people of all cultures happily participate. (*I will assume you realize I am making a point and not ignoring the popularity of singing and dancing.*) When questioned about the order that things are rescued when fleeing a burning house the respondents say children, pets, and family photographs. I think this makes the case. I also recall sitting in a theater and watching *Shindler's List* and there is this scene where the audience is getting its first visual sense of the concentration camps and of the people are being stripped of

their possessions. The camera pans from one pile of belongings to the next ... shoes, glasses, and the like. In the theater the audience was still and silent until the camera paused on a pile of family photographs ... then I remember a collective gasp taking the air from the room.

My student's generation is the most visually sophisticated in history; they arrive from high school with a visual vocabulary that dwarfs that of their parent's generation. They may not know all of the buzz-words and art-speak ... yet ... but the ease of their visual expression is stunning. So many times I've finished running a critique seminar and thought how amazing it would have been to have the operant visual conditioning they have been raised on when I earned my degrees at Massachusetts College of Art and R.I.S.D. That's when I begin to think about how they see. With machines and popular media defining what "good" and "art" mean, the best place to begin is to tell you what I believe.

To me, visual literacy is the ability to see. More specifically, it is the capacity to interpret, associate, and communicate signs, symbols, codes, signals, metaphors, and marks. A visually literate person is able to draw on a knowledge base that includes cultural and art history, criticism, and semiotics; the study of how meaning is established and understood by the culture it springs from. Don't get frightened off here. I won't be going off on an academic romp through the often incomprehensible, and political, mine-field of semiotic theory where I can beat upon you with important life issues such as modalities, representation, paradigms and syntagmatic analysis. What was the joke in Daniel Chandler's, *Semiotics for Beginners*? ... "What

do you get if you cross a semiotician with a member of the Mafia? An offer you can't understand."

Visual Literacy is a term that means different things to different people. In my personal context, the issues that are relevant to our programs at The Art Institute of Boston are not always in harmony with those in other programs at the University. If you cut our respective paradigms with the same academic knife we would bleed the same color blood, but our types would differ, as would our methods of assessment. It all really coalesces into a mission with the same goal ... to allay the fear of imagination; especially of those that possess a good one, and to inspire the creative process.

Creativity is as important to me as language and it's difficult to be creative if you are afraid to fail and you can't sing if you are afraid to hum. This form of nurturing is one of the very few gifts that a parent or teacher can give a child that will continue to evolve over the child's lifetime. For me, the mentors who remain in me are the ones who offered the gift of how to teach myself to see.

I'm reminded of a story I heard recently that makes the point about how confidence and imagination are nurtured. In a first grade classroom the teacher passes out a piece of paper to each of her students and tells them to draw a picture... this is the 15-minute portion of the day that is scheduled for creativity. A 6-year old girl begins to draw and the teacher comes by her desk and asks what her picture is of. The girl replies that she is drawing a picture of God.

“Well, the teacher responds, you can not draw a picture of God because no one knows what God looks like.”

The girl thought about this for a heartbeat and looking up from her drawing replied, “Well, they will in a minute.”

Bauhaus... is a very, very, very, fine house ...

Walter Gropius, one of the founders of the Bauhaus (1918), admired the medieval guilds, “The Bauhatten,” that had created the great cathedrals in his native Germany. Gropius’s mission, and intent, was to create a cultural synthesis and reconciliation between the atelier, modern art, and the goals of the industrial revolution. His method was to develop a curriculum that was essentially a “foundation” program where students were expected to become visually literate through the study of drawing, design, color, and form. Essentially, this model’s approach to learning, and intent, was to solidify, and unify, art, craft, and technology. This is, as you know if you have experienced it, the traditional structure in most accredited art schools today and has been for nearly a century.

The problem with this Bauhausian design is that the majority of “good” art programs are dedicated to promoting *individualism* while simultaneously turning out students who have been forced to learn the majority of their required subjects in a repetitive, cookie-cutter, curriculum that is evaluated through standardized assessment. This is a significant disconnect.

The Industrial Revolution and Arts Education

Our present educational system of teaching the arts is predicated on assessment models and values established during the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. Nothing defined that revolution more than the assembly line... and the method of assessing a line's success was dependent on reaching specific levels of performance, volume, and generic consistency, from one object to the next, as it rolled through to the consumer and society. There was nothing subjective about it. If there were no inconsistencies, if the workers performed their tasks in the prescribed manner, the line could go faster. Without change, increasing the speed of the line meant greater production, which equated to employment for all, and greater profit for the machine. Each of these things were of great importance and because it worked in the factories, it seemed logical to apply it other areas of society.

Education was presented as a standardized package and the guaranteed path to employment, success, and a better life, as long as the line kept moving. The school was the factory, the children were the products, and they were assessed by assigning grades indicating success, failure, or an in-between, at defined intervals. If the product failed, it meant a failure to meet the standard and a return to the beginning of the line to be made again.

It was a fairly simple task to assess and quantify success in mathematics, science, English, and the like, where learning through repetition was the norm. However, assembly line rote was the paradigm and when it came to subjects involving the creative process, and

imagination, there was a problem. Grades still had to be given but because you could not successfully mandate competency levels of creativity another significant disconnect occurred. Like assessing an obese child in a gym class rope-climbing test, the standards for competency were based on things that the school could not influence.

One additional glitch in the system was that the industrial model mandated a connection between the education of the child and that child's eventual ability to be employable. The theory was that a literate and productive work force would make the line move faster and better and that all in society would benefit. Unfortunately, it was clear that there were not a lot of artists, musicians, writers, or dancers making a living in art factories. Because of this, it was assumed that these subjects couldn't be important if immediate employment and success were not available to all. Whoever heard of someone working hard and becoming vice president of art?

But you can't argue with success and you couldn't stop the line. We became so efficient at getting everyone into higher education that we have determined – in the same way that Susan Sontag reasoned that photographs had become meaningless due to their sheer numbers – that the high school diploma, and undergraduate degree, are of diminished value simply because everyone had one. I'm going to try and close the circle now.

Mirrors and Windows

Many years ago I was sitting in a lecture hall at Wellesley College listening to John Szarkowski; then curator and Photography Tsar of The

Museum of Modern Art. He spoke of the valuelessness of photographs and how there were now more of them in the world than bricks. This lecture paralleled with Szarkowski's opinion that there were two types of photographers in the world and they were represented by the metaphors of *windows* and *mirrors*.

The "mirrors" took images that were, for better or worse, describing their personal sensibilities and this was the meaning and intent of their photographs. They were their own context. The "windows" photographers made pictures that described information. Their images documented facts as well as commenting on the "system" of making photographs.

Robert Hughes (read everything by him you can find) wrote, in a 1978 Time essay, *"Everything that happened, one might suppose, happened before a camera; there has never been anything like the sheer bulk of visual documentation left as the residue of a popular-photography culture. People and events seem ghostly unless they have been verified by a camera. Wars, elections, riots, disasters, communal ecstasies, the speeches of politicians and their deaths—all are eaten up by the omnivorous lens, as photography (through journalism) defines the terms of our fictitious intimacy with the world. This intimacy means a ravenous consumption, rather than contemplation, of images."*

In 1978, Szarkowski cynically insisted that that most issues of importance cannot be photographed. This may be compatible with Salman Rushdie's sentiment from *Midnight's Children*, *"Most of what matters in*

your life takes place in your absence." From his windows vantage, that perception was not a surprise.

We are presently swimming in the sea of digital photography, where everyone makes, from a 19th century critical perspective, "good" pictures. If Hughes was concerned about volume leading to ravenous consumption rather than contemplation, and Szarkowski was cynically insisting that issues of importance in life cannot be photographed, then the sheer volume of digitally made images, fueled by the inexpensive, reusable, and easily edited archiving system ... is an issue destined to grow larger. It seems that the choices are more clarified than ever.

The long running show of silver- based gelatin films and paper is coming to an end. It will probably be designated an official alternative process in the next few years. The people who loved photography for it's accidents, expression, and unpredictability are moving in droves to alternative process image making. This transition is not at all unlike the artistic tsunami that swept through the contemporary painting world in the late '50s and early '60s and it is healthy for the genre. I saw these changes coming a few decades ago when I first began offering alternative processes classes at Harvard. Many of those former students, like Dan Estabrook, are in this book and have made a life for themselves in the medium. It is clear to me that photography is now a part of every visual discipline in some way or other and if it is to have a place of its own that place may be the realm of handmade photosensitive imagery.

The Future of Photography is in its Past

Visual literacy is the capacity to interpret, associate, and communicate signs, symbols, codes, and marks. We can assume that a visually literate person will be able to draw upon a knowledge base that includes art history, criticism, and semiotics. Here's the rub... for a contemporary digital photographer, the history, criticism and semiotics of the medium are in perfect harmony with the windows definition ushered into our language by Szarkowski. In fact, they were made for one another; a marriage of Donald Norman's "*information appliance*" and Szarkowski's *windows* where the image is as much about the information as it is about the system of delivering the content.

From the mirrors perspective, visual literacy embodies the *light – marking ... the photo – graphis*. In alternative process printmaking, the hand and the eye are equal partners in the art and crafting of the image. The print itself is a sign, a symbol, and a mark ... perhaps even a metaphor for the process of making the print.

Obviously, there are no absolutes in this discussion. Creative issues arise in every form of expression. I know many digital artists who are deeply involved in their art and the very relevant issues of visual literacy that can be explored quite well within their discipline. In fact, the addition of digital technology to the Bauhaus recipe would, I think, be an ingredient that Gropius would have greatly approved of.

That said, I nonetheless believe the future of photography is in its past. Contemporary alternative process artists are, as Lyle Rexer coined

well, the antiquarian avant-garde. France Scully Osterman and her husband, Mark Osterman, call this approach to photography “photo-humanism” and those who embrace it “photo-humanists.” It’s all about the human reference in both the *vision* and *crafting* of photographic imagery. The light-marking art they produce, and how they define their creative process, is flourishing as a language without compromise, or conditions ... or one that is tied to a syntax-dependent feast (as perfect as it is) of 1’s and 0’s that is only a solar flare away from erasing it’s history.