

Photography's Dualistic Controversies

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Is photography documentation or art? Self-expression or communication? Reality or illusion? Photography is all of these and much more; but, most certainly, is not an 'either/or' dichotomy. At its best, photography is embodied in the "gassho" paradigm (not the gesture; but, the essence symbolized: that you cannot have a left without a right, a valley without a mountain; that all dualities and seeming dichotomies are part of a whole—a web). In photography, there are techniques, tools and opportunities to suit every taste.

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag observed, "The history of photography is punctuated by a series of dualistic controversies." A current list might include:

Film and Digital. Clearly, photography is not about what (kind of) camera you use. Digital capture is, now, universally accepted; although, not without controversy. An especially persistent notion: digital photographers can and will cheat; although there is little agreement on what constitutes 'cheating.' And, for example, not everyone accepts flatbed scans as photography.

Prints and Slides (or Where Does the Photographic Process End?) Before digital imaging there existed a slides versus prints controversy. At its heart, this controversy was over where/when the photographic process ends. Traditionally, for printers the creative process does not end with the click of the shutter as it typically does for slide photographers. Printers have long continued the photographic process in the darkroom. Today, that process more often continues in the "digital (electronic) darkroom" and so does the controversy.

Documentation and Art. Interesting subject matter alone is generally not as effective as a pretty picture. In his book, *Alberta*, Canadian photographer Daryl Benson observes, "The moment you take the leap of understanding to realize you are not photographing a subject but are photographing light is when you have control over the medium." It is with light that photographers 'write' their stories and give an image its impact.

Visible Light and Other Forms of Radiation. Photography is often poetically and correctly described as 'writing or drawing

with light.' Although 'photography' is an old word which could not have anticipated advances in technology, today, besides visible light, photography includes ultraviolet (UV), infrared, x-ray and even gamma ray imaging used by some space telescopes—all of which use photons (light).

Deliberation and Serendipity. To what extent a photographer needs to know (anything) about what (s)he is photographing in order to make a good image is more a matter of individual choice than settled wisdom. However, the obvious is generally conceded: knowing your subject and preparation are helpful—as are good luck and flexibility. In the words of photographer Tom Zsolt, "It is said great photographs are visualized in the mind and created in the heart, but in my experience, some come by chance."

Stereo and 'Flatties.' With binocular vision we actually see two 2-dimensional (width and height) images which are slightly offset; our brains convert these 2-dimensional images into scenes we perceive as having depth. Cameras record width and height images. It is possible to create the illusion of depth, most notably—but not solely—with, stereo imaging, stereo-grams and holograms.

Seeing and Feeling. Feeling or emotion is also a product of our brain's processes. Seeing and the reproduction of visible facts (what 'reality' looks like) is one aspect of photography; other photographers are much more interested in making images of what 'reality' *feels* like. What is important is you get the pictures you want.

Still Frames and Motion Films. Still frames provide an opportunity to narrowly focus/direct viewers' attention. Motion films generally tell a larger/more complex story. Think of the difference between a sentence and a book.

B&W, Monochrome and Color. Black & white is admired for its simplicity: bold, graphic and direct and is often used to reveal shape or form and to increase drama/expressive power. Color can be a distraction; but, used effectively it strengthens communication.

Communication and Self-expression. Self-expression is essentially self-directed and self-satisfying—a luxury generally reserved

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for amateurs; communication recognizes and reaches out to an audience—useful to all photographers and critical to commercial success.

Objective and Subjective. Photographs may reveal as much about the maker as the subject. Although it is not possible for a photograph to be literally accurate or objective (range of luminosity or contrast being just one of the obvious differences), early photographs were valued for their relative accuracy and objectivity. Many photographers still emphasize reality in their images; but, we now know photography can be as subjective as any medium.

Subject Matter and Photographic Possibilities. Every photograph requires a subject and tells a story. Still, the subject can be abstracted to the point where, to quote Roger Ebert, who was referring to filmmaking, “It is not about what it is about.” Sometimes, composition which imposes a human sense of order on natural observations is inappropriate.

Realistic and Creative. (Reality, Illusion of Reality and Illusion) Unlike other art forms, a photographic image always begins with a subject from reality; in *Portraits of Earth* Freeman Patterson states, “The creative

process of making photographs does not begin in the imagination—but in observing the world around us.” It is never purely imaginary.

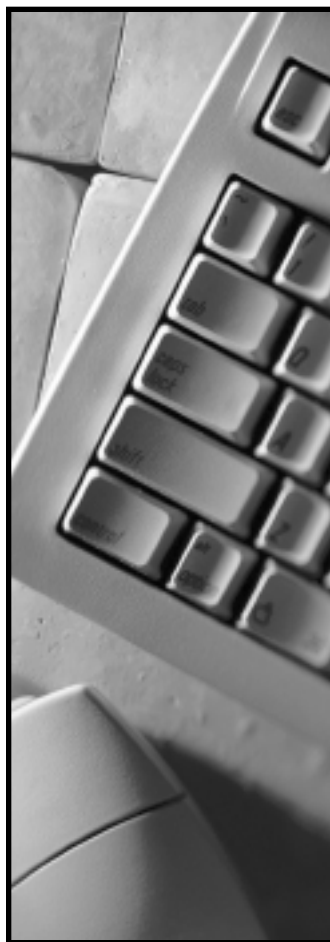
Jacob ‘Jake’ Mosser III, FPSA, EPSA, puts it this way, “Literal truth and cunning illusion.” Because photographs are so often perceived as truthful or ‘real,’ photographers may have a special ethical obligation to self-disclose alterations/manipulations.

When is a photograph not a photograph? Even when an image originates as a photograph, through manipulation—as with various image editing software—a point can be reached where photographic content no longer predominates: yielding what photographic artist Gene Nocon whimsically calls “fauxtographs.”

Conclusion. Photographers are as unique as fingerprints; yet, they share a fascination with the storytelling power of typically three-dimensional (height, width and time) visual images drawn from reality using radiated energy on sensitive material. Through the community of the Photographic Society of America (PSA) and its member-clubs you, too, can share the fun of discovering photography’s opportunities. There is room in the tent for everyone: gassho! ☺



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2006 PSA Camera Club Committee International Website Contest

Conditions of Entry: Any PSA Chapter, Club or Council currently maintaining an Internet Website and signifying its intent to participate in this contest, is eligible, provided the PSA dues are current to June 30, 2006.

Entry: Chapters, Clubs and Councils must indicate their desire to enter this contest by completing and submitting the form found at the following link:
<http://www.psa-photo.org/cccwpc04.htm>

Entries: Earliest date to submit entry is April 1, 2006, and the deadline is June 30, 2006. Note that this contest is not for the websites of individuals or personal websites, but only for recognized Chapters, Clubs and Councils. Entrants must include their membership number as indicated on the form.

Judging and Rating: Experienced webmasters will judge entries. The judges will review each entry and rate it for its total presentation, content, layout, good use of space, neatness, choice of typefaces, use of color, ease of use, ease of reading, use of links, and general overall design and style.

Divisions: There will be two divisions, Division (A) – websites not professionally designed and maintained. Division (B) – websites professionally designed and maintained where a fee is paid for this service.

Fees: There is no fee for PSA member Chapters, Clubs and Councils participating in this contest.

Awards: The awards will be a First, Second, and Third Place in each division; Honorable Mentions will be determined by the number of entrants in each division. If there are less than three entrants in Division B, it will be judged along with Division A. Presentation of these awards will be made at the 2006 PSA Conference of Photography in Maryland.

For additional information please contact PSA International Website Contest Director, Janet Bigalke: cccwpc@psa-photo.org.