



## Teaching about Photography: Selectivity, Instantaneity, and Credibility

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*Art Education*, Vol. 39, No. 3. (May, 1986), pp. 12-15.

Stable URL:

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*Art Education* is currently published by National Art Education Association.

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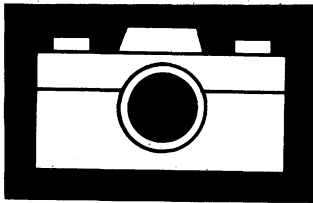
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# Teaching About Photography:

Terry Barrett

**T**his is the first of three articles about photography. The premise is that photography is a different kind of picture-making than drawing and painting and that its differences ought to be highlighted so that photography can be appreciated for what it uniquely offers to our experience of pictures. The articles are toward teaching about photography so that understanding and appreciation of the medium results in more thought and enlightened talk about photographs. Although photographs certainly share commonalities with other pictures, the emphasis here is on how they differ. To point out how photography is different, three unique characteristics of the medium are identified and explained as *selectivity*, *instantaneity*, and *credibility*.

## Selectivity

Certainly painters select both subject matter and manner of presentation, as do photographers, though different kinds of selection are involved. Painting is additive, and photography is subtractive. Painters begin with blank canvases, whereas photographers' viewfinders are never empty given any amount of light. Painters add to the blank canvas and perceive emerging forms as they paint, adding imagery to imagery, mark to mark, stroke to stroke, brushing paint on top of paint. Photographers, however, are essentially engaged in a subtractive process, one of taking away or distilling. They select from the entire universe available to them, choosing a broad or narrow field, from very close to very far, and make an exposure that results in a single instant of time from a single point of view. The camera's viewfinder is always filled with visual information or stuff of the world. The photographer moves the camera, the subject matter in front of the camera, or both, until the viewfinder is appropriately filled and visual clutter has been satisfactorily distilled. This manner of working is different in kind than the manner of adding paint to a blank surface.

***In this article . . . Barrett shares one of three of his ways of looking at, and responding to, photographs (look for the other two articles in the July and September issues). "Just because photographs are highly selected images . . . photographs are always out of context."***

Photographers are also more selective in degree than painters. In the course of their respective careers, photographers make many more pictures than painters and make many more pictures than they ever present publicly. While analyzing a photograph made by Russell Lee, Szarkowski (1973) imaginatively reconstructs and lists several pictorial options available to Lee even after he had already selected his subject, site, and equipment:

The simplicity of photography lies in the fact that it is very easy to make a picture. The staggering complexity of it lies in the fact that a thousand other pictures of the same subject would have been equally easy. (p. 134)

Painters have thousands of pictures that could potentially be painted, but would find it difficult to actualize these thousands of potential pictures. Because of the ease of photographic picture-making, many photographers

do make up to thousands of pictures of the same subject, only selecting afterwards the ones they deem acceptable. Sports photographers, for instance, use a motorized film advance to shoot literally thousands of frames of the same subject. Afterwards, they select from those thousands and give some to a picture editor, who selects perhaps one, two, or three for publication.

Art photographers make similar choices on their own or in conjunction with exhibition curators. Discussing his process of selecting recent work for an exhibition, Nathan Farb (1980 in Lusttrum) comments:

Then there are the stages of making the rough cut and then the final smooth edit, terms which are much more frequently used in film. Simply put, that means taking two hundred pictures out of two thousand and trying to make them say what the two thousand did and then bringing it down to a final eighty or ninety. (p. 34)

Although making pictures with a camera is easy, making good photographs is not. The photographer's problem of making a conceptually or aesthetically coherent image is more difficult than it might seem when one considers that the camera impartially records whatever falls within its view. The photographer's problem is one of selecting the significant from the insignificant and making that choice apparent in the picture.

## Instantaneity

Photographs are instantaneous in several different ways. They are made instantly, and what photographs show, they show as if it were an instant. They also show only that instant during which they were made. Photographs are always made in and of a particular, discrete, measured, and measurable instant of time, usually one that is very short. What they picture has existed in time. In all of these ways photographs are different than drawings or paintings, and our experiences of them are different.

# Selectivity, Instantaneity, and Credibility



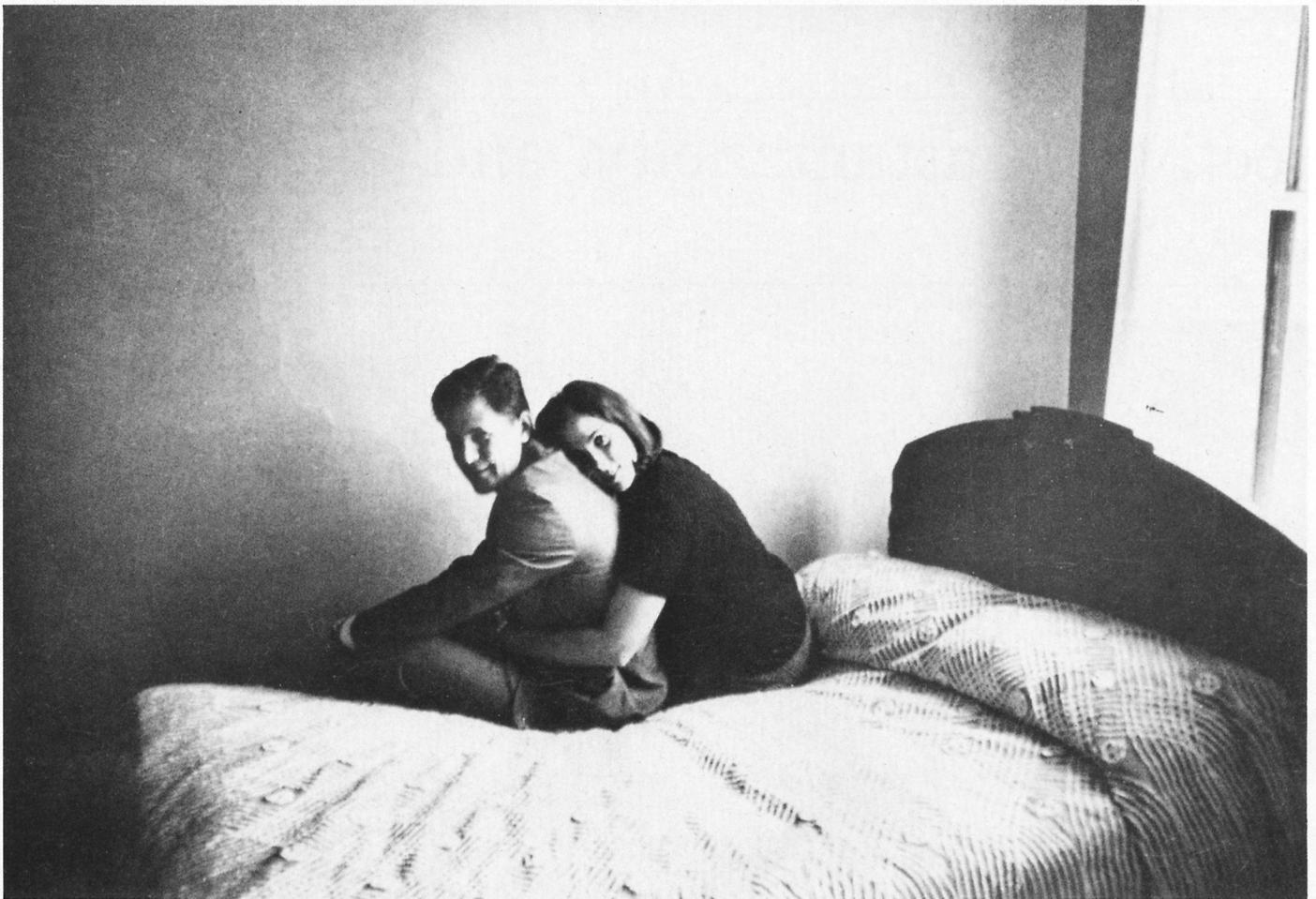
"Dali Atomicus" by Philippe Halsman, 1948. A portrait of Salvador Dalí which dramatically utilizes the "instantaneity" of photography for expressive purposes.

Our sense of astonishment at the quickness of achieving a realistic picture in seconds has been renewed by watching a Polaroid color print develop before our eyes. Arago (1839) said "the rapidity of the method has probably astonished the public more than anything else," particularly when photography's speed is coupled with its "unimaginable precision" (p. 12). More recently, Callahan associated the speed of making photographs with its

*raison d'être*: "It seemed absolutely anti-photography to me to go in the darkroom take an hour to make one print, just to see what it looked like . . . if you're gonna take that long, maybe you could've drawn it" (in Stein, 1980, p. 6). Callahan and other master photographers may well take an hour to make a finished exhibition print, but not "just to see what it looked like." One of the unique characteristics of photography is that

one can get a stylistically realistic picture in seconds, study it, and modify it until it is considered finished. Modifying the print is also quick compared to drawing or painting. Inserting filters in the enlarger can instantly alter complete tonal ranges or color palettes. A painter would have to redo an entire canvas to achieve such variation.

Photographs stop action and reveal their moving subjects as instants. Sometimes this is dramatic and the



*"This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon when things were still good between us, and she embraced me and we were so happy. It did happen. She did love me. Look, see for yourself!"*

'This Photograph Is My Proof' by Duane Michals, 1974. With his image and text, Michals mocks our photographic gullibility.

point of the picture as when physicist Edgerton photographically stopped a rifle bullet in mid-air as it traveled at twelve hundred feet per second, tearing through and shredding three balloons (Time-Life, 1970, pp. 34-35). Grenewalt, using an exposure of one thirty thousandth of a second, has photographically stopped a hummingbird's wings beating at eighty times a second (Time-Life, 1970, p. 33). Cartier-Bresson, identified with "the decisive moment" when all elements coalesce in an aesthetically charged arrangement, is eminently aware of time: "the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude . . . you must be on the alert with the brain, the eye, the heart; and have a suppleness of body" (in Lyons, 1966, p. 42). Photographers, such as Ansel Adams and Elliot Porter, who work with the virtually still subject matter of landscape, are also extremely aware of time in making their pictures: "never put off taking the picture . . . nothing is stationary. Nothing is permanent. Every-

thing is changing" (Porter, 1973, in Scholastic, p. 10).

Photographers, despite careful planning and "pre-visualization" (White, 1968), are often surprised by their pictures, due to the photograph's link with time, in ways that painters are not. Painters see what they paint though photographers frequently do not. Sometimes this is due to the speed and complexity of the photographer's subject matter, and sometimes it is because of equipment; with all but twin-lens cameras the view through the camera is blocked during exposure.

Painters paint and paint over, seeing and evaluating forms as they emerge and relate to other forms on the canvas. Photographers, however, must learn to see the world as if it were made up of instants. Photographers must see objects, often as they are moving or interacting with other objects, how objects will be transformed into two-dimensional forms, how colors of objects will be rendered in grays, or how colors will be rendered in color film

and print materials. Unlike painters who perceive emerging forms relating to other forms as they paint quickly or slowly, over days, months, or years, photographers must acquire the ability to perceive all that is happening through the viewfinder as a would-be instant in an instant. It is not only the interaction of visual forms that must be perceived, but the implications of those interactions also must be perceived and evaluated in terms of expression and meaning (Barrett & Linehan, 1977).

#### **Credibility**

People believe photographs, whether for better or worse, and whether with or without proper justification. That is, when viewing photographs people generally tend to grant to photographs more credence than they would to paintings, drawings, prints, or sculptures. In experiencing photographs, viewers blur distinctions between subject matter and pictures of subject matter and tend to accept photographs as reality recorded by a machine. In or-

dinary language, I am likely to pull out of my wallet a school photograph of my son and say "This is Jesse;" whereas if I were to show a painting or a sketch of him I would be more likely to say something like "This is a picture of Jesse drawn by Tom." In the second case, the original declaration is rather automatically qualified by "picture of" and "drawn by." In casual interactions with photographs, we rarely give these qualifications though we routinely offer them in casual interactions with other kinds of pictures.

Photography is an invented form of picture making. Its precedents were the customs, concerns, and conventions of painters. But the conventions borrowed from painters by the inventors who fashioned the first cameras, the conventions with which photographers work, and the determinations photographers make in taking their pictures are all deemphasized in favor of seeing the photograph as a transparent and natural reflection of reality made by a machine. The photographic image is accepted as nature as well as natural.

Goodman (1976) and Gombrich (1960, 1980) help us to understand how pictures come to be seen as realistic and natural rather than as complex, coded, notational systems invented by artists. Realistic looking representations are less natural and more conventional than we usually take them to be. Artists experiment with and develop systems for picturing, and viewers decipher their pictures by means with which they have become comfortable. Through familiarity that comes with repeated exposure to pictures using a set of conventions that operate in any given culture, members of that culture so internalize the conventions that they no longer recognize them but take the conventional representations to be natural.

Photographs utilize many conventions of realistic painting and drawing, and photographers have refined many of their own. Snyder (1980; Snyder & Walsh, 1975) points out that we have come to believe that the camera gives us privileged access to the world. This is partly because of our ignorance of historical developments in the invention and refinement of the camera, most importantly, that the camera was designed and refined to meet the conventional rather than natural pictorial standards set by Renaissance artists.

Photographs share in the convincing construction of Western pictorial realism that leads us to believe that renderings in perspective are pictorially equivalent to what we see.

But photographs are significantly different than paintings and drawings. A painter can paint a man that never existed, and a writer can describe a place that never was, but when faced with a photograph of a man or a scene, we know that what we see, however it may have been modified or manipulated, has actually existed. This is because of the casual interaction of light reflected from objects and the light sensitive materials of photographs. Barthes (1981), for one, is so impressed with this difference that he names the essence of photography "that has been" (p. 77). What a photograph pictorially contains is not an *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers, as in painting or language, but "the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (p. 76).

Because photographs are generally very realistic and because they do have an optical and chemical causal relation to the things they picture, they easily become transparent. We tend to see through them to what is pictured and forget the artistry employed in their making and the subjectivity of their makers; we grant photographs more credibility than they perhaps deserve. The photograph enjoys a halo of credibility that is a psychological condition which influences our experience of photographs. The cultural credibility of the photograph is neither categorically good nor bad: it is, rather, a very interesting given that ought to be cause of wonder, interpretation, and evaluation.

### Conclusion

The major point is that photography is significantly different than other pictorial media, and this leads to some immediate conclusions and implications. One is that if, in teaching about art, we conflate photographs and paintings rather than mark their distinctions, we lose some of the richness of each and risk misunderstanding both. By being unaware of the photographicness of the photograph, we also lose the unique understanding and aesthetic enjoyment the photograph can yield. Other major conclusions and implica-

tions will be explored in Parts II and III. Just because photographs are highly selected images and discrete instants snapped from the flux of time, photographs are always out of context. Part II examines contexts in relation to understanding photographs. Because photographs tend to be seen transparently as natural objects rather than as the visual expressions of individuals, Part III offers an interpretive schemata to aid viewers in deciphering the various functions for which photographs are made and for which they are used. Parts II and III will appear in the following two issues of *Art Education*. ■

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