

I'm a senior lecturer in photographic arts and some of my students really don't "like" art imagery whether it is historic or contemporary.

That doesn't mean that they have no taste or style or opinion.

It is usually because they have only just become familiar with what can be very unusual images.

The emotion, atmosphere, ambience, narrative, composition, statement and substance of an image may be so unfamiliar that our response is often bland, dismissive or rejecting.

The reason we may have a dismissive response could be that we have no internal language or paradigm with which to respond or communicate with and question the image.

It can take a little while, looking at, and discussing a range of artists'/photographers' work to build a background of familiarity, understanding, language and emotional links with which to assess, compare, analyse and discuss imagery which is new to us.

It can be an education or just an exercise in curiosity.

It can be a very enjoyable journey.

### **My background in Art**

Immediately post war my father managed to work in a brickyard digging 20 tons of clay a week for just £4.

We were poor and lived in a condemned house with a 'hole in the ground' latrine at the end of a 75 metre 'garden'. It was tough but laid the foundations of the idea that it can only get better.

I grew up believing I could improve myself and I had that fortunate internal dialogue of wanting to succeed.

My parents were liberal and somewhat permissive and saw the benefit of allowing me to pursue my dream of a career in the arts – I was top of the school in art – so I went to art college at the age of sixteen.

I've worked in the arts in some form or another ever since and I am lucky to be familiar with art of all kinds.

### **Discovery**

However, I can remember when I found art a very empty and frustrating experience.

When looking at abstract or modern art and photographs I had no tools with which to engage.

I remember going around an exhibition by the artist Paul Klee in London on a college trip.

I had never seen anything like it before and I couldn't see anything in it, and nor could any of my classmates.

His work just looked like a child's doodles.

On the same trip, in 1964, we were taken to the Tate where the '54 – '64 exhibition of contemporary British and American art was getting rave reviews.

This was what piqued my interest.

There was a lot of it. All very different, new, abstract and conceptual.

Even though I could barely find a word to say why it intrigued me I had a thought that even though I didn't *get* this stuff, it would appear that a great many people found it exciting, interesting and worthwhile.

In my mid-teens I didn't even know what 'intuition' meant when my teachers told me to use it.

With a little encouragement from some very inspirational tutors it didn't take too long for me to drop my pre-judgements and broaden my capacity to look at imagery without forming opinions.

Familiarity with the changing schools, cliques and styles in art allowed the process of expanding my visual education.

Paul Klee is a fascinating artist and I would have missed the delights of his work if I hadn't given it a second chance.

I found the same thing listening to classical music and jazz, design and literature.

I knew there must be something in it as millions of people enjoyed it.

I just didn't know what it was.

Abstract art was the same. I determined to stick with it as I thought it must be worth it even if I couldn't "understand" it.

Fake it till you make it - so to speak.

After a while I realised that the "understanding" of art or jazz or classical music is often a 'booby prize,' an attempt at an intellectual explanation for something which is often outside the realm of understanding and only a small part of a comprehensive view of art.

A real essence doesn't necessarily come from understanding or needing an emotional response to everything.

In fact, even with all our research and progress we don't really have answers to what is quality, beauty, art, reality or life and consciousness.

Plenty of philosophers have spent lifetimes trying to define those questions.

The feelings which we label as good and bad, "like" or "dislike", understanding or not understanding, often only refer back to our previous experiences which were similar to the feelings, the emotions and responses we experienced when viewing or listening to art, music or literature in the past.

Some of our feelings and emotions are referring right back to our survival instincts\*, our comfort zones or childhood "feel good" factors. The warm feelings we get when it all goes right, or the upset and disappointed feelings we have when things go wrong are often automatic responses and we need a conscious effort to think differently and to choose a more open mind.

(\*Positive or negative aspects of our overall survival strategy - survival

in this sense also meaning survival of our spirit or ego as well as our being and body).

**An example:**

The portraiture of the Taylor Wessing Portrait Awards can give some insight. (These portraits are sometimes very neutral or very unlike traditional portraits. Viewers sometimes have difficulty in eliciting any response to the images and define the photographs in terms of “I like that” or “I don't like that” or “It doesn't do anything for me” “I don't see the point”).

The flat lighting of some of the portraits allows the viewer to really see the people in very raw detail.

Something we rarely do. We don't sit and stare at people normally.

The raw lighting also removes the possibility of emotions or narratives being formed from the lighting itself such as warmth, softness, harshness, coldness, romance or abjection.

In other cases the images provoke a narrative or emotional response.

The lack of a smile can also remove our empathy or sympathy with the model so we don't feel emotionally required to like or dislike the people.

The lack of background in some of the portraits has a similar effect in that we can't place the people in a class, a circumstance, an occupation, habitat or atmosphere.

The very fact that these attributes have been removed leaves us just with the person themselves.

It's possible that we know them all the more because of that.

A feeling that an image is bland is probably a good start.

Your interpretation of the portrait is now much more individual to you alone. The artist

is not trying to direct your feelings.

There is no requirement to like or dislike the portraits.

There are no emotional assessments to be made.

The reduction of emotions places the people in the portraits as clear members of the human race and we can guess their age and that they are European or African perhaps. Almost everything else would be what the viewer would bring to the picture.

And that may be a great deal or very little.

**So what is art and art photography?**

***A definition:***

It is the opposite to artless, being naive.

It is the encompassing word for “*artful*”,

ie. Clever, manipulative, shrewd, discerning, selective, cynical and questioning.

Art is many things.

As well as music, theatre and literature it is visual imagery in the form of sculpture,

painting, photography, film etc.

Seen by many as decoration, throughout history it has been one of art's primary functions.

A photograph is a representation. In art it often represents the object of desire. It can also represent the object of need.

As an adjunct to superstition - drawing a deer on the wall of the cave could produce the feast in the flesh and icons and sculptures can bring the deity closer to Earth. It is a glorification of religion, an offering, a worshipping an attempt to depict the undepictable.

Photographs are history, the substance of moments captured in time, memories or memorials. Portraits represent all that is left of people long gone.

For the artist and hence the viewer art and photography can be a therapy, a release of inner tensions, a representation of the inner self.

At different times art and photography are political, statements of supposed truth, metaphors for injustice, for revolution or demands.

Photographs can be a shocking way to present a life, a moment in a life, a moment in society, societal rights and wrongs.

Photographers and artists attempt to comment honestly on the human condition, to make a point and to make that point obscurely or overtly in an attempt to provoke thought and reaction.

The best photographs and artworks are original, unique and memorable.

Sometimes beautiful- why do we describe something as beautiful? Sometimes ugly - why do we describe things as ugly? These terms are only our perceptions inculcated through societal norms.

Photographs and artworks can be, but not often, sentimental.

Our club photography sometimes tends towards aspects of pictorialism and illustration which strike a sentimentalist note. In popular culture it is often kitsch - a parody of sentimentality or in dubious taste.

Photographs, like art, can be realistic, abstract, (what does abstract mean?\*), monumental, personal and evocative.

(\* Definition of "Abstract". Literally 'drawn out of' or 'taken from'. )

Generally, art particularly and photography frequently, can be for an audience.

In most cases the outcome is for the artist. For no-one except the artist. Fame or infamy in art are rarely sought by the artists and are brought about by critics and the public. There have been publicity seekers and self publicists and some of these do succeed in achieving fame.

Great photography and art has rarely been made for the viewer's opinion. In the case of music, film and theatre – there is a cost element and audience approval is more of a prerequisite, however many films and plays are made and performed without a profit motive.

### **What does it mean to me then, as a viewer?**

It means what you think it means, and that can change from day to day or as you become accustomed to different forms of art.

Artists don't necessarily put meaning into their work or expect the viewer to perceive it.

Experiencing the work is often all that is needed.

As with much art, a photographer may only begin to unravel the meaning in a work after it is finished and will leave the thoughts of the viewer to the viewer.

The artist rarely thinks about what a viewer may think of his / her work.

### **I know what I like. Why I like what I like. Is that why I like what I like?**

Probably more of what we "like" is based around what we perceive the rest of society deems likeable or acceptable than on our own unconscious pre-constructed experience.

We tend to follow modern fashions and are often unaware that what we like today was yesterday's abstract or conceptual art, unacceptable to a former society.

Likes and dislikes can tend to cut us off from a broader experience of life, and consequently, art.

*Labelling art as "good or bad" or "like or dislike" tends to miss the point.*

The point is to experience as much as possible in life and art based on a non-judgemental relationship with it. Not very easy but perhaps worth pursuing.

If something makes one feel good, then that's what it does. If it stirs other emotions or thoughts then that is what is happening.

All these experiences can add up to a broader enjoyment of art in all its forms, abstract, bland, emotive, shocking and sentimental, as well as "It doesn't do anything for me" - of course.

*In essence "It" wasn't made to "do" anything for you.*

It is there for you to experience if you wish to.

### **You mean I don't have to like it?**

No one says you have to like it.

In fact if you like it you may not be getting the whole picture.

Familiarity with art and photography in all its various forms starts to allow inner thoughts and feelings which allow more of an empathy with challenging imagery.

This shouldn't be confused with "liking it".

We've all heard (or said) "my nipper could have done that", or, "a monkey could have done that" when looking at an incomprehensible series of splashes and daubs.

There is a riposte to this. "Yes, probably he/she could, but this time it was the artist who did it.

### **It's just another entertainment no matter how serious it seems.**

In the end it's another entertainment even though it may all appear to be serious.

Football is a game - which is taken seriously. So is Tennis.

No one *needs* music- but can you imagine being without it?

Much TV is serious but it's still entertainment.

Deep thinking literature searches the souls of men but we don't need it and it is taken seriously even though it is just entertainment.

We call it culture when we think entertainment is serious.

### **Getting to know other genres of photography and experiencing art beyond the confines of likeability can allow us to start educating our visual catalogue and discover the pleasures to be found in art photography.**

The more you see and experience, the more you grow familiar with its ways and means, just like getting to grips with anything worth having or doing.

Music develops in us from simple folk songs and pop songs, to classics and jazz if we listen enough and want to listen to a broader range.

Photography is the same, it doesn't take long to build a visual language the same as one might pick up a verbal language when one spends time in a country.

Spending time around art and photography without the like/dislike, good/bad judgements frees us to be open to new experiences.

The alternative is that photographic art simply continues to be purely wall decoration and not the vast wealth of experience which it makes available to us.

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