

Thinking About Photographs

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Terry Barrett teaches media and related courses in the Department of Art Education. He has written articles about photographic education and is especially interested in photographic criticism. Barrett is also an exhibiting photographer.

The mode of visual expression called photography represents a wide area of human endeavor. There are millions of extant photographs made by thousands of photographers for a multitude of purposes. These images are displayed daily in newspapers, magazines, books, on billboards, and on walls of galleries and museums. In the art world, photography is currently enjoying more respectability than at any time in its history. As an art educator I am interested in increasing understanding and enjoyment of these photographs through criticism of them—a criticism that is primarily interpretive rather than evaluative.

Photographs are too often confused with what they depict. Distinctions between subject matter and a picture of subject matter frequently are not made, with the photograph being accepted as reality rather than as a photographer's point of view. Photographs are not people, places, or events but are flat pieces of paper covered with tiny particles of silver. But from its inception, photography has been priced as an accurate and reliable transcription of real world people and places, and today, both electronic and print news media use the camera to witness events, asserting that the photographs or footage is just how it happened, reinforcing an unquestioned credibility about photography.

The photograph does have a unique bond with the physical world: The world of objects is a literal content of photographs. All photographs, no matter how ephemeral their themes, are inevitably linked to a specific time and space in the world since the photograph depends on light reflecting from objects to light sensitive materials. But these factors contribute to a view of the photograph that is overly mechanistic, causing us to forget that photographs are not made by

cameras alone. We need to put the maker back into the picture. Photographs by Lee Freidlander incorporating his shadow or reflection in his pictures make this point visually.

When a photographer such as Jerry Uelsmann obviously manipulates his work through multiple exposures, or when a photographer such as Duane Michals overtly employs costumed models in designed sets, there is no problem in seeing the artist's input, control, and unique sensibility. Their pictures have the look and feel of art. But in more seemingly straightforward and direct work that utilizes strikingly beautiful nature as subject matter, such as that of Ansel Adams, the task of distinguishing between the photograph and the initial reality becomes more difficult. Likewise with the photographs of circus freaks, nudists, and the insane by Diane Arbus, we tend to limit our concerns to the individuals depicted, justifiably wondering about their life styles, thoughts, motivations, and so forth, and we tend to forget about the artistry employed that has gotten us involved in the first place. These are not people on the streets we are wondering about, they are pictures made by Diane Arbus, and had she not made them in the way she did we would not be wondering about them at all.

The visible universe is available to the photographer. Using commonly available lenses, the close-up and the telephoto, the photographer can choose to focus from inches to miles. The camera can go anywhere man goes; under water, into outer space, to the Viet Nam jungles, into the bedroom, and behind bars. Adapting the camera to a microscope or a telescope, worlds closed to the unaided eye also become visible. Subject matter is everywhere. Nor are photographs made by cameras alone: they are still and silent visual

