

## PHOTO CLICHÉS

Some years ago there was a conference of the Society of Photographic Education. During that conference there was a panel of New York gallery directors, including the infamous Ivan Karp from OK Harris in Soho.

Someone posed a question, "How do you deal with looking at so many portfolios?" Karp was quick to reply. "I have a list of photo clichés in my desk. I open each portfolio and compare the top photo with my list. If there is a match, I close the portfolio and go on to the next."

He then began to recite the photo clichés on his list.

- no pictures of the expressive hands of old people,
  - no pictures of the gnarled roots of mighty trees,
  - no dramatic sunsets,
  - no drooling babies,
  - no cute, cuddly pets,
  - no self-portraits in rear-view mirrors,
  - no pictures of cemeteries with or without dancing nymphets,
  - no pictures of motorcycles boys with or without pierced nipples",
- and he went on, to a riotous response of laughs and applause.

When I first started teaching in Bucks County I got lots of picturesque photos of barns and covered bridges, so I added the rule of:

- no pictures of barns or covered bridges.

Then I came to teach at Temple University, an urban campus. The first new rules that were added were:

- no pictures on TU campus
- no pictures that could immediately be identified as typical student photos, including snapshots of roommates and drinking buddies anyone 'hamming it up for the camera' falls into this category
- no pictures that look like they could have been shot at the family or company barbeque [aka snapshots]

These expanded to include the urban postcard set:

- no pictures of City Hall (or any landmark building)
- no pictures of the Love Sculpture (or any pictures of sculpture, someone has already made the image)
- no pictures of City Hall through the O of the Love Sculpture
- no pictures of City Hall through the O of the Love Sculpture reflected in a puddle.

This is basically a way of saying

- no pictures that look like anything that might appear on a picture postcard.
- no pictures that look like snapshots  
(these depend on personal knowledge of the people or places in the photos)

You can double-check your photographs by comparing them with what can be found on the site FLICKR. [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

## PHOTO CLICHÉS, cont'd.

The other types of photos that seem to have been used up by the commercial world are the following:

- no pictures of musicians every record album shot is trying to look like art
- no pictures of dancers Dance Magazine is full of photos trying to look like art
- no pictures of kids on skateboards or bikes  
like everything seen in bike and skateboard magazines
- no pictures of animals of any kind they will just look like Nat Geo shots
- no pictures of graffiti someone has already made the image (like sculpture)
- no pictures in the subway either on trains or in stations
- no pictures of tattoos these are usually people are usually showing off

This is basically a way of saying

- no pictures that look like anything that might appear in a documentary.

These are photojournalism, which is neither better nor worse, just different from what we are engaged in here.

And finally

- no pictures that could be fashion ads

The bottom line here is that the motivation for making any of these pictures is to sell something, not to make any kind of personal statement. These photos cannot be art – they are commerce. ref : Sarah Moon

And if you say, “Why not?” an analogy might be bringing a Hip Hop track to a Jazz Improvisation class. Both are musical styles but the aesthetics of each are very different.

### MOTIVATION & INTENT

Sometimes it is not the appearance of the photograph that counts. Well, never, actually. It is the motivation of the photographer that is important. What is the photographer trying to share with you? What is the essence of the communication?

This does not have to be some profound statement. It may only be some small part of the world they are drawn to, and then wish to share with you. If you find this same content interesting, then there is some similarity between you and the photographer. This is called resonance.

For this to work, the artist must first be clear about what they are trying to communicate. If they are not clear about their content, how can anyone ever understand what they are trying to say? If the motivation behind the content is indiscernible, then there is no communication. If there is no communication then there is no art.

It can be so simple sometimes, that clarity can be the content! Other times it can be buried behind layers of personal meaning, and only the surface is clear. But still you can understand the depth of the feeling without knowing all the details. This is the emotional aspect of communication. EMOTIONAL discipline.

Still other times it can be some ideas about the content. Maybe the connection in a group of photos is the place or a series of events. This is an example of the conceptual aspect of photography. CONCEPTUAL discipline.

And even other times it can be the way a photo is made that can make it compelling. It could be some technical aspect of the craftsmanship. PHYSICAL discipline.

## CONTACT SHEET SYNDROME

Another measuring stick of progress in this class is how much time is invested in shooting for each critique. It says in the syllabus that part of your grade is based on “an ongoing effort to produce quality work”. If you come in with a collection photographs that were shot in one session, this demonstrates a lack of effort on the student’s part.

You cannot show a group of photographs that are that limited in range. It will look like a Contact Sheet. When you shoot, you are encouraged to shoot numerous shots of each subject, playing with the proximity and angle of view in an effort to get just the right framing and composition. But in the end you have to edit these down to select the single best photograph from each group of shots. This is called Creative Editing.

The photos can be of similar subjects but you must shoot regularly throughout the two or three week period between critiques to get a varied collection of shots. You cannot do two weeks worth of work in a couple of hours. You cannot ‘cram’ for this class. It is about evolution. You must shoot almost every day. Even if you think you have no to time to shot, then you should shoot on your way from one place to another.

You should have a consistent body of work of each critique. Within this, however, you should have diversity. The consistency should come automatically if you are aware of what you are drawn to and make a conscious effort to study your shots as you go, determining what works well and what does not, and continually refine the nature of your quest for what is meaningful to you, and how you can shoot it so that it can become meaningful to your audience. The diversity will come from shooting on a regular basis and continually expanding the scope of your visual investigations.