

## 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 the 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, and
- no pictures that could immediately be identified as typical student photos, including snapshots of roommates and drinking buddies.
- no hamming it up for the camera  
even posing makes it look contrived. Try to be candid. Just closing the eyes of your subject makes them automatically more sensuous, and no longer self-conscious. This is a useful tip for self-portraits; close your eyes or look away from the camera.
- no pictures that look like they could have been shot at the family or company barbecue aka Snapshots. Snapshots are the photos that everyone takes without thinking about them. This is the anthesis of what we are doing in this class. We want photos we have never seen before.
- no pictures at sporting events  
These too are like pictures of your friends or like travel pictures. There is nothing more boring than going to someone's house to watch slides of their recent trip.

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 sculpture)
- 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).

The thing about shooting buildings and sculpture is that someone else has already made the art. Shooting these things is appropriation. We are looking for original work. [John Lennon said, "There are no new ideas in the world. Only new arrangements of things."] And there are artists who's whole career is about appropriation.

There are other sites in Philadelphia that have shown up in too many shots.

- Girard Prison
- Boathouse Row

There are other types of photos that seem to have been used up by the commercial world that should be avoided, including 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 that are obviously at photo shoots, film sets, recording studios, etc.  
these may be while doing work for some other class.
- no pictures of kids on skateboards or bikes  
like everything we see in bike and skateboard magazines
- no pictures of animals of any kind  
they will just look like Nat Geo shots

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, which is subjective rather than objective.  
Documentary photography is by definition documenting something i.e. informing us. What we want are pictures that pose questions rather than provide information that does not require a query.

Art vs. Commerce

- 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. [Although there is no black or white in any of this.]

ref: Sarah Moon who shoots art photos, sometimes while shooting fashion assignments.

ref: Deborah Tuberville who made art photos into fashion shots, breaking down the barriers. She used many innovative techniques as well.

Graffiti

Do not shoot pictures of graffiti. There are magazines full of this. If the photos are just showing how the graffiti looks, it is more documentary than anything else. If graffiti shows up as the background where something else interesting is happening, then maybe that is cool.

Text

Don't use text that someone else has written as the main subject of your shot. Someone else has already made the art and you are just appropriating it. Make shots that are of your own creation.

## SMARTPHONE-SPECIFIC PHOTO CLICHES

Here are some specific Photo clichés that have come up in Smartphone Photo classes:

### Snapshots in general

- no selfies (the most obvious, with or without a selfie-stick)  
This means not hamming it up for the camera, Making snapshots are only relevant to you and your friends.
- food pictures  
Everybody seems to be compelled to take pictures of their meal to share to their friends, but no one really cares.

### Lights

- lights  
Finding great lighting is imperative, but taking pictures of lights themselves seems to come up too much.
- signs  
Don't take pictures of signs, especially those with clever wording. It is someone else's cleverness you are using, and is not original.
- lighted signs  
This is a combination of the previous two!

### Sunsets

- sunsets  
These are more postcard images. But the quality of light at sunset is amazing. Use that twilight to alter the emotional ambience of your scene without making the sunset itself the subject of the shot.
- fluffy clouds
- fluffy clouds at sunset

### Landscape (that can make really great photographs, but...)

- trees  
Mother Nature is already a great artist. If you want to take pictures of trees, they need to hone in on some special aspect of the scene. Get close.
- shadows
- shadows of trees
- shadows of trees created by sunsets  
Now I am teasing you, but you get the idea.

### Vintage Clichés

- family photos on the wall
- heirloom objects  
tabletop still life  
table top still lifes with toys or sci-fi figures
- vintage cars or abandoned rusting trucks (on farms)

### Cars

- get out of your car to shoot  
make a commitment to get the best shot possible
- avoid photos in the rear-view mirrors  
especially self portraits

## Filters

There are a whole slew of filters in Photoshop that should be avoided at all costs. In almost all cases the effect of a filter takes over the photo. The same goes for filters in the Smartphone apps. The general rule is, "If the effect is seen before the content, then it has been overdone." When any filter is applied it should be turned down so it is just on the edge of recognition. This usually makes the effect supportive rather than overbearing.

This is the case for Toning as well - there should be enough color to remove the photo from the world of dead black & white, making it warmer (or cooler) than normal, adding more emotion and feel, but it should be over the top or become pretentious.

HDR is another good example of a filter gone bad. It was designed to give you an extended tonal range. People have figured out, however, how to over-apply it to make 'dramatic' photos. These just look fake and photographically wrong.

## Tiny Planets

Please avoid using any variations on this new fad.

## VIEWING on a P-ANGLE

Please do not turn the camera on an angle. This is known as a P-Angle, *p* being for *pretentious*. Here's the story: You know when you go to a family picnic and your Uncle says, "Okay everybody, get together for a group picture", and then just before he snaps the shot he tilts the camera on an angle. This is because he knows, even subconsciously, that he is about to take that generic family snapshot that is inherently a boring photograph. Tilting the camera makes it look like you're trying to make an artsy photograph of something that is not all that interesting. [note: immediately shoot anyone who uses the term 'artsy' for they know nothing about art.]

Part of the aesthetic of shooting well-composed photographs is to frame the shot so it is obvious that the photo is being created by the photo-artist's individual point of view. This has been called 'constructed photographs'. This comes from considering the angle of view, the distance from the subject, and how things are lined up with the edges of the frame and with other things within the frame. One way to test this is to ask, "How does this photograph look different from what was seen when the shot was taken?" If it looks no different, then you are only capturing the appearance of the things in the photograph. What is far more interesting is your personal view of the things in the photograph.

note: also refer to the document 'Passive/ Active Shooting'.

## MOTIVATION & INTENT

Sometimes it is not the appearance of the photograph that counts. 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.

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 so limited in scope. 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 the evolution of ideas and refining your personal vision. You must shoot almost every day. Even if you think you have no time to shoot, 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 refining 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 range of your visual investigations.