

On Being an Artist and Photographer

by Eric Kim - 4/30/2015

As a photographer, you are also an artist. To me, art is creating meaning out of our everyday life experiences. Art is living life to the fullest. Art is dedicating your life to a journey of learning. Art is seeing the beauty in the mundane, and appreciating all of the small details of life.

I've just finished reading, researching, and writing on the book: "[Akademie x Lessons in Art + Life](#)" which is essentially art school in a book.

Lately I've been more inspired by books on "art"—rather than purely photography books. In this little e-book, I compiled some of my articles on art and photography. I hope you find some of these ideas helpful in your artistic journey.

Chapter 1: How to Succeed and Survive as an Artist and Photographer

One of the concepts I came across was from Sanford Biggers, currently an assistant professor of visual arts at Columbia. Below in his essay titled: "This is a marathon, not a sprint", he writes the importance of perseverance and work ethic in being an artist:

"To succeed and survive as an artist, one must develop serious perseverance, strength of character, an unshakable work ethic and confidence. Artistic trends, attitudes, and appreciation change frequently, so you must be able to see beyond the successes and failures you may experience."

Being an artist is one of the most difficult occupations you can choose in your life. But then again remember, you don't need to be a full-time artist to call yourself an artist. You can be a lawyer, a banker, or a schoolteacher, and simply do your art after-hours.

The 3 Traits of a Great Artist

Better-yet, treat your lifestyle as being an artist (and your job as something that just pays the bills). I don't think that making a living directly off your art makes you somehow a "better" artist or more "successful"

artist. The quality of your work is what matters the most at the end of the day, not how much money you make, how many awards you've won, or how many exhibitions you've hosted.

I want to explore some of the treats of a great artist in-detail below:

1. Perseverance

If we treat art (and life) as a marathon, not a sprint— we're going for distance and longevity, not just a short burst.

I think being an artist is like being an athlete. You can't expect to just work out once a month and expect to stay physically sharp and in-shape. You need to train everyday, always be mindful of what you're putting into your body, and make training a part of your lifestyle (rather than something you simply do on the side).

As an artist you need to find perseverance as well (just like an athlete). You need to train your visual muscles everyday, whether that means practicing your art, looking at other artists' work for inspiration, or being mindful of what kind of art you are consuming. You can't expect to just be really artistic one day, and hope that you will stay strong and sharp as an artist. Rather, you should treat your art as a "daily practice", and focus on small increments of progress.

Perhaps you can also think about the life of an artist as nutrition. You can't expect to simply do a one-week "diet" and stay healthy and fit for the rest of your life. Rather, you need to find out some sort of nutritional system and lifestyle that you can stick to for a lifetime.

As photographers, how can you persevere as an artist? How can you put in a small "daily practice" to stay sharp creatively?

Some ideas:

Shoot at least 1 photograph everyday

You don't need to dedicate an hour of shooting everyday. Not all of us have that kind of free time. Rather, I think by focusing on the smallest possible task (like shooting one photograph a day), it is easier to get into the rhythm of creating photographs everyday. It doesn't even need to be with your fancy camera, you can just use your iPhone.

Be mindful of what you eat

I think just as an athlete doesn't eat junk food (Cheetos, Doritos, deep-fried foods), an artist shouldn't eat junk food (random photos on Instagram, Flickr, and blogs). Rather, you should try to nourish your body with

healthy foods for your creativity. Try to consume amazing work from the masters, to buy photography books that inspire you, and to surround yourself with positive influences whom support you.

Find a creative circle

I find that having a creative circle of friends is absolutely essential to staying inspired as an artist. Just like going to the gym, it is often good to have a “gym buddy” who makes you accountable for constantly going to the gym on a regular basis. If you have other photographers who keep you inspired, they will keep you accountable for constantly creating new images, and to also help support you with recommendations with photography books, help editing your photos, and also perhaps to go out and shoot with.

2. Strength of character

I think it is important as an artist and photographer to have confidence in yourself, by being able to stick to your ideas and beliefs.

It takes a lot of courage to have a “strength of character” when it comes to defending our work and artistic vision. It is easy to fall into trends, where we are just copying what is popular and in vogue when it comes to photography.

In regards to street photography, sometimes shooting with a flash at a close proximity is popular (like Bruce Gilden), sometimes shooting color with multiple-layers is popular (Alex Webb), other times creating classic black and white photos of people jumping over puddles is popular (Henri Cartier-Bresson).

But what is your artistic vision, and voice? What kind of photography truly makes *you* happy and feel fulfilled?

Disregard the trends and how others shoot, publish, and share their work. Stay true to what feels right to you.

3. Unshakeable worth ethic

Lastly, having a strong work ethic is key.

One of the lessons I’ve learned about success is that if you link hard work and success, you are more likely to become “successful” than someone who thinks that talent is something that we are innately born with.

For example, if a child in school is constantly told that he/she is “smart”, they won’t work as hard or push themselves as hard as a child who is congratulated for being a “hard worker”.

At the end of the day, you need to put in the hard work to flourish and thrive creatively. But don’t treat this artistic and creative work as agricultural labor. You should absolutely love what you do. It should be hard in

the sense that it challenges you to the upmost of your creative abilities. You should reach a state of “flow” when you are creating your art, whether that is shooting in the streets, editing your work, reading, writing, or whatever.

Know that as an artist you have no limits. You have limitless potential. The limiting factor is always how much work and effort you put in.

Art for art’s sake

I feel the only true way to live as an artist is to produce art for art’s sake. Meaning— don’t create art to simply please others, do it to make yourself happy.

Sanford Biggers shares:

“Understanding where you are in relationship to other artists is useful; however, do not allow it to turn into envy or self-doubt. When I was beginning I was advised by a mentor: **‘Only be an artist for the love of art and the act of creation. Nothing else is promised.’** Accolades, fame and fortune may come and go, and that’s only if you’re lucky.”

No matter how famous, rich, or popular you become through your art, it will never satisfy you. Personally it was my dream to make a living from my photography, to teach and travel the world, and to gain a strong following. I have achieved all of those dreams, but honestly, it hasn’t made me deeply fulfilled. I still am frustrated, feel like I am lacking something in my life, and want to achieve more.

The time I am truly happy and fulfilled is when I am doing something creative and artistic. I feel supremely happy when I am researching (reading books), when I am writing (like this article now), when I am photographing and interacting with strangers on the streets, when I am teaching and empowering other photographers, or when I am engaged in a critique & editing session with other photographers.

Only do your photography and art for the love of it, and for the act of it.

Nothing else counts.

Closing thoughts

What do you ultimately want out of your photography and art? Is it for external recognition, is it for self-fulfillment, or something else?

Chapter 2: The Role of the Artist and Photographer

Another concept we need to consider is what is our role as an artist and photographer? Why do we create art? What is it for? We explore these ideas in this chapter.

To become a successful artist isn't a skill, it is a calling

I think one of the biggest things we need to consider when it comes to art and photography is that **our work should be a calling, rather than a chore or obligation.**

Meaning, you shouldn't feel obliged to go out and shoot everyday. Rather, you should feel called to go out and shoot everyday.

I think obsession and passion are things that you cannot teach. You are either born with a calling, or you aren't.

Other things in photography and art can be taught, like technique, approach, tips, and tricks.

But the question you always want to ask yourself is this: "Why do I photograph?"

If you don't have a reason or an impetus to shoot photography, why are you doing it?

For me, I photograph because it is what helps me better navigate the world. Photography helps me become more aware of my surroundings. Photography helps connect me to other strangers (especially when shooting street photography). Photography helps me live life more vividly, and helps push me outside of my comfort zone.

Don't think that you should shoot photography, or feel trapped to always be creative and shoot everyday.

Rather, **photography should be a "must" — that there is something deep within you in which you must make photographs,** or you will feel a part of you wither away.

We can't have a universal definition of beauty

Immanuel Kant wrote that it is impossible to have a universal definition of beauty, and I agree with this idea.

There is no universal way to define what makes a good or memorable photograph. As a viewer of a photograph, we always use our own subjective thoughts, experiences, and interpretations when looking at images.

Of course there are things like composition, framing, exposure— fundamental things that can help structure a photograph.

But whether a photograph is beautiful, powerful, or meaningful? This is something that is out of your control.

What can you do as a photographer?

Well, **you can use your heart to create images that feel beautiful to you.** You can never 100% control the opinions of others, but you know what kind of images make *you* happy.

At the end of the day, make photographs that stir emotions in you, and simply hope that others will relate.

Geniuses bend reality as much as it bends them

Another concept that Piero Golia shares:

[Kant] also wrote that genius has its own rules, and one cannot dictate these: **they bend reality as much as it bends them.**

I think as a photographer (especially as a street photographer), your job isn't to show reality as it is. Rather, **your job is to bend reality and to show your own subjective view of the world.**

Also know that when you're out shooting, the outside world influences and informs you greatly. You can learn a ton from the subjects you photograph.

When it comes to street photography, I love hearing stories, anecdotes, and having conversations with strangers in the streets. Whenever I make a "street portrait", it is a two-way collaboration. I interact with them and share my personal stories with them (who I am, how I got started in photography, and why I like to make photographs), and they tell me about their experiences. Together, we make images together— rather than me just taking their photograph and moving on.

So think in your photography: **how do you bend reality as you make images, and how does reality influence and bend you?**

Creating art is always a risk

“All courses of action are risky, so prudence is not in avoiding danger (it’s impossible).” - Niccolo Machiavelli

Whenever you go out and create art (aka make photographs), you always put yourself at risk.

You put yourself at risk by upsetting or pissing off your subjects, you put yourself at risk by upsetting or pissing off your viewers, you put yourself at risk by upsetting or pissing off yourself (by feeling like you “failed”).

However know that any creative work or endeavor involves risk. And I think it should involve risk.

Risk is what makes us feel on edge, risk is what makes us feel alive, risk is what helps push us outside of our comfort zone.

Nowadays when it comes to street photography, **I don’t take a photograph unless it scares me a bit.**

Whenever I see a scene that makes my heart pump, cold sweats to go down my back, and makes me feel nervous, I know that I must make that photograph.

Whenever I see a person who I want to photograph and might say “no” to me, I take a risk and ask them if I could make their photograph. I do so knowing that they may reject me. But it is better to get rejected than to never try at all.

So how are some other ways you can take more risks in your photography? How can you step outside of your comfort zone? Can you try shooting with a wider-angle lens? Can you try to get closer to your subjects? Can you try to purposefully get rejected from your subjects to build your confidence? Will you take the risk of uploading your images to the Internet to be judged (either in a positive or a negative way)?

Push yourself. Take those risks. You can never make meaningful art without avoiding danger.

The artist has a social duty of creating meaning but also delivering it in a memorable way

Probably one of the best quotes from Piero Golia is this:

“An artist is a choreographer of reality, constantly shifting boundaries, an individual who finds himself with a political investment and social duties, **making meaning but also delivering it in a memorable way.**”

I think as street photographers, we are always trying to construct meaning from our images. We see random situations, scenes, and people on the streets— and there is a reason *why* we decide to photograph certain scenes.

Sometimes we try to photograph beautiful moments. Sometimes we try to photograph suffering. Sometimes we try to photograph what we think is worth photographing (we want to show the significance of an event we might have witnessed).

So as a street photographer, **we are trying to combine meaning in a memorable way.**

How do we make a photograph more memorable?

We might make a photograph more memorable by capturing interesting facial expressions, hand gestures, body language, novel arrangements of subjects/objects, or capturing an interesting scene.

I think we shouldn't forget that as a street photographer, we have a **social duty**. We have a social duty to document reality that might have significance in the future. As a street photographer, we are also historians of our neighborhoods, our cities, and our country. Perhaps 100–200 years from now, our future generations may look at our images and marvel at what the world “used to” look like.

You also want your photographs to affect your viewer— to stir something in them. Perhaps you want your photographs to spark a certain memory in your viewer, or you want your photographs to evoke some sort of emotional response from your viewer.

Know that everyone has a “**social relationship**” to images. Images can never exist in a vacuum— there needs to always be an interpretation from the viewer based on the society he/she grew up in.

Transform your viewer into a “witness”

The last concept I want to share is on transforming your viewer into a “witness”, as Piero Golia shares below:

First of all, you need to create art that shares your personal experience, which helps build a narrative for your viewer:

“You don’t necessarily affect the public sphere just because you perform an act in it; **you need to connect with the public, share your experience, building a narrative for and with them.**”

This then transforms a person from being a passive viewer into a more active participant of the scene:

“Once you do this, **people will become more than just passive viewers: their memory and narration will represent the next step of the work.** In the moment a person sees something, she becomes the custodian of the memory.”

Your viewer then isn’t just a viewer— they are a “witness”. And they aren’t just “docile watchers” — they have their own opinions, thoughts, emotions, and feelings. And your work as an artist can change people and affect the way they live their lives:

“Witnesses aren’t just docile watchers. They opine and relate. If the work is good enough, the experience changes people so profoundly that it shapes and colors everything that they see afterwards. This effect then ripples out to others. A witness doesn’t just see, he testifies.”

So **think of yourself of an artist and photographer that transforms a passive viewer into an active witness.** Photos aren’t just images. Photographs are tools that help transform the worldview of someone who looks at your work.

So what are you trying to do with your photography? What are you trying to say about the world around you? What is your unique viewpoint? What do you have to say? How do you want to change, influence, and inform the thinking of your viewer? How can you transform your viewer from being passive, into an active “witness”? How can you make images that burn themselves into the memory of those who look at them?

Chapter 3: How to Express Yourself as an Artist and Photographer

In Chapter 3, we will discuss the importance of self-expression in art. This will allow you to uncensor and find yourself as an artist. Many of these ideas are from Carol Bove in [“Akademie x Lessons in Art + Life”](#).

On Work

If you live in an industrialized country or in the west, there always seems to be an unhealthy amount of obsession with “work”. Whenever we are *not* working, we feel like we are committing a cardinal sin. To not work is to be lazy, unmotivated, and a failure at life.

Work has also been tied into this idea of “busyness”. The more busy we are, the better we feel about ourselves. The more accomplished we feel about ourselves. The more “productive” we feel.

Think about it— whenever you have a conversation with your high-achieving friends, co-workers, or anyone random in the city and you ask them, “How are you doing?” what percentage of people say, “Oh, I’m *crazy* busy” (saying it with a badge of honor).

Not only that, but we see sleep as a disease to be cured— sleep is something that we don’t need. Think about all the energy drinks out there, caffeinated beverages, and “life hacks” which promise you how you can be more busy, more productive, on less sleep.

One of the concepts that Carol Bove shared in “[Akademie x Lessons in Art + Life](#)” was how she stopped trying to use the word “work” and tried to substitute it with something more specific to the task at hand. She explains further below:

“I decided to stop using the word ‘work’ as an experiment. It was very difficult! I had to compensate by substituting a more specific description of the activity. For example, instead of ‘I’m going to my studio to work’, I’d have to say, ‘I’m going to clean the kitchen and fold some laundry.’ **I discovered that the absence of the word ‘work’ forced me to reconsider assumptions about leisure, because the idea of work implied its opposite.**”

For example, when it comes to exercise, a lot of people say I’m going to go to the gym to “work out” (implying that exercise needs to be arduous, unpleasant, and “productive”). I have heard a better phrase to describe a workout: calling it a “**practice**”. So when you are at the gym, don’t ask people, “How is your workout going?”— ask them, “How is your *practice* going?” A lot of people in Yoga also refer to their Yoga sessions as “practices”.

So when it comes to photography, don’t treat it like “work”. Don’t feel that your photography needs to be “productive” and that you need to put in the same amount of begrudging “work” as you would do in your job.

Rather, **treat your photography like leisure**. After all, aren’t you shooting photography because you enjoy it? You don’t want photography to just become more “work” because others expect you to do so.

Carol considers that in-fact, we should dissolve the boundaries between labor/leisure. Meaning, our labor should be our leisure:

“I let go of the notion that I deserved a certain amount of downtime from being productive or from being active. **The labor/leisure dichotomy became uncoupled and then dissolved.** I couldn’t use labor to allay guilt or self-punish or feel superior. **Work didn’t exist**, so all the psychological payoff of work for work’s sake had nowhere to go.”

Takeaway point:

Make art and photographs fulfill you creatively, emotionally, and spiritually.

Photography is something precious. Street photography is even more precious. It is an experience that is highly personal, deeply involved, and requires a lot of mental and physical effort from us.

But we shouldn't treat our photography like work. We shouldn't work in a way that feels incongruous to our own beliefs, morals, and manners.

Follow what your heart tells you, and disregard the rest.

Time and information management

Time is the ultimate non-renewable resource that we have in this world. The only real truth in the world is that sooner or later, we will all die.

We don't own anything forever. Even our lives and our bodies are on "loan".

Each day is a ticking clock, in which the numbers are going down, not up. No matter how rich, powerful, or successful we are, we can never add days of life. Sure we can buy more houses, more cars, have more 0's in our bank account, but we can never buy more time.

Time is the ultimate resource that we own in life.

In Seneca's "On the shortness of life" he writes how silly that we can be so stingy with our money, but too openly wasteful with our time:

"You will find no one willing to share out his money; but to how many does each of us divide up his life! People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy."

So know that as a human being, artist, and a photographer, be stingy with your time.

Most photographers I know who are well paid and have comfy lifestyles always complain that they never have enough time. What is the point of having all the riches in the world if you have no time to enjoy life?

I know that we all have different life circumstances. Some of us literally have to work 80+ hours a week just to pay the bills. But if you are just working extra hours in order to get a promotion, to earn more money, or to

just kiss more ass in the office with your boss to look good (I used to do this), consider spending *less* time at work, and more time following your passion.

The less time you spend on the non-essentials, the more time you can spend on what is essential (creating your art through your photography). Carol Bove expands on the importance of time in "[Akademie x Lessons in Art + Life](#)":

"Your time is not a separate thing from you; it's not an instrument. Time is a part of what you're made from. Emerson said, '**A man is what he thinks about all day long.**' Everything that you do and think about is going to be in your artwork. The computer-science idea 'garbage in, garbage out' applies to artists. This is something to consider when you're choosing your habitual activities."

Also be sensitive in terms of the media that you let into your life.

For me, I try to embrace a "low-information diet" as Tim Ferriss encourages in his book: "[The 4 Hour Workweek](#)". I don't watch TV, don't read/watch the news, don't play games, don't look at my Facebook newsfeed (I recommend downloading the "[Facebook Newsfeed Eradicator](#)" for Chrome), don't look at Instagram (I found myself addicted to it, so I unfollowed everyone as an experiment).

Be extremely guarded in terms of the kind of information, stimuli, people, and ideas you let into your mind. I have personally found that my "media tolerance" is a lot lower than I thought.

If Emerson was right in saying, "A man is what he thinks about all day long", I want only to think about things that matter to me: photography, philosophy, close friends, and family.

Carol Bove expands below:

"One question is, how do you create a way of being in the world that allows new things (ideas, information, people, places) into your life without letting *everything* in? I want to point out that **your tolerance for media saturation might be lower than you realize**. You need to conduct an open-ended search that doesn't overwhelm you with information and at the same time doesn't limit the search in a way that pre-determines your findings. That is a puzzle."

Takeaway point:

I think it is always hard to "make" time in today's "crazy-busy" world. After all, how can we add an hour to our days, when our days are already jam-packed?

I say take the opposite approach (what Nassim Taleb calls “via negativa” in his book ‘Antifragile’). The concept is this: **rather than trying to add things to your schedule, try to figure out what to remove from your schedule.** Removing things from your schedule will free up more time than trying to “add” free time.

So if you don’t have enough time to go out and shoot, think about what you can *remove* from your schedule to have more time to shoot?

Perhaps your morning workout takes you an hour to do. Maybe you can cut time out of your morning workout by just doing kettlebell swings at home (it takes me only about 10 minutes for an invigorating “practice”).

Perhaps your commute to work takes too long. Maybe you can see if you can move closer to work (and perhaps pay more in rent) in order to free up an other 30 days (each way) to your day. Better yet, if you take public transportation, think about photographing people on the bus or subway (and do a “public transit” street photography series).

If you drive, perhaps take photos of other people stuck in traffic through your car window (be careful while doing this). Or my favorite if you want to be creative and are stuck in a car, listen to podcasts (I recommend [“The Candid Frame”](#), a photography podcast by [Ibarionex Perello](#)).

If you watch TV, eliminate that from your diet. Perhaps use that time to go out and shoot, or look at photography books at home.

If you mindlessly kill time on social media to pass the time at work when you’re bored (I used to do this a lot), maybe use that time to critique & give other photographers feedback, study the [magnumphotos.com](#) website, or even take portraits of your co-workers for fun.

Don’t waste a minute of your life. Subtract the unnecessary, and you will add meaning and purpose to your life and photography.

Uncensoring

Have you ever been on the streets and you see an interesting scene, and you pause and *not* take the photograph because you tell yourself, “Oh no, don’t take that photograph. It is boring and cliché.”?

Uncensor yourself when it comes to shooting on the streets. Kill that little inner-critic that will make you fall into “paralysis by analysis”. When we’re out on the streets, let’s photograph what we find even minutely interesting. We can always edit out the photographs when we go home and look at them on the computer.

I think as an artist and a photographer, one of the most difficult things is to make yourself vulnerable. Once you release your art in the world, you are putting yourself in a way that makes you open to criticism, open to being judged, and open to being misinterpreted.

However at the end of the day, your art is your passion. Your art is your life. Your art is who you are as a human being. Don't self-judge, self-criticize, or self-censor yourself.

Carol Bove shares her personal experiences censoring herself in "[Akademie x Lessons in Art + Life](#)":

"The worst part about being back in school was making art and having to explain it at the same time. It made it impossible for me to feel safe when experimenting. **As a consequence of profound self-doubt and insecurity, I was censoring what I really felt compelled to make, reasoning that since I was stupid, whatever I truly wanted to make would be stupid. I thought I would be better off faking it.**"

Safety is important when it comes to creating art. If you feel too much self-doubt and insecurity, you will never find that place where you feel comfortable to make art in order to self-express yourself.

So think to yourself: are there any ways in which you self-censor your art and photography, because you are afraid of looking stupid? What do you really want to shoot in photography, and how do you want to shoot it?

Carol continues by sharing how she tried out an experiment of only creating art for herself, not for anyone else— knowing that **she didn't have the pressure to share it with anyone else:**

"As soon as I got out of school, I was very curious to know what exactly it was that I was censoring, because the repression was so assiduous that I had absolutely no idea what it might be. I decided to try an experiment. **I would make whatever I wanted for three months with the understanding that I would not show what I dredged up.** Not to anyone. But I felt the need to discover my secret."

I feel in photography with social media, we feel obliged to share everything online. But remember: **just because you photographed something, doesn't mean that you need to share it online.** You can easily shoot it for yourself, and even print it out for yourself or publish it in a one-off book for yourself.

By not feeling that you always have to show others your work, you can find a place of comfort to thrive creatively.

Carol expands by sharing the importance of being patient and nonjudgmental with yourself and your art:

“I can tell you now, since a lot of time has passed, that I discovered I wanted to draw portraits of pretty women. **It seemed dumb at first, but I was patient and nonjudgmental and just let my desire take me wherever it wanted to go,** and that’s been my *modus operandi* ever since.”

When it comes to working on photography projects, they take a long time and the process is key. Know that as a photographer and artist, you don’t need to rush things. Everything arrives sooner or later. And art is about the journey, not the destination.

And the last piece of advice that Carol has? Have fun:

“Creating a nonpurposive, free space in which to play and have fun is essential. You can tell when you’re looking at art that was a drag to make: it’s a drag to look at. On the other hand, it’s thrilling to watch someone work through a problem that’s exciting for him, even if the subject matter wouldn’t normally move you.”

Takeaway point:

Don’t self-censor yourself. Don’t self-doubt yourself.

Create an experiment where **you photograph for 3 months, but intentionally not share the photographs with anybody.** This will take a lot of pressure off your shoulders, and can help you create the type of art you truly want.

Finding yourself

The last lesson I learned from Carol Bove is that art is about finding yourself— who you are as a human being, how you interact with others in the world, and that art is ultimately about **self-expression.**

When we create art, Carol shares that it comes from our entire being:

“Artwork comes from the total personality: ego, self, id, conscious and unconscious, transpersonal, linguistic and nonlinguistic, historically determined, sensual, emotional, physical, mental, ideological and cultural.”

To also make a body of work that is meaningful, we have to find out who we are psychologically:

“I believe that in order to make something that’s meaningful you have to start by figuring yourself out psychologically.”

A lot of photographers don't know who they are as human beings, and therefore feel lost as artists. They don't know how their work is unique, or how their work reflects who they are as a human being.

So before we should go soul-searching in our photography and art, perhaps we can first discover who we are as human beings.

Carol leaves us with this last idea on self-expression:

“Artwork is self-expression, and clearly I’m talking about a notion of self that radiates far outside of one’s body or even one’s time.”

Takeaway point:

I think the best artists and photographers are the ones who create work that is a reflection of who they are, how they see the world, and the amount of courage they put into their work in making themselves vulnerable.

Remember as photographers, **our images are more about ourselves, not about other people**. I believe that every image we make is a self-portrait, and it reflects more of who we are, than the people we are photographing.

For example when it comes to street photography, you use your own inner-psychological worldviews when looking and perceiving in the streets. If you are prone to anxiety, fear, and depression, you will probably see others in the streets with a similar disposition. If you are positive, optimistic, and friendly— you will also see that reality reflected by the people in the streets.

Everyone in terms of their personality is different, and there is no “right” or “wrong” when it comes to their worldview.

In order to better get a sense of who you are psychologically, I highly recommend taking the [“Myers-Briggs”](#) test, which gives you a blueprint of your personality. Of course this isn’t 100% comprehensive, but I think it does allow us to discover more of our inner-traits.

For example, according to the Myers-Briggs test, I am a “ESFP”. I am “extroverted” (I gain my energy being around other people), “sensory” (I prefer “practical” information), “feeling” (my emotions dictate more of my decision-making processes), and “perceptive” (I prefer a flexible lifestyle).

Based on knowing my personality, I know that when shooting street photography I prefer to interact with strangers and shoot “street portraits” (than merely candid shots), I love learning practical information when it

comes to photography, the emotions in an image are the most important to me, and I don't like structure when it comes to my life or shooting.

So maybe take the test for yourself, and see how your personality reflects your photography. See how you can make both match up, and perhaps even push yourself outside of your comfort zone (and try an approach in photography totally different from what you're used to).

If you are interested in personality type tests, I also recommend the "[Love Language Test](#)".

Concluding thoughts

At the end of the day, being an artist and a photographer is about following your own path, not letting self-criticism get in the way, treating photography as your passion (not work), knowing who you are as a human being, and sharing your unique viewpoint with the rest of the world.

No matter your job or profession, if you are partaking in any creative act, you are an "artist". An "artist" isn't someone who lives a bohemian lifestyle, spends all days at cafe's drawing sketches in a moleskine, or living in some warehouse artist colony.

Being an artist is a lifestyle— in which you pursue your true passion, and explore self-expression.

Live everyday like an artist, and look for the possibilities in your life, not your restrictions. The world is your oyster. Now go out and create art.

Chapter 4: How to Have a Creative and Flexible Mind as an Artist and Photographer

As an artist, you want to have your mind stay sharp, creative, and flexible. What are some strategies we can employ? Michelle Grabner shares some ideas with us in "Akademie x Lessons in Art and Life", which we will explore in this chapter.

What is art for?

One of the first ideas that Michelle Grabner explores is the idea of Herbert Marcuse, in his work: '[Aesthetic Dimension](#)'.

This is how Marcuse describes art:

“It seems that ‘**art as art**’ expresses a truth, an experience, a necessity which although not in the domain of radical praxis [process], are nevertheless essential components of revolution.”

I might be misconstruing what Marcuse is trying to say, but this is what I take away from his quote on art: **that as artists and photographers, we need to express the truth through the experiences we see in life.**

When it comes to making images, we don’t take photos in the streets simply because it is fun or enjoyable. It goes deeper than that. We *need* to make these images. It is something that exists deep in our psyche and in our bones.

If you have ever seen a great potential photo opportunity (and missed it), you might feel like shit. You literally feel ill. You go to sleep at night, deeply regretting having *not* taken that photograph.

But then again the opposite is true: when you see something absolutely amazing and happen to make a photograph of it well, you feel alive. You feel that you were able to communicate your experience of that event in an image that shows some deeper “truth” about how you see reality.

One question that photographers rarely ask themselves is: “Why do I make photographs?” Artists also rarely ask themselves why they create art.

So consider *why* you create art.

I think for me personally as a street photographer, I see the world in a unique way in which I want to communicate with the rest of the world. The way I see the world is very subjective— it is colored through my personal lens (which has been deeply influenced by my life experiences, education, and influences).

I also feel a *need* to make these images and share them with the rest of the world. If I don’t make these images and share them, it is almost like having **photographic constipation**. I get blocked up, feel in pain, and just need something to release (sorry for the graphic analogy, but you get my gist).

The best way to relieve photographic and artistic constipation? Stay well nourished (look at a lot of great art work), and have regular bowel movements (create art on a regular basis). That means try to photograph, edit, and share your images on a regular basis.

Filter down the images you look at

Philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch wrote these words in the late 1960's:

"Each human being swims within a sea of faint suggestive imagery. It is a web of pressures, currents and suggestions, something often so much less definite than pictures, which ties our fugitive present to our past and future."

What Murdoch is talking about can refer to today's hyper-connected world. We constantly swim in a sea of images. Except in today's world, the images aren't "faint" and "suggestive." They are aggressive, in your face, and constantly bombarding you.

Think about advertising. We have pop-up ads all over the internet, banner ads vying for your attention, blogs constantly publishing content that are irresistible *not* to click, and millions of photographs being published to Instagram, Facebook, and social media.

Today we are **drowning in a sea of imagery.**

So what is the solution?

Michelle Grabner suggests an idea:

"When we are faced with the blurry, the unclear and the ill-defined, we have to look carefully and with dedication so that we can assemble pictures and build a knowledge base. When things are fuzzy we have to work to clarify. That work is important and must be practiced or we'll find ourselves merely surfing that 'sea', pushed along by a tide of information and jpegs."

The way I take Michelle's advice is this: **work hard to filter the information and imagery you take in.** Be very selective about the images you look at on a daily basis. On social media, only follow those whose work and imagery really inspire you. Try to unsubscribe from as many annoying notifications as possible. Un-follow those who you find overly spammy, unsubscribe from news that just promotes terror and fear, and seek imagery that is hopeful and inspiring.

Michelle talks about putting together a "knowledge base" of imagery. For me, my "knowledge base" consists of the work of my close friends and colleagues, as well as the work of the masters of photography (especially Magnum photographers).

So what type of imagery can you unsubscribe from today? I highly recommend installing ad blockers (the web looks a lot prettier and less spammy), and perhaps even unfollowing those whose work you don't find absolutely essential to you.

I think in art, what you decide *not* to look at is more important than what kind of art and imagery you decide to look at.

Whether we like it or not, we are constantly influenced by the images we see on a daily basis. Therefore by controlling the fire hose of images we are subjected to everyday, we need to control the valve of which images we let into our everyday lives.

Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius once wrote that our mind is colored by our thoughts. Similarly, our art and photography is colored by what types of images we see on a regular basis.

Regularly undo and re-do your world constructs

I think as artists we should be like water. Open to change of direction, constantly flowing, and adaptable.

Michelle Grabner shares advice in terms of how to acquire knowledge (and the importance of having a flexible mind):

“You have to be prepared to regularly undo and redo your world-constructs and accommodate change as readily as you develop and share narrative.”

How can we keep our minds open-ended to art? Michelle shares three ideas: **time, curiosity, and trust**:

“Art as a means of acquiring knowledge is what compels my work. I have spent my life looking *around* art, identifying and building contexts. **It takes time, curiosity, and trust** in your observations to see the center and the periphery all at once.”

- It takes **time** to build up your knowledge base of images, inspirations, and information about art.
- It takes **curiosity** to continue pursuing your passions and following where your creative nose takes you.
- It takes **trust** to know that the process of art will eventually lead you down the path you want to follow.

Furthermore, try to stay as active as you can by **learning all you can that is around you**. Be a sponge of information, knowledge, art, and inspiration.

Not only that, but offer your help and services to other creatives and artists. Ask others, “**What do you need?**” and “**How can I help?**” This will help open doors and bridges to artistic collaborations and shared-ideas. This is a better road than trying to just ask others to do things for you.

For me, I often fall into rigid ways of thinking. It takes me a long time to develop a certain world-view. And once I develop that world-view, my mind starts to fossilize. My thoughts become set in stone.

However I need to constantly remind myself to **consider the opposite**.

For example, I am generally a big proponent of the “1 camera, 1 lens” philosophy. I genuinely do believe that having too many cameras, lenses, and equipment can be bad for your creativity.

However the opposite is equally true: **some artists thrive by having lots of different tools**.

I have therefore realized that although I have my own thoughts and opinions, my thoughts and reality aren’t truth. They aren’t “objective truths”. They are all my opinion.

So remember, everything you read on this blog is just *my opinion*. The things I write are just my thoughts that have personally worked well for me, and might not necessarily work for you.

So what are some beliefs that you hold true to yourself, and how can you think opposite and open up your mind creatively?

Art is a manifestation of learning

When Michelle Grabner was asked by the editor of “Akademie x Lessons in Art and Life” the question: “Does art have a purpose?” she answered the following:

“Art is a manifestation of learning. And to quote David Foster Wallace: **learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think.** It means **being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to** and to choose **how you construct meaning from experience.** Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed. Think of the old cliché about **‘the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master.’”**

“Art is a manifestation of learning” — what does that mean? To explain:

Art is created through the learning process.

What does that mean?

For me, as I continue to learn more about the world, I create art by sharing my unique viewpoint with the rest of the world. I create art by making images, by writing articles, by recording videos, and by sharing my ideas with others.

Also in terms of learning how to think as an artist is all about **having control over “how and what you think”**. So as an artist, you have to make the conscious decision what to pay attention to, and what *not* to pay attention to. If you are a street photographer, you make the conscious decision to pay attention to strangers, urban life, and the streets. You have consciously decided to ignore taking pretty landscapes, macro photos of flowers, and pretty bug photos.

Ultimately, **how do you also construct meaning from what you experience?** For example, if you are out on the streets and you meet someone interesting (or looks interesting), how can you make a compelling image of them that has personal meaning to you and also the viewer?

Personally I feel that street photography for me is less about the images I make, and more about the meaning I get from my experiences being out on the streets.

I shoot street photography to experience life more vividly. If it weren't for street photography, I wouldn't be as curious, engaged, and interested in the urban world around me.

So what is the purpose of your photography? What drives you to photograph and create art? Contemplate on that — it will give you razor-like focus, artistic creativity, and purpose.

Chapter 5: How to Break Out of Your Comfort Zone in Art and Photography

I think one of the most exciting things about being an artist is following your curiosity, passion, and to pursue a life-long path of learning.

Continuing from my “Akademie + Life” series, here are some lessons I learned from the Raqs Media Collective in their essay: “Letters/Reminders/Lessons”.

Transforming yourself through art

As an artist, you are continuously re-inventing yourself. If you are diligent with your art, your thinking and worldview will always be changing and evolving.

The Raqs Media Collective shares their thoughts on this continuous state of flux as an artist:

“Artists undertake to transform themselves continuously through their practices and throughout their working lives. For an artist, there can be no rigid separation between being someone and learning to become someone.”

Your “self” as an artist is a process— a journey.

But what drives us to continue to live artistic lives? Well, we are trying to fill in the gaps in terms of what we want to express about the world:

“The reason for continuing to be an artist lies in an everyday rediscovery of what remains to be said, or done. Being an artist is no different from learning to become an artist. **The process of rediscovery of what it is that he/she needs to do, transforms the artist on an everyday basis.”**

Not only that, but **our horizons are always expanding:**

“The horizons of the artist’s self continuously expand to take in the incremental unraveling of what the artist still desires to transcribe upon his/her consciousness and the attention of the world.”

Takeaway point:

There are several points I want to tackle about art as a vehicle for self-transformation:

a) We are continuously transforming ourselves:

You are not the artist or the photographer you were a year ago. You have either consciously (or subconsciously) taken in other inspirations. You might have been influenced by other artists work that you have seen, films you have watched, photography books you have looked at, or museums you have visited.

For me, I also see my photography go through waves. When I first started photography and was deeply influenced by the work of [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#), I wanted to capture beautiful black-and-white candid of everyday life.

However as time went on, I started to become influenced by the work of [Bruce Gilden](#), whose up-and-close and gritty style suited my social temperament.

When I started to shoot film and discover color, the work of [Martin Parr](#), [William Eggleston](#), and [Stephen Shore](#) had a deep influence on how I saw the world. I started to photograph more mundane scenes and objects, and made color the subject of my images.

I think this constant transformation of my worldviews and photography is exciting. And not only that, but I am starting to see all of these influences dove-tailing into one distinct “style” or “look” in my photography.

At the moment, I have tried to combine all three past “selves” into my work: I want to combine candid moments and expressions ([Henri Cartier-Bresson](#)) of up-close subjects ([Bruce Gilden](#)), while shooting in color ([Martin Parr](#)).

So when it comes to constantly changing and transforming, don’t stop or impede the flow. Follow the river, and you will continue to transform yourself creatively and artistically.

b) We attempt to fill in the gaps:

One of the quotes from the Raqs Media Collective was this:

“The reason for continuing to be an artist lies in an everyday rediscovery of what remains to be said, or done.”

As artists, we are trying to rediscover what *remains to be said, or done*. Therefore we look at all of the art and photography others are producing and we are asking ourselves, “What kind of photography or art *haven’t* I seen— and how can my work fill that gap?”

I do believe in art and photography “everything has been done before”. But there are still so many possibilities for you to fill in those gaps. There perhaps can be some different **variations** in which you can work on a photography project, or a different **angle** or **approach**.

You don’t have to work on a photograph project for the sake of being different. But when you are pursuing a photography project, think of how you can do it **subtly differently** than from those who have come before you. **Think of what you can add to the conversation.**

c) We rediscover ourselves through our art:

I do believe that art is a form of self-exploration and gives us the chance to “rediscover” ourselves.

When I am out shooting on the streets, I often don’t know why I am attracted to photographing certain scenes or people. But when I look at my images, I start to rediscover myself.

For example, lately I’ve been shooting a lot of up-close portraits of people on my Ricoh GR, with macro-mode, flash, and 28mm. I think this reminds me why I started street photography in the first place: **I love and am fascinated and drawn to people and faces.**

So I was able to re-discover this part of me: my love of humanity and human beings.

So how does your photography remind you who you are as a human being, and how you see the world uniquely as an artist?

d) Our horizons are always expanding:

I think one of the worst mentalities a photographer can have is thinking, “their best work is behind them”. [Martin Parr](#) sometimes says this about his own work tongue-in-cheek, which I find quite depressing.

Take the opposite approach: **think that the best is yet to come in your photography and art.**

Your horizons are constantly expanding, and your limits as an artist are limitless.

Continue to experiment, pave new ground, and search for new avenues for your art. Experiment with different cameras, different formats, different projects, and different areas. Travel, collaborate, and explore the world—and know that there are no limits for your creativity and art.

e) We want to transcribe our consciousness to the attention of the world:

As an artist, you ultimately have something unique you want to say. If you are a street photographer, you probably see the world from a unique perspective.

I think as street photographers, we are a unique breed of human beings. We are drawn to the beauty in the mundane, to interesting scenes and people, and connected to the thread of humanity.

So how do you etch your continuousness of what you see in your photography with the rest of the world?

Know that you are a unique individual, with a unique lens of the world, with a unique opinion. Don't shy away from your subjective view of the world. Be proud of it, and share it openly and freely with others— whether that is through social media, through books, through exhibitions, zines, or prints.

Step outside of your comfort zone

I think as artists, it is important to have an “incubation” phase. During this phase, imagine yourself as a larvae in a cocoon. You just were born into the world, and you need that sense of safety to exist. When you begin to grow, then you can hatch from your cocoon, and then explore the world.

To use that analogy in art, you need an “incubation” phase in which you feel safe to experiment and explore in your creative vision. During this time, you don't necessarily have a “style” or a “voice” yet. You have mentors (either real-life or virtual) in which you try to imitate their work (very much how renaissance painters followed an apprenticeship model). Then when you feel safe and secure with your work, you can break away from your roots and origins, and try something radically different and new.

The Raqs Media Collective also shares this importance of knowing when to break out of your comfort zone, and to break out of your limits and boundaries:

“There soon comes a time when, as in the case of any boundary, any protective armature, the scaffolding reveals its property of limit, limiting and limitedness. **This is the point when the scaffolding stops being a support and starts being an enclosure.** At this point, **it becomes necessary to separate the work from the emendations and annotations that have gathered around it in the course of its making.** This is the time to **let the work drop its armor.**”

Takeaway point:

Art is about risk-taking. Art is taking a unique standpoint, and making yourself vulnerable. Whenever you make art, you will be judged. Not everyone will agree with your viewpoint or approach or how you see the world.

What you want to avoid as an artist is finding yourself in a comfort zone. Whenever you find yourself in a comfort zone, ask yourself, “Is this comfort zone helping me thrive artistically, or is it holding me back?”

Picasso had a similar practice— that whenever his work became too recognizable and routine, he broke out and tried out something totally radically different. Of course, this pissed off a lot of people — but this is what helped him stay healthy and creative his entire working life.

Don't let your work and artistic endeavors close you in.

I know it is scary to leave that comfort zone. Personally I like having comfort as well. But I know if I want to take my work to the next level, I need to take more risks, new approaches, and push myself to become the best artist I possibly can be.

Dedicate yourself to a life-long pursuit of learning

What is the “best” way to constantly learn and evolve? The secret is to be an **“autodidact”** (someone who self-learns).

I think that knowledge, information, and education shouldn't be spoon-fed to you in a school, classroom, or a teacher. Education should be a tool — as a guide for learning. But it shouldn't be the only source.

Ultimately you want to shape and direct your own learning. This is the only way for you to follow your curiosity, and go down the rabbit hole of creativity.

The Raqs Media Collective shares this concept of being an autodidact below:

“Autodidacts manifest themselves by transforming their own curiosities. They turn themselves into magnets that attract new possibilities of thinking in the world.”

By following your curiosities, you can attract new ways of thinking and interacting with the world.

Not only that, but as an autodidact you push yourself beyond the normal conventions of knowing and thinking. By pursuing this path, your questions lead to more interesting questions:

“Since [autodidacts] are not already formed through a fealty to established knowledge, autodidacts find themselves at liberty to let their questions lead them beyond the boundaries of familiar ways of knowing and doing things. These trajectories inevitably orient themselves towards other queries. Questions may not always find answers, but they always beget more questions.”

Furthermore, constantly asking questions can lead and connect you to other creatives who also seek similar questions. By having collaborations with other communities, you can continue to expand and evolve your own thinking:

“The life of the autodidact's mind constantly relays encounters between different victors of thought. This can open us up to a new way of imagining communities, as formed by questions and affinities. Communities need not to be seen as static formations constructed from given loyalties or lineages.

Rather, following the autodidact's lead, **the gathering of people can be a precursor to a constant festivity of questioning and connecting.**"

By constantly questioning and following your questioning, you start to understand your role and place in the world:

"Strangers come together through curiosity, echoing the way in which autodidacts produce clusters of thought from disparate sources. This can be seen as analogous to the way in which strangers form communities. **An autodidact is drawn to a new form of thinking in the same way as strangers find people to talk to in a bar.** Affinities, desires, curiosities and attractions produce the bonds that tie people together in cascading clusters. **People learn the ways of being with each other, just as autodidacts teach themselves to think their place in the world**.**"

Takeaway point:

So how can you be more of an "autodidact" in your creative life?

Well first of all, never take anything at face value. Whatever you learn from teachers, classrooms, books, lectures — take it with a grain of salt.

Constantly question everything you learn or encounter. Think to yourself, "Can the opposite of this idea be true?"

I also challenge you to question everything you read on this blog. Find the holes in my thinking, and rebel against the concepts I share on this blog.

Take and pick what you find interesting, and discard everything that doesn't resonate with you.

Ultimately you want to curate your own artistic mind with ideas, thoughts, and concepts that resonate with you.

The great joy of being an autodidact is having **creative freedom**. You only pursue what you personally find interesting. You don't need to follow a certain course or curriculum. You can jump around, and skip the parts you find boring.

I have another rule for myself: if I find an exhibition, an art book, a lecture, or anything boring at all— I immediately move on. Life is too short to be bored. Follow your natural sense of curiosity. Find and follow what you find truly enjoyable.

Don't feel obliged to know the history of every single photographer that is famous. Only learn about the photographers you are personally interested in.

For example, in my "[Learn from the Masters](#)" series, I only research and write about photographers whose work I am personally interested in. Otherwise, I won't put energy, emotion, and passion into the articles. And the reader is no fool— they can tell whether I am really passionate about something (or not).

Also when it comes to photography projects, I think the moment you find yourself bored or not enjoying it— you should reconsider your project, and perhaps even make the decision to finish the project, change it, or to simply move on.

Never stop learning. Never stop exploring artistically and creatively. Never settle. Long live the autodidacts!

Chapter 6: How to Be Self-Compassionate as an Artist and Photographer

I think as artists and photographers we often put a lot of pressure on ourselves. We always put pressure on ourselves to improve our photography, to take our work to the next level, and to make "original" work.

In "Akademie X: Lessons in Art + Life" artist (and our tutor) Shirley Tse gave lots of interesting ideas on art that are quite Taoist/Buddhist in nature. Her ideas reflect on self-compassion in art, and some of her lessons include loving (not judging), being critical without being judgmental, sharpening one's visual intelligence, and not worrying so much about being original (but more focus on being authentic).

Let's dive in for our last chapter, Chapter 6.

Love, not judge

Whenever you put your work out there, you are always putting yourself into a vulnerable spot. You make yourself open to judgment, criticism, and this process can be quite scary. I know a lot of artists and photographers who rarely put work out there because they are afraid of being negatively criticized.

I think we should always practice the golden rule that our buddy Jesus told us when it comes to art and photography: **Treat others how you would like to be treated.**

So one practical piece of advice and wisdom that Shirley Tse gives us is the importance of **“Love, not judge.”** This applies when giving critique and feedback on the work of others. She explains more below:

“Another useful thing that should be taught in art schools is the Buddhist mantra **‘Love, not judge’**. **This applies to yourself, your work and the people around you.** In a critique situation, this state of mind can be very powerful.”

Why should we focus on being more emotional and open to the work of others, instead of giving them critical feedback right off the bat? Well, it allows us to slow down and think to ourselves: “Why did that artist or photographer create that work of art? Why is it valuable to them, and what are they trying to say?” It allows us to be more open and empathetic to what they value.

Shirley continues by sharing the concept that in art, the idea of “value” is subjective. And trying to convince others that your work is better than theirs is also a path of delusion and ego-centeredness:

“Invariably, **art comes down to a question of value. There is a kind of fallacy in convincing others that your value is higher than theirs.** It took me an awfully long time to answer (and to live) the question and value in these three words: ‘Love, not judge’.”

Takeaway point:

I think whenever you are giving feedback or critique to another artist or photographer, you are trying to **help them grow, develop, and mature as an artist/photographer.** Giving a critique isn’t to beat them down, discourage them, and to show your own superiority over them.

Whenever giving feedback, always give it from a place of **love, not judgment.**

But how can we be honest, open, and critical (in a constructive way), without being judgmental? Well, let’s continue to the next point.

Be critical without being judgmental

So how can we avoid passing judgment, while also being critical (in a positive way)?

Shirley Tse explains how it is possible to be critical without being judgmental:

“You may be puzzled how it is possible to avoid passing judgment when we’re presenting our artistic decision-making for analysis. **I think it is totally possible to be critical without being judgmental.** In a nonhierarchical setting presenting the reasoning for one’s artistic decisions is not done for the

purpose of one-upmanship, but rather for the **purpose of challenging preconceived notions or assumptions in ways that make everyone reassess where and who they are.**"

So to break down what she said, focus on these points:

a) Have a nonhierarchical setting

When you are giving critique, receiving critique, on a critique-group, nobody is better than anybody else. Everyone is on the equal playing field. Everyone are colleagues, and on equal footing.

Just because one artist or photographer might have more art school experience, more followers on social media, more established bodies of work, etc. — it doesn't mean that they have the "ultimate say" over what others say.

By having a nonhierarchical setting, you treat everyone's opinion as being equal.

b) Having the chance to share your artistic decisions

Whenever I look at a piece of art or a photograph by another artist (and I don't like it), I ask myself, "What is it about this artwork do I not like? And **why did this artist decide to make this piece of work, or make this photograph? What did they see that I didn't see?**"

If it is a photograph, I then spend more time looking at the **edges of the frame**, and really **analyzing all of the details in the frame**. This then helps me get a better landscape of the image, and all of the pertinent information that the photographer was trying to capture.

I then try to put myself in the mind of the photographer. I try to ask myself, "*What* did they try to capture, *why* did they try to capture it, and *how* did they try to capture this?"

Once I have really understood all of the details in the photograph (and perhaps psycho-analyzed the photographer a bit), I can then give a piece of feedback that is for the purpose of **helping the photographer**, not putting them down.

c) Challenge assumptions

The reason why other artists and photographers need your feedback and critique is because they become blind sighted by their own work.

It is easy to love our work, and fall in love with the back-stories of how we made the images.

It is hard to be 100% objective when it comes to our own artwork, because we gave birth to them. Our art and photographs are like our babies and children— we love them all unconditionally. Sometimes irrationally so.

So if you are on the other end (having your work critiqued), **don't feel like you need to defend yourself**. When others give you feedback, don't take it as an assault on your ego or who you are as a human being. Treat it as that the people giving you a critique is **trying to challenge your assumptions as an artist, and trying to help you see another perspective**.

Sometimes I know for me, I have a certain intention for a photograph (in terms of what I want the viewer to get out of it). I think to myself, "Oh, that message is so obvious to the viewer! Of course this photograph shows the pain, suffering, and destruction of the socio-economic class in America". Someone might then look at the photograph and might totally not "get it".

I then get frustrated at the viewer for not understanding my grandiose artistic vision, but then I remind myself, **"It is not the viewer's fault for not 'understanding' the image— there is some inherent shortcoming in the image itself that doesn't communicate my message."**

So whenever it comes to being an artist, **don't make assumptions**. Don't make assumptions about the work of others, or assumptions about your own work. **Use communication in an open, friendly way that fosters dialogue and collaboration**.

And what is the best way to communicate these ideas? Shirley Tse recommends the idea of *"nonviolent communication"*— in which we try to reach a mutual understanding:

"There is a tool available to aid this process: '**Nonviolent Communication**' - a process that Marshall Rosenberg began to develop in the 1960s. The premise is that **we share basic needs that are not in conflict**; rather it is our strategies for meeting those needs that are in conflict."

Thinking to sharpen a person's visual intelligence

In "Akademie X: Lessons in Art + Life" one of the questions prompted by the editor is, *'Is there an activity you would recommend for sharpening a person's visual intelligence?'*

Shirley Tse responds by saying how important **thinking is a strong tool to sharpen a person's visual intelligence**. And "thinking" can be the same as **"looking"** (as we photographers do). And thinking/looking is about **spotting relationships and differences**:

“My answer is simply ‘thinking’. To me, thinking and looking are one and the same thing. **Looking is about discerning relations and differences; so is thinking.** We learn new things by summoning the old; **we see new visual relations when we are fluent in the old ones.**”

Shirley continues by sharing the importance of using art as a tool to experience the world and to grow our knowledge about the world:

“That’s why **art is both experience and knowledge production. What I learn from the economics about the complexity of relations will help me see relationships in the world.**”

Takeaway point:

One of the best ways to improve your art and photography is to **see relationships and differences in the world** by mindfully **looking**.

I think a photographer’s most important tool are his/her eyes. It doesn’t matter how technically adept a photographer is— without a good pair of eyes to see relationships, interesting juxtapositions, and oddities— a photographer cannot make a good image.

But how does a photographer better improve their “visual intelligence” in a practical sense?

My suggestion: give yourself as what Jay Maisel calls “**visual push-ups**”. If you want to grow muscles and get fit, you do push-ups for your body. If you want to grow the muscles of your eyes, you do “visual push-ups” by working them out.

How can one do “visual push-ups”? Well, do things that challenge and stimulate your visual cortex. Look at art that is exciting, challenging, and confusing. Douse your eyes with colors, shapes, forms, lines, and complexity.

Don’t just look at photographs, look at modern art, look at impressionist art, look at watercolor paintings, acrylic paintings, watch dance performers, watch films (which give you 24 images per second), and walk around a lot and look at people, things, and places with a discerning eye.

Everyday I try to do at least one sort of physical exercise to stay fit (push-ups, squats, deadlifts, yoga, chin-ups, etc.). But everyday I also try to do one sort of visual exercise to stay fit (look at photography books, look at photographic images and analyze them, read photography books, and go out and shoot).

If you don’t do your daily visual push-ups, your eyes will atrophy, become fat, out-of-shape, and you will begin to “dumb-down” your visual intelligence.

Stay visually fit.

Don't get hung up on originality

One of the challenges I personally faced when I started in photography was trying to be original. I got a lot of criticism early on that I was just copying Henri Cartier-Bresson or the work of Bruce Gilden. It hurt a lot, and I started to go soul-searching, trying to “rebel” against the box in which others put me into.

But looking back, **I should have taken those criticisms as a compliment.** My critics saw a similarity between my work and the work of photographers far greater than me.

Not only that, but I should have realized and been grateful that these photographers and I shared some sort of common history and path.

Shirley Tse shares her experiences about the jadedness that artists can face with the whole “it’s already been done before” plague:

“When I was a student, I looked at a lot of artwork by other artists both in exhibitions and in reproduction. **It was easy to be plagued by that ‘Oh, that has already been done’ jadedness.**”

So how did Shirley Tse overcome the jadedness of trying to be original? She shares an interesting quote from Duchamp:

“Duchamp said art is about choosing, not creating. That really helped me to not get hung up in the idea of originality.”

The way I interpret that quote is that when it comes to creating art, **we are trying to choose what path we want to go down.** All types of art has already been created before, but we try to go down a path that is a little different from the footsteps of artists who have come before us. Creating “original” artwork is about **the small variations and our unique perspective on things.**

Shirley Tse continues by expanding on the idea that as artists, we all share in a mutual sense of kinship. We shouldn't see other artists or photographers as foes, but rather as friends and potential collaborators. We are all in the same boat together:

“Seeing other people's work, even if it happens to be based on an idea I've also had, can become a form of excitement in kinship.”

But choosing what path we decide to pursue in our photography or art can be challenging and scary:

“Since we have so many options or models for making a work, it can be very frightening to have to choose. Writers refer to this as the terror of the blank page.”

So how does one find his/her own style? **I think a big part of finding your originality as an artist is knowing what *not* to do. Avoiding the types of art that you aren't interested in:**

“When I look at other artists' work, I often say to myself, ‘**How lucky I am to have seen how others have travelled down that specific path and to recognize it's not quite for me.**’”

Takeaway point:

Don't get too hung up on originality. Every piece of art you create will inevitably be “original” — because you created it.

Even if you try to copy or imitate another artist, you can never truly replicate their work 100%.

I think it is great to have this global community of artists and photographers we can relate with. Creating art is about **kinship**— it is about sharing our personal outlook of the world that others may also share.

Art wants to thrive, grow, and remix itself.

Art is about the spread of ideas. If your art happens to be similar to the work of others, see how you can perhaps collaborate with them. Not only that, but perhaps the thinking of others can help inform your thinking, and fill in the gaps of your own creativity and outlook.

If you find others “copying” your work, don't become defensive and upset. Rather, be honored and complimented that someone saw something unique in your work which resonates with them.

Continue to make work that makes you happy, that makes you feel alive, that brings you in closer unison with others.

Originality is overrated.

Learn from the work of others

I think a common fallacy that a lot of photographers fall into is purposefully *not* exposing themselves to the work of others, in order *not* to be “influenced” by their work.

I think it is silly to work in a black box. We all inevitably are influenced in our art by the things we see, the people we interact with, and other artists we may bump into.

Don't be afraid of exposing yourself to the artwork of others. For me, I find that exposing myself to the work of others helps re-inspire me, and helps re-invigorate my own work.

Shirley Tse shares a similar philosophy of the importance of exposing yourself to the work of others:

“That really helps me make up my mind how I want to proceed in my work. **There's nothing to lose in exposing yourself to other artists' work.**”

Even when you disagree with an artist, you can still admire their way of thinking:

“**Sometimes, I can't stand certain artists' or writer's' work but do admire their way of thinking,** their way of processing information and re-presenting it.”

And also remember that you don't need to agree or even like the work of another artist or photographer. You can still learn from them by appreciating your differences from them:

“I've come to understand that **I don't need to agree with them in order to learn something from them.** It surprises me to find that many young artists are afraid of losing their naivety or becoming corrupted if they look at other artists' work. That's an awfully Romantic idea that belongs in the nineteenth century.”

Takeaway point:

Always expose yourself to the art and ideas of others. There are so many beautiful creative ideas to swim in.

But at the same time, be selective about the art you expose yourself to. Only surround yourself with art that inspires you, makes you excited, and makes you thrive. Disregard art or photographs that do nothing for you emotionally, spiritually, or creatively.

What is your motivation for being an artist?

One of the questions that we rarely ask ourselves as artists or photographers is: “What is my motivation for creating art?”

Shirley Tse shares her motivation, which was creating art in order to give meaning to our shared experience in the world:

“When I was 23, my motivation for being an artist was simple and direct. I was on a mission to **give form to the profundity of our experience.**”

She expands by sharing the communal aspect of her artistic thinking:

“**I deliberately say ‘our’, not ‘my’.** In the process of giving forms to the profundity of our experience, I would question the conditions in which forms are available to artists. I believe this is one place where epistemology, critical theory, and politics come in.”

Not only that, but Shirley Tse notes **the importance of being excited about creating art.** When you create art, it might be difficult and challenging, but the payoff is hugely rewarding:

“For me, this is also when I get excited about making— again, this making will involve difficult negotiations in myriad ways but the reward for inventive thinking and making is tremendous.”

Takeaway point:

When it comes to creating art, *why* do you do it? What drives you to go out into the streets, and take photographs?

For me personally, I create art (through writing, teaching, and photographing) because it makes me feel fully alive. Creating art makes me fully present in the moment, and relieves my stresses, anxieties, and fears about the future (and frustrations about the past).

Creating art helps connect me to a like-minded community of inspired people. Creating art helps me express my own ideas that I hope help other people. **Creating art for me is a form of self-therapy that helps bring me happiness and fulfillment in life.**

Conclusion

Thank you for joining me on this journey to take your creativity and art to the next level.

Remember, you are first an artist, and second a photographer.

Continue to live a life full of curiosity, passion, and interest.

Don't be afraid to share your personal outlook with the rest of the world. Make photographs that are personal and reflect how you see the world. If there isn't an element of fear in your art-making, you aren't making yourself vulnerable enough.

But ultimately make art and photos because it makes you happy, and do it for yourself (not others). Always remember this quote below:

"For me a few are enough, one is enough, having none is enough"

A crowd of one (yourself) is all the audience you need in your art, photography, and creative production.

Recommended books on art and creativity

In addition to the book: "[Akademie x Lessons in Art and Life](#)", here are also some inspirational books on art and creativity:

- "[The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles](#)"
- "[Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative](#)"
- "[Manage Your Day-to-Day: Build Your Routine, Find Your Focus, and Sharpen Your Creative Mind](#)"
- "[The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity](#)"
- "[Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#)"

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