Win Labuda

From Image to Art Image

Ten Theses on Photography as Art Object

Image - art image

When a photographer takes a picture with artistic intent, the purpose is to define a pictorial section of the visible world for his/her work. So far, the act of creating art with the camera has essentially been done by precisely determining the framing. The photographer can choose the suitable light, as well as change brightness, contrast, colouring and other technical parameters, but the created image remains largely determined by the selected framing.

Today, however, digital technology makes it possible to make creative changes to photographic image files, for example by adding, duplicating or removing any image parts. The impression of a realistic image remains in its entirety: some say it's a system for image manipulation – others say it's a prerequisite for new types of image creation.

In the documentary film "Gursky, Photographer" by Jan Schmidt-Garre [2], Andreas Gursky [1] demonstrates artistically motivated image design with the aid of digital technology. This happens as part of the creation of the Gursky photograph "Hamm, Bergwerk Ost". The large format image shows miners' garments hung from the ceiling of a changing room while the miners are underground. The combined use of camera and computer greatly expanded the possibilities of artistic creation of photographic images. Whereas previously the creative range of variation of the photographer was not really comparable to that of a painter, it has now grown significantly and in some aspects even surpasses the possibilities of panel painting. The following text also refers to the single photographic image, but not to the art of film. So what are the prerequisites for a photographic image to be perceived as a work of art – framing the image in the camera or composition after the photograph has been taken using digital technology? A general answer to this question could be: the picture must suggest an illusionistic perception to the viewer.

The term "photo art"

If the term "art" is not easy to define, it becomes even more difficult with the associated terms created in this context with "art", such as architecture, film art and also photographic art. The term "photo art" is also still too young to be firmly anchored in the semantics of the German language. The photographer Thomas Ruff even mentioned in the Spiegel interview from March 2012 [10] that he felt the term "photo artist" was an insult.

What turns a photographic image or a series of images into an art image in us is actually a combination of characteristics:

+ The picture symbolizes a phenomenon that is condensed into an emotionally moving statement in the context of the depicted reality.

+ The image is permanently anchored in the viewer's memory.

+ In addition to the above properties, the image has a recognizable design level.

Concept of design level

German law does not recognize the term "photo art". It therefore does not distinguish between a photograph with snapshot character and world-famous photographic works such as Ansel Adam's "Moonrise, Hernandez".

The terms "design level", "creation level" or "work level" are known from German copyright law. They serve to identify the relative innovative achievement contained in a artistic work. According to this, if the work is sufficiently innovative, it is granted the character of a work by appointed persons or committees, which in turn gives the author a time-limited right of exploitation.

In the field of photography, German jurisdiction up until 1995 made a distinction between "Lichtbild" (photograph) without and "Lichtbildwerk" (photographic work) with an innovative character. In 1995, German copyright law was brought into line with European law. According to this, the official determination of a certain level of design is no longer required for protection as a photographic work. Every photograph is now automatically granted the character of a work. Only automatically taken photographs and photographic reproductions are excluded from this and therefore also exempt from copyright protection. [12]

Against this background, ten theses are put up for discussion. This is done with the aim of giving the term "photo art" a clear definition.

Ten theses on photographic art

First thesis: Photographic art is the photographically designed interpretation of the visually accessible world.

According to this thesis, the content of interpretation and the impression of reality are the essential aspects of photographic art. For some viewers of photographic art, the level of design is an additional prerequisite for the basic assignment of an image to the photographic art category. This hypothesis explains, for example, the interest shown in staged, narrative photography by Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson. Their photographic works are determined by the means of staging. The process is based on artistic endeavour and is in principle related to what happens in the theatre. It also affects staged still life photography, such as that of Ian Blakemore (*1965), Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976), Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) and Josef Sudek (1896-1976).

Second thesis: Photographic images always have an effect in the context of the mental and emotional imprint of their respective viewer.

In this context, it is interesting to observe the reaction of viewers to a well-known series of images by the Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado: the images show thousands of people smeared with earth, who are in a very small space in a huge pit and want to leave it via narrow ladders while bearing heavy sacks. The viewer of course thinks of a pictorial accusation against the exploitation of Brazilian miners. If he is told that the people depicted are in fact private gold diggers, he is usually not relieved at the mistake, but rather disappointed at the questioning of the blame that has been assigned.

Third thesis: Photographic art is determined by the narrative aura of the image being viewed.

An example is the picture "Tomoko Uemura in her Bath" – Minamata 1972 by W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978). Depicted is an Asian woman bathing an apparently mentally handicapped and severely deformed child. The photograph shows us the loving devotion of the woman to the child and at the same time the hardship associated with caring for it. However, it is only through the story attached to the picture that the photograph embeds itself into our memory and becomes a symbol through its description: W. Eugene Smith had become aware that the Japanese chemical company Chisso discharged waste containing mercury into the Japanese Minamata Bay and thereby caused methylmercury poisoning of many local residents. The child the woman was bathing was mentally handicapped from mercury poisoning. After Eugene Smith had published the facts and this picture in the American magazine LIFE in 1971, he was beaten up and badly injured by a criminal gang hired by Chisso in January 1972, so that he ended up going blind in one eye. In this case, the image only acquires its meaning through the moral context.

Fourth thesis: In the future, the expectation of design will be added to the previous expectation of authenticity for a part of photographic art.

For the modern photographer, photography no longer comes out of the developer shell as a kind of surprise product. For him it has in many cases become a "digital paintbrush". Within the framework of the extended possibilities of post-processing photographic images through digital technology, these were initially hesitantly changed, but today they are habitually changed in the interests of the creative photographer.

Fifth thesis: The number of works of photographic art recognized as important by the public is limited.

The phenomenon of the "photographic flood of images" in the sense that photographic art would have become immense should first of all be questioned here: Today, photographic images are in the majority consumer products of the electronic networking of our society. The way of noting down thoughts, events and the transmission of the same has shifted from the text note to the image and spoken note. This is probably due to the fact that image recording is now much faster and easier than writing text descriptions. Although the number of image files we store is growing, they are no longer as important to us as they once were. Thus, photographic images – in keeping with our way of life – have become disposable products. At the same time, however, there is the extraordinary, the elitist in the nature of art. This in turn means that an increased appreciation can only ever apply to a limited number of objects. If one imagines a museum wall that has been decorated with 100 of the most beautiful icons, then the viewer does not have the 100-fold effect of a wall on which only one icon is hung.

Sixth thesis: The ease of photography and image processing make selection and rejection essential parts of artistic creation.

The ease of photography created by the photography industry has made it possible for anyone to get involved in photography. Joseph Beuys' definition of art "everything is art and everyone is an artist" finds its most striking correspondence in photography with an artistic intention. If artistic photography is not to submerge into the resulting arbitrariness of the works created in its frame, then photographic art must be defined in a way that everyone can understand. It can therefore be assumed that a not insignificant proportion of the works known today as photographic art will soon be affected by a loss of importance.

In the "farewell volume" "Henri Cartier-Bresson – The Photographer's Portrait" 155 pictures are shown. Cartier-Bresson is known to have stopped taking photographs after 1975. That means: in 44 active years as a photographer, only three to four pictures were taken each year that the Maestro and the publisher Robert Delpire finally decided were worth showing. This must give us cause for thought. Oeuvre selection also means abandoning what is no longer representative, indicating what is to come and a sign of the ability to limit yourself to the artistic in the sense of something unique.

Seventh thesis: Within the assumed polarity of "living" and "inanimate", the degree of emotionalization for works of photographic art increases to the same extent as the image content is determined by living things.

The photographic depiction of "creatures" (people, animals, plants and landscapes) emotionalizes us to a greater extent than that of things.

Landscape is assigned to this group because it forms the environment that makes the existence of living beings possible at all and because, as the substrate of vegetation, it is a quasi-essential phenomenon in its own right.

The observation can possibly be explained by the human need for communication with other "beings", while the inanimate is on a subordinate level in our Western scale of values God – man – animal – thing.

Eighth thesis: Pictures are consumable products with a finite duration of effect.

Every art is defined, among other things, by the social processes, problems and attitudes of its respective time. Towards the end of its period of activity, art – and thus also photographic art – is no longer perceived in an illusionistic manner but only as a historical reality. If time passes over a certain art epoch or even over individual artists, their works may no longer even be perceived as art.

A look at the history of painting is helpful. This affects the life works of once recognized artists such as the work of Bernard Buffet. Conversely, works by important pioneers in the field of fine arts were not yet recognized as art by their time, so that they were denied this ennobling due to the incomprehension of the viewer. This was the case, for example, with Vincent van Gogh.

Ninth thesis: Works recognized as photographic art are subject to the usual market conditions for paintings or graphic art.

The past two decades have shown that the prices for photographic art have risen significantly and today no longer differ significantly from those for paintings for well-known photographers (Gursky, Sherman, Prince, Ruff, Becher, etc.) [11].

Tenth thesis: Photographic works can be classified.

A classification of photographs with an artistic claim could be as follows:

A - Photo Art – Photography with an emotional effect

Photographs that touch us existentially or evoke emotions in us. Examples: Robert Capa: The Falling Soldier. Henri Cartier-Bresson: Seville, Spain – Boy on Crutches Playing with Others. Walter Schels: Dying, Before and After Death. Eugene Smith: Minamata Disease, Animal Experiments. Nobuyoshi Araki: Erotic Bondage.

B - Photograph of mental orientation

Photographs that affect us by mobilizing our thoughts and our aesthetic perception. Examples: Karl Bloßfeld: Plants, Henri Cartier-Bresson: Jumping Man, Hervé: Architectures, Herbert List: Santorini, Thomas Ruff: Night Pictures, Starry Sky

C - Photograph of recognition and decoration

Photographs that have an effect on us, e.g. through an interesting structure of the depicted objects, through rows, light reflections and drastic colour changes, all kinds of fashion and most of the celebrity photography as well as most photographs, which essentially serve the pleasant memory of people close to us.

When leafing through comprehensive books on photographic art of our time, the arbitrariness of some of the works shown is striking. At the very least, the question arises as to why some of the photographs shown should belong to the photographic art genre or are considered worthy of publication. The intellectual-emotional radiance, the aura of many works, is too weak to be anchored in the memory of the viewer and the range of similar works is unmistakably large.

Summary and outlook

Recognizing fine art is an event that builds bridges between the artist and the viewer. Of course, that doesn't always happen. The origin of artistic creation largely eludes analysis, just like that of artistic perception. The question arises whether a photographic image that an art mediator (curator, auctioneer, gallerist, reviewer, book publisher or exhibition organizer) recognizes as an "art image" and presents to the public causes a change in meaning from image to art image, simply through its selection and display. After all, pictures that are presented by recognized auctioneers occasionally experience ennoblement in the sense of extended awareness and higher evaluation by the public willing to buy. The actors involved in raising awareness of photographic images are: photographer – exhibitor – viewer – buyer. We recognize a certain proximity to the market chain typical of industrial society: producer – distributor – user. One tends to give a museum curator the highest level of authority over the artists and works on display. However, even the curator is not only committed to the intellectual aspects of art, but also to the expected number of visitors to his institution, for example.

For centuries, visually effective aesthetics were visible confirmation of a certain ordered structure in our world. What we are looking for in an aesthetically designed picture, for example based on the "golden ratio", is the assurance that our lives are determined by reliable, order-providing forces, following a strict meaning. Ansel Adam's mountain massifs, Bloßfeld's plant pictures, Callahan's grasses and Caspar David

Friedrich's landscapes assure us of precisely these order-providing forces that are perceived as "good". This is probably also the reason why we generally do not find pictures of people dying or maimed in acts of war on the walls in people's living and working areas, but above all those that awaken constructive forces in us or are dedicated to "good memories". The fact that today we are increasingly finding photographic instead of graphic images or paintings on the wall surfaces of our personal environment also shows our increased need to support the proof of the existence of order-providing forces through the reality of photography. Faith is fading, evidence is to take its place, and among the visual arts photography provides the best means to expect such evidence.

The view proposed in this essay essentially concerns a photographic art of the sublime and noble. Naturally, this has to challenge those who deal with, for example, photographing industrial wastelands (Edward Burtynsky), landscapes polluted by waste (Richard Misrach) or the misery of emigrants on our planet (Sebastiao Salgado). You could argue that the art of the sublime and the beautiful belongs to the past and that modernity is primarily called to reveal truth. Such tendencies are not new in art. Francisco de Goya already presented the picture "The Shooting of the Insurgents" in 1814 or Auguste Rodin the sculpture "Man with the Broken Nose" in 1864. Art and journalism merge in these works. However, the difference between such works and those mentioned above lies in their fate-individuality. In these works, it was usually the individual who was portrayed as threatened, more rarely the small group (Auguste Rodin – "The Burghers of Calais"). Today's perceived threat scenario, on the other hand, is no longer just aimed at the individual or the group, but at the human and animal species in general. One of the major problems with photographic art is to what extent it can either confirm or question known structures of order and whether or not the recourse to the beautiful and the sublime verifies the identified tendencies

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[12] German copyright law UrhG

Translation: Carol Oberschmidt