

Focus is Overrated

Paraphrasing W.Somerset Maugham “There are three rules for making a good photograph. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” (Maugham) We all know the rules until, we find out that we do not. I humbly acknowledge that you won’t find the rules here. Instead, what follows are a handful of thoughts and considerations regarding what one might do to grow as a photographic artist. I hope you’ll also find a good deal of uncertainty and paradox in what I offer. If you do, then you will have gotten my point.

Photography is an equipment intensive undertaking. At the outset, we are overwhelmed by the technical details of understanding and operating the equipment and as image making has advanced in the last few decades of digital innovation, we now contend with not only mastering cameras, lenses, lights, modifiers, and props; but computers and software as well. At the same time, the advances have given us an enormous range of possibilities for our images. Techniques that once took hours in the darkroom now take minutes on the computer. As digital technology advances exponentially, techniques that as little as a few years ago would take an hour or more on the computer, are now accomplished with a few key strokes, actions or plugins.

We can now create virtually anything we can imagine. The key then becomes, as it always has been, our imagination! The means of production have become democratized such that we can all reasonably expect to have access to state of the art equipment. Thus our personal inspiration, imagination, and authentic creativity become the nuclei that will distinguish us from all the many images makers around us. The intent of this thesis is to survey the “soft skills” of image making - inspiration, imagination and creative process - and how each of us might advance our personal process of image making.

Declare Yourself an Artist!

We must be artists for many reasons: skill development, state of mind, marketing, and because we can't help ourselves; we want to be artists. I, and many I've talked to, have had difficulty declaring ourselves artists. It feels fraudulent and arrogant to call ourselves artists, thinking "I'm not an artist, I'm just a photographer". But it's not arrogant. We are not declaring ourselves great artists, or important artists, we're simply identifying what we do. If we don't acknowledge ourselves as artists we will never make art.

If you declare yourself an artist, one day you will be. It may take some time to accept, but at some point, you will know that you are. I've made the suggestion repeatedly in workshops and classes to "Declare yourself an artist" and I've been surprised by how many students have told me, sometimes years later, that my giving them permission to be an artist was very impactful and meaningful to them; a turning point in their image making. If you have any doubts, get in touch, I will personally give you permission to call yourself an artist.

"Lesson 1: Don't Be Embarrassed

I get it. Making art can be humiliating, terrifying, leave you feeling foul, exposed, like getting naked in front of someone else for the first time. You often reveal things about yourself that others may find appalling, weird, boring, or stupid.

People may think you're abnormal or a hack. Fine. When I work, I feel sick to my stomach with thoughts like None of this is any good. It makes no sense. But art

doesn't have to make sense. It doesn't even need to be good. So don't worry about being smart and let go of being "good" (Saltz, 3).

Visual Literacy - Change Your Brain

The artist Chuck Close says: "Once you know what art looks like you can figure out how to make some of it" (Close)

From Wikipedia: "Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, extending the meaning of literacy, which commonly signifies interpretation of a written or printed text. Visual literacy is based on the idea that pictures can be "read" and that meaning can be through a process of reading" (Wikipedia)

There are a wide variety of definitions of visual literacy that fluctuate among various usages in art history, art education, semiotics, philosophy, and art criticism. My usage here simply means acquiring a great deal of exposure to visual experience; not only art, but advertising, illustration, nature, architecture, and anywhere one directs visual attention. The back stories of art are interesting and important, as are the critical descriptions and interpretations. But simply having the visual experience, and particularly experiencing art without judgement, bias, and expectation, will literally change your brain. Exposure will form new synapses and bring depth to your visual literacy. The need to memorize the details and chronology of art history is far less important to you as an artist than it is to simply experience art.

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within

our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive”

(Campbell 5).

Many art museums and institutes offer audio devices for rental that will speak in your ear as you approach each individual piece. In my opinion: “DON’T DO THIS!” Listening to a pre-recorded docent while trying to experience art is like texting while driving; it divides your attention and deprives you of the full experience of the art before you. You need not evaluate it, critique it, score it, or even like it. You need to leave your bias about what’s good art and what’s bad at the door. Your opinions will cloud your perception. Just stand before the piece (or scene, or mountain, or architecture) and experience it with as little judgement and as possible. Be descriptive rather than proscriptive. Don’t ask why or how it was made and don’t ask what it means. Simply experience what you see. The experience will literally change your brain and allow you to develop new visual categories. You will learn to see rather than respond to existing categories. It matters not whether you like it, don’t like it, know what it means or what it costs. You may well learn more from pieces you don’t like than from those you do.

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.

(Berger 7)

I don’t mean to imply that back stories, art criticism, and technical analysis are not important. Go home and read a book or view a youtube on the art in question. But as you stand before the art, experience it non-verbally. Do not speak of art in its presence. Just as writers of fiction must be voracious readers of fiction, visual artists must be voracious viewers of art!

"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and

write a lot” (King).

So, dear reader, please go look at art. It will change your brain. It will introduce you to the DNA of art and it will contribute to the images you make! Indulge my redundancy but this is important -LOOK AT ART!- It will become part of you. Your experience will co-mingle with art’s entire history, and with art’s DNA.

The DNA of Art

Art has its own DNA. We don’t create art in a vacuum; we create art based on the 40,000 years of human creativity that preceded us. The same themes and visual concepts bounce around not only decades, but centuries and millennia. The more visual experience we gather from viewing art, the better informed and inspired our creations will be. Inspiration provides the fuel for our creative engines. We need to steal the color palette of one artist, the composition of another, the subject and themes from others, and transmute them and make them our own. We need to take inspiration from everyone and compare ourselves to no one. We need to both meet the expectations of our viewers and simultaneously subvert them. Art works best when it’s a combination of something that you know and something you don’t

Only a few artists become famous and fewer still become wealthy from their art. When we see a famous work of art by a famous artist we must remember that it was not a single artist that created this work. It was the entire living history of art, a history that belongs to all of us and to which we can all contribute. The history is not simply a linear progression. It is a 3

dimensional matrix, a plasma, in which ideas flutter and collide, a cauldron of possibility. It is living and interactive.

Picasso shocked the world with his exhibition of "*Les Femmes d'Alger*" in Paris, the summer of 1907. He took inspiration from the Altamira cave paintings in northern Spain, created some 20,000 years earlier, and is reported to have said "They have invented everything" (Thurman). Dali took inspiration from the Renaissance several centuries prior to his work. Renaissance artists took inspiration from Greek art created many centuries earlier.

No art is created in a vacuum. It is all the result of many humans creating many works over 40,000 years or more. That history belongs to all of us. We all get to be a part of the discussion and perhaps add a tiny little piece to art's DNA.

Sports, perhaps the only other human cultural activity as old as art, provides an analogy. The current high jump record of 8ft. 1/4 in. is held by Javier Sotomayor. I suggest that such records were achieved by athletes observing each other, experimenting with each others techniques, and perhaps due to some small difference in individual physiology, the record holders were able to add a fraction of an inch more to their highest jumps. Those records made and eventually surpassed by others were the result of the entire history of the sport. The highest jumps belong, in part, to who all participated in the sport throughout its history.(Rosenbaum) Such is the case in art, and we can all play a part in its evolution.

Visual Art's Secret Weapon

"All art aspires to the condition of music."(Pater) Isn't it true? Music, more than any other art form, has the ability to evoke emotion. Don't you wish that through your selection of rules in visual art you could be assured of evoking emotion among many viewers? Don't you

envy the musician who no one ever asks “what does that melody mean?” or even “what do the lyrics mean?” “I am the walrus Goo goo g'joob”.

Writers can, with a simple choice of words and stories, evoke feelings of joy, fear, love, or anger. Brilliant chefs can utilize all the senses to create a carefully orchestrated response to their creations. Don't you wish we could do that by simply choosing color and composition and be assured of evoking an emotional response to our images?

Music, or words, or cooking, or dance all take time to arrive at their destinations. As little as 3 or 4 minutes for a pop tune or 45-60 minutes for a symphony. Hours can be required to get the full impact of a novel, or a motion picture.

The still image, painted, drawn or photographed, achieves its impact in an eye blink; an “*Augenblick*” in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. (Ward) Although it's less sure fire, and perhaps for only a small number of viewers, we can sometimes create an enormous impact on our audience in an instant. Have you ever had the experience of bringing a viewer to tears, or elation, or even revulsion at their very first experience with your work? Why envy other artistic media when we have this attribute that no other media has?

Only visual art can make its impact, and sometimes a lasting impact, in a moment, in an *Augenblick!* No other art form can create impact with such immediacy - from a small child dancing in a field of flowers to the horror of reportage on a scene of war.

The Tyranny of Rules: “Can’t live with ‘em - Can’t live without ‘em”

Without any rules we are rudderless. Too many rules will bind you up like a pound of cheese. So how can we manage rules to enable our image making without becoming creatively stifled; a hostage to the rules.

The old adage that you must learn the rules before you can break them, as trite as it is, has some importance. Historically I don’t think artists break the rules, but more often replace the rules with others more suitable to their ambitions.

However; with no rules, we are wandering around in the wilderness. An important part of the creative process is a “prepared mind”: learning rules, learning craft, learning how to make art from all those who have gone before us. It must be done. But at a later stage in the creative process, the “Aha” moment arrives and it is often the result of subverting a basic assumption usually involving “the rules”. But without our prepared mind, without knowing those rules we would not have had the leverage to overcome them. I’ve had experiences with the “Aha” of subverting the rules, with abandoning, often accidentally, the most basic rules of photography such as proper exposure, focus, and color theory. The rules give us opportunity and leverage, in some cases, because we choose to subvert them.

I was driving through a woods while my mentor Joyce Wilson hung out her open window to shoot the bare limbed trees. I offered to pull over and stop so she could reduce motion blur. “No! No!” she said, “Focus is overrated!” (Almost all of Joyce’s comments deserve exclamation points, but alas, many of my favorites are not suitable for print).

Ted Orland and David Bayles remind us of the long held rule that the expression of a full range of tonal value in photography became a paramount rule. It became such a pervasive and overriding rule that perfection of tonal values became the primary content of an image, sometimes neglecting concept, composition, and all other characteristics and impact of the image.

“We do not long remember those artists who followed the rules more diligently than anyone else. We remember those who made the art from which the “rules” inevitably follow.” (Orland, Bayles 95)

Learn the rules, then break, subvert, and replace them. The most important rules are the rules you make for yourself. Don't be afraid to break, subvert and replace your own rules either. But don't forget, although we have an ambition to break the rules and work outside the proverbial box, there's still a lot of creatively useful stuff left in the box.

Paradox and Uncertainty

All artists are liars, I am an artist.

Any consideration of art and creative process is necessarily replete with paradox. Create by the rules/break the rules. Paradoxical thinking may well serve as a definition of creativity. In fact, cognitive disinhibition, often used to describe a psychological pathology, may also be a central feature in the way creative people think. (Carson) Google “paradox in creative process” and look at the many results. Every suggestion on enhancing your creative process is countered by an alternative notion. (Doyle)

Among my favorite books on creativity is *Creative Quest* by Questlove. He provides his personal experience as well as reports and interviews with many other creatives. He points out

that his book is not a one size fits all approach. On which side of a paradox you may fall is entirely dependent on who you are, your current creative circumstances and where you are in your career. (Questlove)

“Don’t overthink things – except when you probably should” (Hiatt).

Uncertainty and paradox are both inevitable and necessary elements of the creative process. Only when we finally get where we’re going will we be able to print the map showing how we got there.

How Can We Speak Of Art?

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture”-

(author unknown)

“Art is alchemy, we turn base metal into gold, but the more we talk about it we turn gold back into base metal.” (Highwater)

We talk too much in front of art.. We need to spend more time making art and less time talking about it. I’ll do my best to listen to my own advice, but I often overthink it when I shouldn’t.

The reason we make images is because some things are ineffable. So why do we spend so much time talking about it? Why do we listen to critics who more often make pronouncements on what art is bad than tell us what art is good and why?

“If I could say it in words there would be no reason to paint.” Edward Hopper

The School Of Athens



“*The School of Athens*” Raphael ,Wiki Commons photo

The “*School of Athens*” is a Renaissance fresco by Raphael painted in the early 1500’s for the Vatican. The painting depicts the most famous philosophers and scientists, from different times and places, all gathered in one place to share and learn from each other.

In his book “*How to Be an Artist*” Jerry Saltz suggests creating your own mental *School of Athens* by gathering the images and thoughts of the artists who inspire you most. They can be from any time in the history of human image making, from the earliest cave painters to the most recent digital artists (Saltz). You might also want to include quotes or epithets from artists you find most inspirational and meaningful in guiding your creative process.

“All art is contemporary when viewed in the present” (Schjeldahl).

Collect your inspirations, but with the caveat that it's best if they be limited to the most important. In *Creative Quest*, Questlove insists that it's important to curate your inspirations and influences. He had catalogued so many that they became cumbersome and meaningless and many were entirely tangential to his work. He began to re-evaluate and curate his inspirations, culling them into a manageable and more specific groups of the most important. (Questlove)

Inspiration

“Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work. If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work. All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself.” (Close)

Inspiration is a complex topic. Often, when we say we're inspired, we really mean we're entertained, or sometimes just envious. I've often muttered to myself “I could have done that better” But I hadn't and some one else did. In other cases I've been inspired but finished work was just a little to close to that of my inspiration to be acceptable.

Real inspiration needs to be distinguished from the other possibilities of imitation and outright plagiarism. As discussed earlier, we all have access to the entire history of art, the DNA of art. Anything in the public domain, which is to say almost anything more than 70 years old, is available for our use in any way we wish. But most of us want to add something genuinely new to the mix, to participate in the creative discussion, and perhaps add just a tiny little bit to that DNA

Imitation is valid. Historically, it has been the most utilized method of learning how to be an artist. We imitate the masters and eventually we become transformative and add our own

sensibilities to the work that we do. It's good practice and training to directly imitate the masters and their masterpieces. But in my view, it's both unethical and unrewarding to present them as your own. In recent history the notion of "Appropriation" has become acceptable; to recreate others work and make some slight alteration, or in some case to outright plagiarize another's work. Several major, well known artists have been sued for plagiarism and lost. Some of those same artists have been entirely unrepentant and unconcerned. Shepard Fairly, Jeff Coons, Richard Prince, and Andy Warhol have all been accused of plagiarism and in some case have lost in the courts. I'll make no judgements publicly about those cases in terms of what's plagiarism and what's legitimate transformative art. But I would caution any artist to guard against wandering over the line in terms of what's acceptable within their own practice, standards, and integrity.

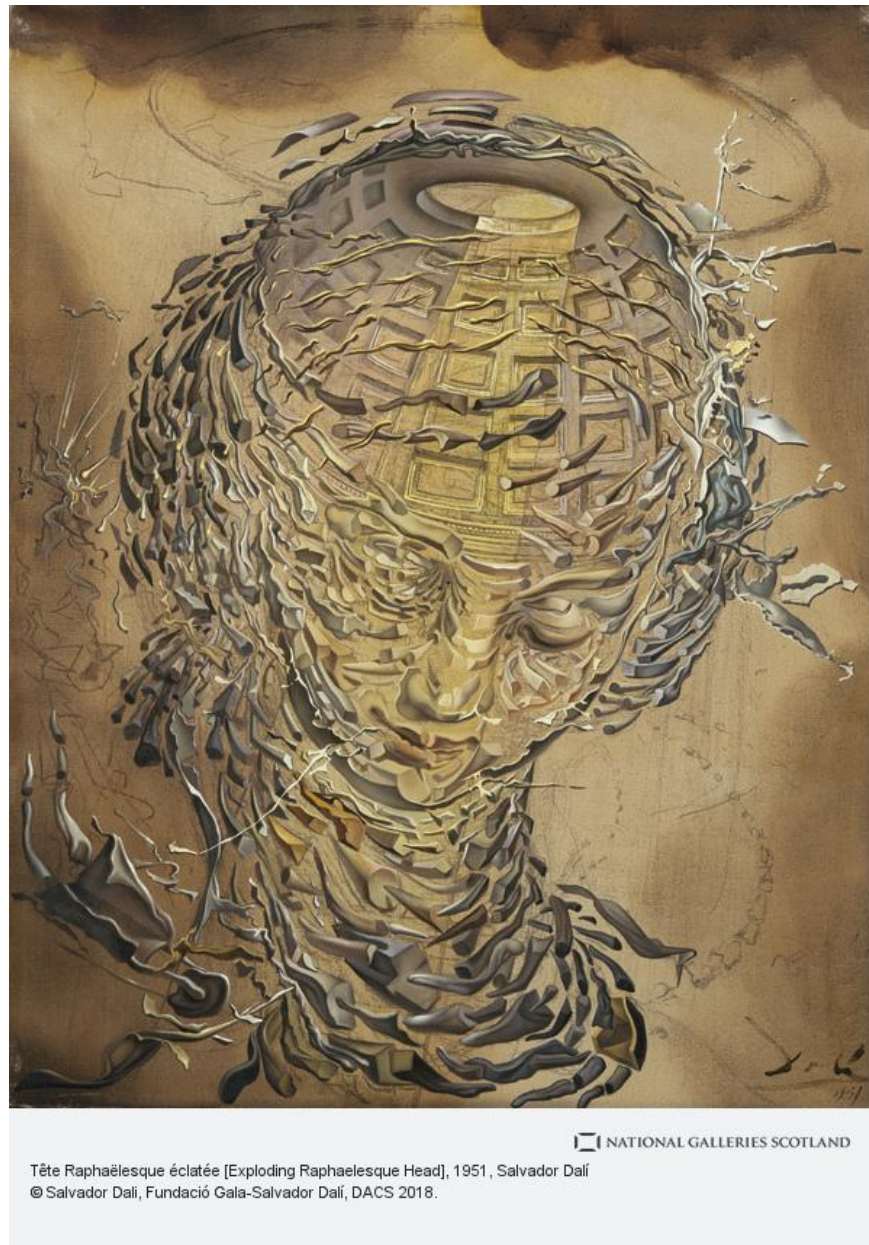
Envy is another emotion often confused with inspiration. I've found that I was succumbing to envy without even realizing that inspiration was being overcome by envy. As I've aged I realize that I don't want my last breath to be tinged with envy. Instead, I'll do my best replace envy with appreciation, celebration and thankfulness for art that inspires me

Envy is debilitating. Again from Jerry Saltz's book "*How to be an Artist*":

"Envy distracts the mind, leaving less room for development and, most important, for honest self criticism. It crowds your imagination with the lives of others, rather than what you need to be doing in your own work" Jerry Saltz. 100

So that leaves us with the question, what is real inspiration.?

Agnes Martin said "Inspiration is a command" (Princeton)



Salvador Dalí is among the artists that I find most inspiring. His work offers many examples and insights into how inspiration can manifest. Although his work was surreal, Dalí's comprehensive study of Renaissance art is evident in almost all of his work. The influence is not hidden or disguised. It's clearly an homage to his influences, yet no one would ever confuse his art with his influences. It's completely transformational. Dalí's "*Exploding Raphaelesque Head*" is an example of Dalí's use of inspiration.



The Pantheon, Rome - photo by the author

The interior of the Pantheon forms the back interior of the busts head.



The Angelus, Jean-Francois Millet - Wikimedia commons

The wheelbarrow from Millet's "*Angelus*" is evident in the bottom left of Dali's bust. The wheelbarrow appears in many of Dali's pieces.



La Perla di Modena, Raphael, Wiki Commons

Raphael's *La Perla di Modena*, is flipped horizontally as the bust in Dali's painting. Without copying, imitating, or plagiarizing, the opportunities to utilize inspiration are many. Color palettes, tonal range, composition, alternate posing, alternative composition, are a few of the many elements of inspiration that one can use in an alternate way. We can borrow from the DNA of art history and create transformative images without direct imitation or plagiarism.

But always, inspiration is in the work, as we are reminded by the quote from Chuck Close. Inspiration will come as we work, perhaps not every moment of every day, but as we simply get to work, the inspiration will come.

And we must be able to accept the many failures along the way that allow the few genuine and creative pieces that come from working.

“The function of the overwhelming majority of your artwork is simply to teach how to make the small fraction of your artwork that soars”.(Orland 5)

The sheer volume of work that you produce will result in the best work you produce. Orland and Bayles provide a story about a ceramics class in which the instructor divided that class into two groups. One group would be graded on the quality of their best pieces, the other group solely on the quantity in pounds of work they produced. As it turns out, the highest quality works were produced by the group with the highest quantity of work. (Orland, Bayles 29)

Inspiration comes from the work So... less talking, less thinking, more work! This is a notion which I've often shared with students and I've occasionally had the same advice returned to me when I've been blocked. My wife, Joanne, who is responsible of my having become an artist (perhaps some day she'll forgive herself) has reminded me "We gave up a lot for you to be an artist, now make some damn art!"

CREATIVE PROCESS



(author unknown)

There are many descriptions of the creative process as steps varying in number from 3 or 4 steps to 10 or 12. The example above is one that I think will resonate with most of us.

A more formal example would be:

- A prepared mind (learning Craft)
- Getting Stuck (incubation)

- A reversal of thinking (challenging assumptions)
- The creative moment (AHA)

A prepared mind is necessary; we don't just create out of thin air. We learn our craft.

Looking at artists like Dali and Picasso we'll see that their earliest work is quite conventional.

First, they learned to paint.

Getting stuck is the part of creativity during which the magic occurs, the lightning in a bottle. Although it may feel miserable and hopeless, we work very hard, sometime banging our heads against the wall trying to bring a vague idea to fruition. We set it aside for hours, days, or weeks, and months later while driving, walking the dog, or taking a shower, the solution and path forward suddenly come to us as if by magic. Your muse has arrived, or more technically, incubation has taken place. You've primed yourself with all the hard work and head banging, set the whole thing aside, and in the interim you've unconsciously been at work whole time.

Learn to trust that what seems like hard work with no results will ultimately serve your creative needs. Creativity is not easy! But it is possible with work and patience. When your muse finally does show up is when more hard work begins. Listen to the muses when they speak, they are not patient and will abandon you in a heartbeat if you don't give them your full attention and get to work. Getting Stuck is not a failure to create, it is the very process of creating. Trust that it will come if you put in the work.

Often associated with creativity is the mental act of taking a basic assumption, a fundamental rule, and turning it inside out, standing it on its head, or simply throwing it out the

window. *Proper* focus, The Golden Mean, *proper* exposure are all up for revision or abandonment in a creative situation.

Accident is often the mechanism of reversing an assumption. Think of all the creative accidents in the history of innovation: penicillin, the Post it Note, the slinky. I've personally had success from accidental under-exposure, over-exposure, and out of focus results that led to images that I found very satisfying. Mistakes and accidents are often the way finding signs to success.

Your creative moment may come as an "Aha" revelation where everything becomes clear to you in an instant. Just as often, you may not recognize your creativity for sometime after the fact. You need the time to ponder what you've done before you can appreciate its creativity. Creativity is composing something that hasn't been realized before. Until we've seen it or experienced it over time, we may not recognize it.

The nemesis of creativity is judgment. Judgment forecloses your inclination to take chances and see what happens. We certainly don't want to take creative risks with client work. If we create for competition, we inhibit ourselves with concerns about whether the judges will like it. Competition is great for building craft but an impediment to creativity. Create for yourself. If it becomes suitable for competition then enter it, but don't create for competition.

Don't worry about if it's good! This was a major revelation to me after a long period of being creatively blocked. I didn't realize that in simply evaluating whether what I was working on was good or not, I was exercising judgment. Just do it and suspend judgement until later. There is anxiety and uncertainty in the creative process. I don't know if it's essential to the process, or simply an unfortunate feature. But if we can approach the initial stages of the creative

process as child's play, we might well accelerate the process. Children playing don't overthink it, don't worry about if it's good, and they tend to change the rules when it suits them. Sounds like a suitable plan to me.

Failure is another intrinsic aspect of creativity. We need to embrace our failures, they define our successes. If we don't fail we're clearly not taking enough chances. For all the successful and impactful images we may see, there is a much larger pile of failures, near misses, and not quite fully realized images that are the basis for the smaller number of successes. Failure is part of the work, part of the process.

Above all else, engaging in the creative process means getting to work! Until we get to work, nothing else matters. As I've said elsewhere in this paper, I've had to be reminded more than once that I needed to stop whining and get to work. Expanding on that theme, my mentee, Julie Savage reminded me with great emphasis, : "Get to work #&%@&@\$&#%&@, MORE WORK!" (Like Joyce Wilson, many of Julie's quotes require redaction in print)

Style

What is style? An internet search will yield dozens of results, but I have found none that I think are definitive. For me, the closest description is that of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, when he declined to define pornography and simply wrote "I know it when I see it" This quote, despite its particular context, is the precise definition of style. We know it when we see it. Even without a comprehensive background in art history, it doesn't take a great deal of exposure to readily distinguish between a Picasso and a Reubens, or a Dali and a Raphael. We know it when we see it even without a full understanding of the technical differences in painting technique. Look at the range of historic depictions of David, the boy who slew Goliath with a

rock. Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Donatello, Bernini, and many others created depictions all of which are easily distinguished styles of the very same literary figure. And we know it when we see it, even if we can't articulate a description of the differences.

Style: We don't find it, it finds us. If we try to just pick one we end up with a gimmick, or worse, chronic repetition. But this is not to say that a style will suddenly arrive at your doorstep like an Amazon order. Like many issues in image making, we must do the work. Style will emerge and evolve over time.

Style is a Ready, Fire, Aim process. We have no idea where our arrows will land until we start shooting them. And style is a moving target.

“Instead of shooting arrows at someone else's target, which I've never been very good at, I make my own target around wherever my arrow happens to have landed. You shoot your arrow and then you paint your bulls eye around it, and therefore you have hit the target dead centre.” (Brian Eno)

Do the work and your style will emerge. It's as simple as that. But once your style develops and begins to present itself, there is another issue to confront. What do you do when you become a hostage to your own style? What do you do when you attempt a new direction and everything you try devolves into what you've always done?

This is an issue of current importance to me, and as of yet, I have no real answer, or perhaps too many answers. I'm hopeful that my process inventory (see below) will be of some help. A process inventory is not a style, but it is a schematic representation of what has led to a style. I'm in the process of making deliberate changes to my process, replacing and making new rules for myself, inverting long held assumption and choices, and trying to gradually subvert my

own process and become a tourist in a new perspective. I'll be a traveler deciding what to pack, what to leave behind, and what to acquire when I get there. (Questlove)

Personal Process Inventory

Several years ago I decided to develop an inventory of my personal process. Years later, after a prolonged period of feeling stuck, I revisited that inventory for information about what I might change to pull myself out of my own rut. Along with help from some of my creative friends, I've found it invaluable in redirecting myself and making progress at creating something outside of my typical approach. I've tried not to worry about whether it was good or not, only that it was different.

I encourage anyone who will listen to create a personal process inventory. It must be written down to be effective, simply rolling thoughts around your mind is not enough. By writing it down you'll begin to see the relationship between various elements of your process. My process inventory comprises three - categories. the technical, conceptual and personal aspects of process. Writing it all down helps me to see how the categories overlap and impact each other. Let me emphasize that there are no right answers, only honest answers. Be honest and unvarnished in your answers and the exercise will benefit you.

Technical Process

Elements of your technical process are simply the cameras, lenses, lighting, software, etc. that you use. It may seem trivial, but you may also find that your technical choices may be more related to aspects of your conceptual and personal process than you've realized. Which of your choices are actual choices and which are merely a matter of habit or convenience? If you shoot everything on your 28-80 utility zoom using a prime, wide or tele may open up whole new

possibilities. On the other hand, maybe you've been sucked down the rabbit hole of technology such that you put far more emphasis on equipment than you probably should. If you're thinking *that* new lens, light, tripod, or plugin will change everything, it probably won't.

Photography is equipment intensive. It's easy to become obsessed with gear. How much of that once obsessively desired new gear is laying around your studio unused? I know I have a pile of such stuff.

Conceptual Process

What is your niche? What subjects do you like to shoot the most? Are you so wrapped up in your client work that you don't even ponder what you really love to do? This happens to most of us at some point in our careers. We do whatever pays the bills and sometimes it descends into burnout and threatens the joy and satisfaction we once took in our art.

What color palette do you prefer? Compositional style? Shooting style? Do you prefer using a tripod or the freedom of hand held shooting? Do you take 3 hours to set up your shot and take 3 exposures? Or do you take three minutes to set up your shot and take 3,000 exposures? (I'm in the later group and have no trouble defending my overshooting). Do you shoot from the hip and discover what you like later, or do you pre-visualize everything? Do you get it in camera or prefer to create in post production? How do you use color to illustrate passion? Love? Fear? Anger?

There are many, many more conceptual issues to consider. As you began to write them down, I hope you'll have some epiphanies about your process; some new realizations about how you do what you do.

One of the most fundamental concepts I've run across as a part of conceptual process is: Are you a windows photographer or a mirrors photographer? The first mention of this concept was in a 1978 exhibition at the MOMA titled "Mirrors and Windows". John Szarkowski gave an explanation of the concept in his book *Mirrors and Windows*.(Szarkowski)

A number of interpretations are held for the mirrors and windows metaphor, but in my view it applies to photographic artists in a fundamental way. Do you see your images out there through the window of your camera, or do you see them in your head, the mirror of your own mind. Do you wander environments until you see your image, or do you manipulate the environment or the image to achieve your results? Windows photographers might be wildlife and landscape photographers, architectural photographers, photojournalists and sometimes portrait and fashion photographers. Mirror photographers tend to visualize an image and seek to gather its components to manipulate in the computer, or create with set design, wardrobe, environments and contrived posing in front of the camera. I once thought we tended to be one or the other, either window or mirror creators. I've since realized we may be both, even when working on a single image. I've found it a very useful metaphor for identifying an important part of our conceptual processes.

Personal Process

“As I travel through life, I gather experiences that lie imprinted on the deepest strata of memory, and there they ferment, are transformed, and sometimes rise to the surface and sprout like strange plants from other worlds. What is the fertile humus of the

subconscious composed of? Why are certain images converted into recurrent themes in nightmares or writing?”(Allende)

I believe, as do many, the the best art is personal. An inventory of the personal memories will form your art, and may also bring to light many things both joyous and painful that you forgotten. And as you do, be aware that episodic memory is known to be unreliable, memories change themselves every time you bring them back for review.

But, they are your memories, often involving profound emotions, and far more than facts, it's the emotions evoked that are important as a creative. Your memory is your narrative. Tell it as you will.

The artist Joe Andoe in a story he gave to WNYC's Radiolab is the most illustrative example I can provide. It illustrates his memories of early youth as they re-invigorate his painting practice, he'd been on the verge of quitting. But when he quit and later resumed painting solely for himself, his memories informed his work and he suddenly became collected and exhibited widely.(Pourang)

We will, of course, remember the big horrendous memories, loss of a loved one, the shock and fear of serious illness, or the blend of great pride and abject fear of having a child be sent off to war. The little, less dramatic but poignant memories are important too; a kiss on the cheek, fishing with your dad, a child's first steps. These memories bounce back to you from 10 or 20 or 50 or 60 years ago.

“A post traumatic pleasure disorder from swimming upstream in a river of time” (Joe Andoe)

Making your art personal, drawing on your history and life narrative will result in art that only you can make.

In A Nutshell

Declare yourself an artist!

Look at art! Look at everything! Change your brain!

Involve yourself with the DNA of art.

Learn, break, subvert, and replace the rules!

Embrace uncertainty, paradox, fear, and creative anxiety.

Less talking, less thinking, more working.

Collect and curate your inspirations.

Brush your teeth with your left hand.(Savage)

Document your process.

Take an out of focus image.

Send this author \$10 (or more).

Get to work: Inspiration is in the process!

No really! GET TO WORK NOW!

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