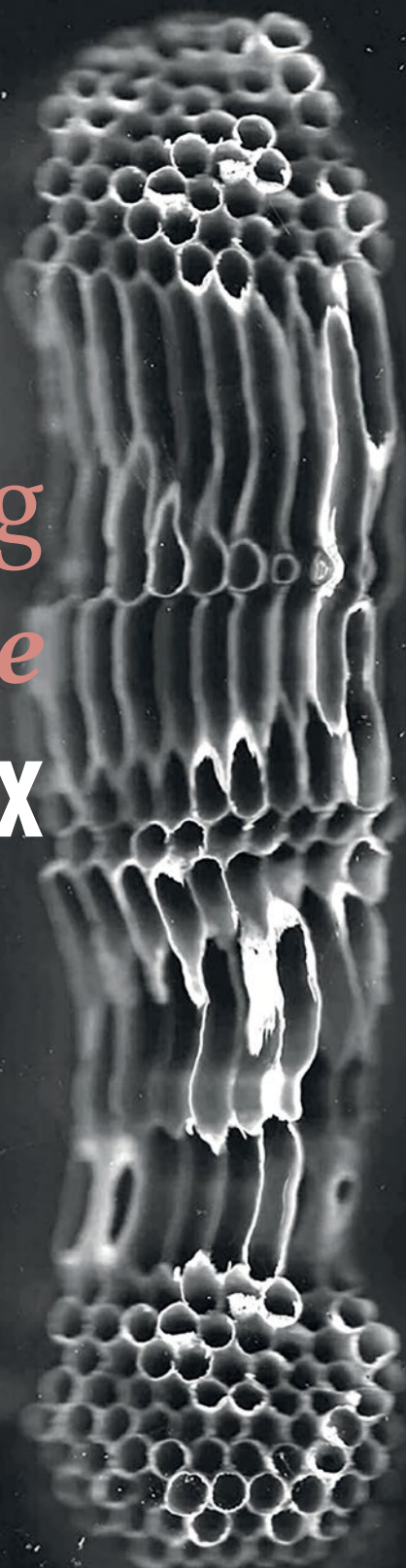




Stepping *Outside* the Box

**On Work with
Students and
Generative
Photography
Going Astray**

Maciej Lewandowski Photograph taken during the Digital Photography
Workshop under the supervision of Justyna Staśkiewicz-Jonak, PhD



Justyna Staśkiewicz-Jonak, PhD

Abstract

The article undertakes the topic of contemporary digital photography in the context of teaching and artistic practice. The author focuses on the importance of tradition – from Jan Bulhak to Władysław Strzemiński – and the role of classic compositional categories (rhythm, perspective, structure). She points to the need of emphasising the conscious formation of visual narration in the teaching process – encompassing both experiments involving means of expression, and the ability to benefit creatively from the richness of the predecessors' oeuvre. The dissimilarity of digital photography as such as well as generative digital photography has been emphasised, with attention paid to the value of the source image and the importance of work experience in independent processing of the photographic material. The article indicates that the photography education requires students to step outside the box, to individualise topics and have in-depth contact with the artistic tradition, which constitutes a foundation for the creative independence of future photographers.

#digital photography #photographic art #photography education #one-point perspective
#composition #generative art #source image #art education

Contemporary digital photography has been developing in various aspects. It follows the demand for various types of documentation, creates illustrations for articles in daily newspapers, information publications, publications on fashion etc. Human curiosity is also a driver for image hunters, travelling the world in search of reportage, sensation, illustration. In their first steps, a photography student involuntarily imitates popular poses and compositions, stereotypes, or fashion icons. There is nothing wrong with that, it is natural for visual arts to learn through watching and imitation. Specific, familiar shots may seem desirable, particularly at the beginning they are more interesting than a search for new presentations. Stepping outside the box requires effort.

Jan Bulhak introduced the term “photographic art” as an artistic, well-thought-out form of photography; Based on his criteria, digital photographic art is distinguished today from digital, generative or analog graphics inspired by photography.

Can digital photographic art be considered art? Much less often than graphics, sculpture or painting. The difference

stems from the nature of the tool; photography, in its basic and common application, is by definition imitative, whereas painting, graphics, sculpture by their very nature require mechanical transposition of observation into gesture, which necessarily requires individuality and at the same time guarantees it. If we understand art as a language of processing sensory data into metaphor, for example a visual one, we can try to apply certain “gradation”: the more consciously the object referred to as the “work of art” is created, the more knowledge and thought (understanding of technical aspects, historical or cultural contexts, etc., and our own relationship to it) is involved by the artist in the process of creation, and the more the work is “artificial” and “creative” and less “imitative”. In a digital darkroom we can obtain photographic prints with a very interesting spectrum of artistic effects (solarisation, cyanotype, tritone, exposing the negative in the analogue meaning of this word). New styles in digital photography often stem from a fascination with digital darkroom tools. As in any field of art, it is also necessary here to avoid schematism and subordination to the algorithm.



Magdalena Laskowska Photograph taken during the Digital Photography Workshop under the supervision of Justyna Staśkiewicz-Jonak, PhD

It is impossible not to include artificial intelligence in these musings. It is very alluring, it is the “enchanted pencil*” of our times, but its properties are imitative and predictable, maybe it is perceived similarly to photography at its beginnings? Its charm lies in the returns to well-known motifs. By definition, it feeds on what has already existed. In the creative photography education, however, the emphasis is on the need to formulate individual and reliable narratives providing tools to go beyond the “database” – to understand the mechanisms that build it and allow for the creation of something new, albeit embedded in a broad cultural context.

Digital photographic art, freed from the obligation to record everything, may rely on such graphic foundations as rhythm, perspective, structure, and composition. In other words, regard-

less of the simplicity or complexity of an image, grammatical or semantic narrative enclosed within the framework of the composition should appear. Distributing compositional weight and zooming in or out of the frame are just some of the elements of the canon of image building taken into account by contemporary masters of this medium.

There are many different artistic aspects of photography and the talents necessary to perform it are also different. For example, there is constant demand for portrait photography. A professional portrait session requires tact and sensitiveness from both parties, especially the photographer. The psychological element is very important, working together can involve crossing personal boundaries, therefore clear understanding between the model and the photographer is necessary. These

problems become even more complicated during the production of a reportage in which the ethical element plays a very important role. There are photographic talents focusing on the gesture, individuality, creation. Some artists can build tension and record events in an intriguing way, and others mainly concentrate on structure.

Working with students

The digital photography education carries many challenges. This very popular, accessible and dynamically developing medium is the younger sister of analogue photography. The core is seemingly the same, but their comparison makes it impossible not to notice how easy it is to master the handling of a digital camera in terms of theory and technological aspects. This generates unprecedented interest in taking photographs which record various aspects of life. Also, memory banks in which photographs exist only in a digital form make you lazy. A serious challenge appears on top of the preparation for and taking the photograph, as well as the processing of the digital file – preparing students to select the appropriate medium to preserve the given work. We have a huge historic heritage at our disposal here, both in the field of photography and printing.

The ubiquitous screen limits the creator and deprives the average user of the opportunity to explore the plastic boundaries of the image. Therefore, when working with students, I take a great care to ensure that they consciously build the correct pattern.

Drawing a clear demarcation line between digital photographic art and graphics that use photography is a difficult task. This line is determined in teaching practice, during the analysis of the stylistic and technical activities accompanying the process of transforming a photographic image. It is the more difficult considering that contemporary photographic nomenclature contains multiple paradoxes. Previously, a "negative" was – as the name suggests – the reverse of the image. Today, a "digital negative" is a file that contains detailed data from a recorded image that goes far beyond the scope of what can be captured in a photograph. "Aperture," contrary to its literal meaning, refers to the degree of exposure of the lens. Decisions made during the editing process in graphics programs involve consciously selecting setting profiles and many other effects to align with the well-known canons of contemporary photography.

In the teaching process, I introduce students to issues connected with the concept of contemporary photographic art in a systematic way, referring among other things to Jan Bulhak's theory. The basic, smallest element that builds the image on the photographic film is film grain, and the basic medium of digital photographic art is a pixel. Thanks to their uniqueness, pixels carrying information about digital recording are more valuable for us than those generated artificially (even by the best algorithms); having the original information, we can use it consciously to build an artistic statement, skilfully differentiating it. The lack of this source information means that we are dealing with a meaningless mass in the literal sense of this term. If, therefore, we can use the source recording, we trim the excess information to convey only the information most important for the student and their artistic concept. This is only possible where the initial information resource is complete; then we have things to give up.

In a photographic studio, access to tethering has reduced the distance between the recording and the visualisation of an image. It is possible to almost immediately correct compositional, technical and lighting errors. We can quickly guide the student through observing the changing light on the set, and thus the changing composition. The input image is modified on the set and discussed then and there. The student can skip the previously hours-long process from the exposure to viewing the result in the form of a print. This apparent ease creates new, particularly important requirements for the theoretical and practical preparation of a student for the photographic representation of a given artistic problem.

Multipoint light measurement systems, increasingly improved matrices, previews on camera screens, a tracking system for selected elements – all this allows for increasingly precise and faster intervention in the photographic process. Never before in the history of photography has it been so easy to verify the technological correctness of a photograph.

The greatest difficulties arise from the nature of knowing and understanding both the semantic and structural nature of an image. The perception of a human eye is complicated. These processes have been described very aptly by Władysław Strzemiński in his "Vision Theory" ("Teoria widzenia") through the analysis of an image combining several perspectives in a single composition.

To follow the processes of perception at least a little, you can use multi-exposure, which is one of the tools for superposition (overlying) subsequent images and modifying the one-point perspective (another way to solve this problem is collage). Conscious viewing of a photograph can also begin from the direction in which details are traced in the composition: moving from focusing on details to the overall impression of taking in the whole. This human ability to work with the eye while creating an image concept is unique, very different from technical recording, and, depending on the concept, it can help shape new worlds. Then comes the stage of working with aperture, distance, and depth of field adjustment.

A characteristic feature of photography is the recording of one-point perspective, first described in the Renaissance and achieved through the use of a camera obscura. This perception of perspective, intertwined with the camera since the invention of optical tools, is being reassessed. Its artistic utility sparked heated debates (including denial of its value) as early as the Renaissance. In the photography education, optical tools deforming the classic one-point perspective are used deliberately. This approach allows students to recognize that the traditional model of vision is not an objective representation of reality, but rather a convention that can be modified and critically analyzed. Students practice using smartphones equipped with dedicated lenses, creating visual images very close to those from centuries ago. Dynamic compositions captured this way justify the loss of quality resulting from the use of generative tools (a smartphone with a dedicated wide-angle lens, a fisheye lens, a random lens, or other algorithms that refract lenticular optical vision). By conducting these creative experiments, we engage students in a discourse that was began by van Eyck and continued by artists such as de Chirico and Escher. We compare the results of our

experiments with similar ones known from the history of art: similarity enables us to find the criteria, knowing the criteria enables us to then consciously select more advanced photographic tools and photo processing.

Metamorphosis, transformation, nonlinearity of image. Visual puzzle

As I have indicated before, experimental methods used in the process of creative development prove that even a simple change in the focal length of the lens affects the vanishing point, which can lead to the deliberate creation of an image. The diversity of perspectives in photographic practice constitutes a significant teaching potential. In this context, the teacher plays the role of a guide, indicating directions of research and stimulating experiments. When the person recording the image is highly sensitive and ensures appropriate technical parameters, even an image from a smartphone can provide valuable artistic impressions. Something as concise as a pixel can inspire a statement in another medium, as exemplified by Gerhard Richter's stained-glass window in the Cologne Cathedral, inspired by pixels, which recalls a far-reaching suprematist "hunt" for the right composition of rectangles.

In digital photography (it should be distinguished from ordinary "digital recording"), it assumes the artist's participation in the creation of images and preparation for taking the photo. In the teaching process, a distinction is made between the initial file and the workshop print and interpretation of the photograph. Given that the algorithms were written based on the actual tools of a photographer's work, we create a useful commentary on the optical darkroom program.

In the teaching process, compositional exercises with rhythm and perspective are used because these issues will be found in the future workspace of a professional graphic designer using



Magdalena Ćwintal Photograph taken during the Digital Photography Workshop under the supervision of Justyna Staśkiewicz-Jonak, PhD

photography. Photography fosters the exploration of one's own ideas. However, viewing and studying the masterpieces of photography and painting masters are important to acquire and deepen one's understanding of the history of imaging, and thus find a place for digital photography in contemporary art.

The ability to find light and moments worth capturing in everyday life is an important issue. It has been emphasised that the deepening of the perspective in creating a photographic image and its contents remains closely connected with the author's experiences. This phenomenon is defined by the principle of projection, so aptly described by Prof. Ernst Gomrich in his book "Art and Illusion" ("Sztuka i złudzenie"). It is common knowledge that the experience gained in itself does not influence the type of image recorded, and it is only the provocation of thematic work, work on capturing the subject in a digital image that leads to the image and actions taken beyond

the ordinary understanding of photography. Focusing on these principles does not mean neglecting portraiture, reportage, or sociological recording. It simply shifts the focus to other issues, less connected with acting-directing aspects. The act of taking a single photograph in a portrait or reportage requires additional consideration of anthropological and psychological issues, and may interact with the work of set designers, lighting directors, and makeup artists.

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In contrast to generative photography, digital photography captures light here and now, it is a barometer of its intensity, it positions objects in space in a continuous way. Generative photography, on the other hand, calculates the relations between spots and proposes specific sequences of them, making (indeed, increasingly rare) mistakes in processing objects as obvious and beautiful as hair, hands, and intricate structures for which it is unable to select the right sequences of elements. These are completely different, yet seemingly coexisting, issues. It is an interesting experience to compare photos taken with a DSLR and a smartphone. The apparent sharpness and extraordinarily attractive color vibrancy achieved in smartphone photos are strikingly captivating to the layperson. But are their bright and seemingly attractive forms truly the modern, important image? A question arises: what is important when the attractive form of photos taken by smartphone cameras and similarly high-quality equipment owes its effect almost exclusively to algorithms, not the mechanical capabilities of the camera?

With a little effort, photos taken with a modern SLR or mirrorless camera possess a subtle sense of space and authenticity. They don't pose the same cumbersome demands as traditional analog photography, but they still rely on certain technical limitations that allow for a more conscious depiction of reality. Generativity often offers smooth planes packed with similar sequences of pixels. This is quite a significant drawback: even in drawing lessons, we place great emphasis on varying strokes in light and shadow, as this leads to the creation of the illusion of space. Excessive repetition and mechanicalness are perceived negatively, depriving the artist of variety and impoverishing the expression.

An untrained eye, on a daily basis drawn to short-form content on social media (e.g., Instagram reels), has no chance of developing broader aesthetic patterns. The monotony of visual stimuli causes the viewer to miss the opportunity to notice the subtleties and nuances of imagery. The simplicity of the message and the obviousness of generativity are highly suggestive and dominant. Thus,

learning how to build artistic vision becomes particularly important in the teaching process.

The graininess of an image as well as the intriguing, original distribution of pixels constitute a significant aesthetic value, while their excessive arrangement can be perceived as unnatural, suggesting a raster element introduced by artificial intelligence. This is where new graphic horizons open and close. With an emphasis on "close", because regular use of the generative standard, as any mechanical unilateral experience, restricts the future adept of the craft and unites them with the shapeless crowd. The joy of being able to choose how to observe the light and the shooting plan constitutes an educational value imparted to students.

Smartphone photography, on the other hand, can serve as a sketch in photographic work. These types of preliminary projects foster more efficient and conscious use of the digital camera. However, they require determination not to replace artistic practice in which a deeper creative process is expected. Photographs taken with a smartphone are excellent as "kick-start" images which may be taken, analysed and abandoned so that you can embark on a true journey of photographic expression.

Even just two months of work on a frame allows for a more interesting depiction of the space. The myth of inspiration replaced by the constant provocation of encountering an image brings results, but when it comes to building the final complex image, the simplified set of data from a smartphone turns out to be too poor. This example shows both strengths and limitations of contemporary digital photography. They are also expressed in the paradox of manuality. However, despite the difficulties caused by the manual adjustment, we know that experiencing such work is invaluable to developing the ability to decide what is important. Based on this, the user shapes their own manual preferences in the camera. This enables conscious pursuit of graphic and compositional values, so characteristic of the diverse artistic trends of 20th-century photography, so aptly described by Urszula Czartoryska.

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The artistic vision in the area of photographic activities is also expanded by the treatment of a single photograph as an element of a mosaic and allowing for randomness and other activities related to the author's concept. The content of experimental and creative photography visible among other things in the axial and mirror compositions of Roman Cieślewicz, in the intriguing juxtapositions of Hockney's multi-photographs, or in the photographic works of Zofia Kulik, constitute important points of reference in the process of artistic education. As eminently original works, based on the artist's conscious, original decision, they encourage individual exploration, as opposed to simply copying a work. They demonstrate the value of asking questions and formulating original interpretations of issues present in the studio.

In teaching practice, it is noticed that such diverse, but always conscious ways of treating photography inspire well-thought-out visions, which then penetrate even the "second circulation", including the kitsch filling the space of photography, including student photography, which is the main area of reference. The greater the emphasis we place on the individualisation of topics and subjective photographic preferences at the level of inspiration and education, the greater the diversity of documentation of aesthetic exploration, and also the greater the value of teaching in the educational process. This way the unavoidable repetitive nature of a large part of work generated in academic settings gains individual, noble features constituting the foundations of future professional independence of students. ■

Justyna Staśkiewicz-Jonak, PhD

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