

Just Say Yes!

An essay by Alain Briot. Photos copyright the author. All rights reserved.

If you can't see it, it doesn't count. - Ctein, talking about photographic technique.

Introduction

As a digital photographer, if you haven't been asked this question you eventually will: "Do you manipulate your photographs?" Sometimes it comes under another aspect: "Do you change the colors?" And occasionally it goes straight to the heart of the matter: "Is this real?"

There is a certain percentage of the public who believes that fine art photographs must represent reality. There are people who do not know that there are differences between what they see and what the camera captures. Finally, there are individuals who do not understand that a photograph is a two dimensional representation of reality and not reality itself because reality is far more complex, perceived by us through five senses and not just one.

Some people are willing to change their minds when these things are explained to them. Others have their minds made up and do not want to be bothered by the facts. Those are the ones that I am referring to in this essay.

The people in this last category not only believe that photographs must represent reality, they also believe that to achieve this photographs must be unaltered. They believe that a photograph must be printed exactly the way it comes out of the camera. While this may be true for certain types of technical photographs, when it comes to art and to my work I believe the exact opposite to be true, namely that photographs must be altered in one way or another in order to have a chance to represent the reality that I perceive.

My premise for this essay is that a fine art photograph, created by an artist with the goal of expressing himself or herself, is a representation of this artist's view of reality - a representation of this artist's vision - and not a representation of the world as others may see it. This can be a blessing or a crime, depending on your opinion regarding this matter.

Eventually, this is a matter of opinion. Personally, my opinion is that a photograph cannot capture reality as we experience it physically and I can back it up with facts (I do so in my other essays on this subject including *Of Cameras and Art* and *The Eye and the Camera*). However, I found that debating this point with people who do not agree with me isn't necessarily the smartest decision. So, I propose a different approach, one that works well for me.

A little bit of history...

For a long time I didn't know what to say when confronted by people asking me if my work was real, if I manipulated the colors, or if I changed something in the scenes I photographed. In fact, as a fledging artist unsure of where I stood, I felt threatened by these questions and was more concerned with defending myself than with anything else.



At that time I believed that explaining my artistic approach would help. So I answered by saying that this - the color changes, the manipulations, the modifications I made to the image - were representative of my style and that my goal was to show how I saw the world.

I also explained that I preferred to call what I do “enhancements” rather than “manipulations,” because the latter was a derogative statement while the former was positive and complimentary.

Unfortunately, my efforts were to no avail. These fine differences in terminology were lost on these people. Furthermore, their minds were made up and they did not want to be bothered by the facts. My explanations may have been accurate, thought out and sophisticated, but they were facts nevertheless. While they may have had a chance to be heard in an academic setting, they were completely useless in a real world situation.

I also thought that doing all this would help in regards to selling my work. I believed that I could change people’s mind and that once this was achieved they would buy my photographs. What I discovered was how many people have their minds made up and don’t want to be bothered by the facts. I also discovered that people who do not believe what you say, or who do not like what you do, will not buy your work. After all, I am selling art. And to buy art, someone has to like the work and often like the artist as well. When people don’t like one or the other, or worse don’t like either, trying to make a sale is not just futile, it is delusional.

What I discovered overall was that my explanations had little effect on these people. While some believed me, most were unconvinced. What I did not know then, was that the majority of those asking these questions were primarily interested in starting an argument. They knew that what I showed in my work was my vision. They asked if it was real not because they wondered about what my answer would be, but because they did not like my vision of reality. Certainly, a few – a minority — really did not understand how my work was created. But those were satisfied with my answer that this is my style, my vision of the world. Those that I am talking about here are the others, those that wouldn’t accept that answer as valid.

I finally saw the light and decided on a different course of action. I decided that in front of obvious suspicion regarding the honesty of my answers, I would give the most direct and least questionable answer possible. I decided, in a sense, that I would act as if I was in a court of law, where the party being questioned, the party whose actions are at stake, is asked to answer with a simple “yes” or “no.” In short, and to get to the point, I decided to *just say yes*.

The Art of saying Yes

When you are asked “do you manipulate your colors?” and you answer “yes” you create an entirely different situation than when you start explaining why you do what you do. When you say “yes”, you state the facts and nothing but the facts: “Yes, I do manipulate my colors.” Although the person asking the question may not like your answer, it is difficult to question this answer without questioning your personal integrity.

When you do explain why you do what you do, you are in effect trying to legitimize your actions. In that case, three things need to be explained. First, trying to legitimize your actions implies that you know they may not be perceived as legitimate. Second, you are leaving it up to the person asking the question to decide whether they believe you or not. Third, you are opening the door for a lengthy discussion because the person asking the question now has the option of taking apart your answer point by point.

In other words, although I was speaking the truth when I tried to explain myself, I was giving control to the person asking the question. Once I had given my answer, they were in control because it was up to them to decide whether they believed my explanations or not, and up to them to decide how they were going to respond. I was also confusing the matter by explaining in a lengthy manner what could have been answered with just one word: yes or no. They could legitimately ask why I was not saying “Yes” or just saying “No”. They had grounds to question my integrity regarding what I was really doing in my work.

Once I decided to just say “yes,” I took control of the situation. Why? Simply because when someone answers a question in the most straightforward manner possible, the two only options available are to either believe this person or not. If you don’t believe that the person is saying the truth, then you must come back with a question as straightforward as their answer, and most likely you will hesitate doing so because you will expect a second answer just as straightforward as the first one. You also run the chance of coming across as insulting. After all, someone you just met answered your question in the most straightforward and to the point manner possible. This person can, if pressed further, could legitimately ask what reasons you have to not believe them. Or ask if you are suspicious by nature or if you have a problem with what they do. Finally, they could ask if there is something wrong with you in the first place. Neither option is bound to be pleasant for the person asking the questions. And as a general rule, human beings do not purposefully engage in unpleasant actions.

For example, if someone asks me “Do you manipulate your colors?” and I answer “yes” and they then ask “Is that so?” my answer will be another “yes.” I could say “yes sir” to emphasize my answer, or just because I feel that they need a longer answer, but that is all I would say at a show of my work. If they ask “how do you manipulate your colors?” I will answer “in Photoshop.” And if they say, “Oh, I see, you use Photoshop!” my answer will again be “yes” with or without “Sir.” Of course, the exact words being used and the exact questions being asked vary in their grammatical construction according to the situation, but in my experience, this is how things go.

Drama

Let’s back up a little. My Creative Writing teacher at Northern Arizona University, Allen Woodman, defined drama as being: “two dogs, one bone.” As we all know, such a situation can quickly lead to a dogfight because most dogs will want that one bone for themselves. Dogs rarely share with other dogs.

With humans, fights often occur for the same reason: two individuals both wanting the same thing for themselves. If we metaphorically apply it to the situation discussed in this essay, photographers or photography enthusiasts often enter into a conflict regarding reality because they both believe they describe reality in their work. However, their work looks radically different, although they both photographed the same subject. In this situation, who is right? Who can claim to represent reality? Clearly, it must be one or the other but not both.

This is usually what is at stake when someone looks at my work and asks: “Do you manipulate your colors?” or “Is this real?” They question whether I claim to represent reality or not. If I say that I do, most likely we are going to have an argument because most likely they see reality differently than I do. Therefore, if they believe there is only one possible reality out there, one of us will be wrong. Two photographers, one reality equals a problem.

However, my answer does not point to a conflict. My answer is not “yes, I represent reality.” My answer is “yes” I do manipulate my work. And “yes” I manipulate reality. Therefore, my reality may be different from yours. At conferences, I give a longer answer, explaining, “In fact I clone, change the colors, alter the contrast, even remove houses that look ugly in the middle of a pristine wilderness. In short, I modify reality. What you see is not what I photographed. What you see is how I felt when I created this image. What you see is the world as see it and as I want to show it.”

“Furthermore, I feel great about doing what I do. In fact, I love it and I have never been happier than since I gave myself the freedom of doing so! Not only that, but I write essays describing precisely not only how I do what I do, but teaching others how they can do it too. I even give workshops and seminars and conference presentations about both the techniques I use and the philosophical and rhetorical views that underline my position. And if there is anything else you would like to know about this subject that I have not covered yet, don’t hesitate to ask. I may have overlooked something, and if so I will be glad to fix it right away.”



What I am saying, to go to the root of my message and of my artistic position, is that there isn’t just one reality. Instead, there are multiple realities. And if we limit this discussion to just myself and the person asking the questions mentioned above, then there are at least two different realities: their’s and mine. We both see the world in different ways. I see the world the way it is depicted in my work, and they see the world whichever way they like. That is OK. They can have their reality, I can have my reality, and I don’t see a problem with that whatsoever.

I don’t claim that their reality is wrong or that my reality is right, or that their reality is right and mine is wrong. In fact, I really don’t care which reality is right and wrong. All I know is that I love my reality. It makes me feel great, makes me want to get out of bed in the morning to create more of it, makes me want to go further in describing in greater details exactly what it consists of, and above

all it makes me want to experience it as much as I can. In short, I love my reality and I live in it happily. All I ask is that they don't impose their reality on me anymore than I impose my reality on them. It is a free country and they can do whatever they please, but their freedom stops where mine begins. We have the same rights, and we should both remember that. We may both believe that we are right in depicting the world the way we do in our work, but we could just as easily be wrong, not just them, me or you but all of us.

Technique is meant to be seen

There is another aspect to this, and that aspect is technique. Technique, in my view, is meant to be seen and should be visible. If this technique involves manipulating or enhancing the image, depending on which side of the fence you stand on, then this enhancement, or manipulation if this is what you want to call it, must be visible. Why? Because I want others to see it. Because I want my audience to see what I did to the image, see how I made my vision a reality through the use of this technique or that technique. In fact, I want this to be visible so much that starting April 2006 I am providing the master file to my images with print purchases. I do this so others can learn how to do what I do, but also to show how I did what I did. That is, I am taking advantage of one aspect of digital technology, which is that the digital image file can be duplicated countless times and still be as good as the original. Such is not the case with a negative or a transparency, whose quality degrades dramatically with each copy made from the original.

There is also a matter of quality. The only way to tell if a technique is good, effective or again mastered by the practitioner, by the master, is to see it for ourselves. Otherwise, we rely on the word of others, on the opinion of someone else but us. Mastery is something that must be witnessed, something that must be seen. If one wants to be recognized as a master, one cannot have as a goal to make his technique transparent. One must try as hard as possible to make his technique something that can be seen, something visible to all.

Technique, in other words, must be or become part of the work. It must not be just the path that lead to the creation of this artwork, it must be part of the artwork. To return to my main point in this essay, and to just saying yes when asked if my work is enhanced or manipulated, I must give this answer in order to tell my audience that it is my intention to make my technique visible. Indeed, I often emphasize my yes answer, by saying yes! In writing, there is no other way to show this subtle difference besides placing an exclamation point after the yes, but in reality this slight change conveys my love and my passion for the work that I do and for my desire to share this with my audience.

Conclusion?

Bringing a conclusion to this essay is difficult. On the one hand, there is a lot more to say on the subject. On the other hand, some may argue that such an essay should never be written. The first position is correct the second one is incorrect. There is a lot more to be said on this subject, and this essay does need to be written because finding the proper answer to these questions is very difficult. As I said at the beginning, if you are a photographer and you show your work to other people, regardless of whether you sell your work or not, you will be asked these questions. If you haven't yet, you eventually will. It is only a matter of time. As the popular statement goes: it is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when.

And when the time comes, you better have an answer. Otherwise you will join the ranks of the stumped. I don't know about you, but personally I hate being stumped.

So yes, this essay definitely has a reason to exist. This reason is to help you find out where you stand. My answer is "Yes" because I do believe, and for good reasons, that I manipulate reality. Your answer may be different. For example, if you believe you do not manipulate reality, then your answer should be "No."

My goal is to create images that represent the world not as it is, but as how I see it, how I feel when I am in a specific location and how I perceive this location as a whole. Not just the part that I see, but the part that I don't see: the melting sap of Pinion pines on a warm summer days; the



call of a blackbird bouncing off a canyon wall; the heat waves floating in front of me over the bare sandstone; the multitude of sensory inputs that are, by nature, non-visual. After all, a photograph is nothing but something we can look at. Yet, the reality of the world is much more than that. We experience this reality through five senses: smell, touch, hearing, taste and finally sight. A photograph only makes use of the fifth sense. It is a partial perception of the world, representing at the most 1/5th of all that we sense. I wish those that argue that unaltered photographs can represent reality would understand that. But, as I explain, it is not in my power to change their mind. Therefore, I limit myself to just answering "yes" when they ask me questions about whether my work is manipulated or not. Of course my work is manipulated. How could it be otherwise? Only a fool would believe that it isn't. Yes.

To some extent, my goal is to include in my photographs as much of what we perceive with these other four senses as is possible to include in a two dimensional medium. It is also to transform the world from what it actually is to what I wish it was. For example, I may photograph a depressing yet otherwise beautiful scene, and if all it takes is remove the houses that mar this scene, or brighten the colors, for this photograph to bring joy to my heart instead of sadness, then I will unashamedly do so, regardless of what others might think. If someone wants a depressing photograph, or a photograph in which all the houses that mar the hills in an otherwise beautiful location are present, I know for a fact that there are countless photographers out there, and that one, if not several of them, will either have exactly what these people want or will be willing to create exactly what they want.

So no, don't write to me saying that you wish I didn't do what I do, or that you wish I didn't manipulate reality, change the colors, remove things, or alter the contrast. Don't write to me to ask that I do not make the world more beautiful, more joyful, more inviting, or more attractive than it really is in your opinion. Instead, write to me to tell me that you like what I do and that you wish I would go further. Write to me to say that you see my point, that your mind is not made up and that you are willing to be bothered by the facts. Write to me to say that you love my work.

Why? Simply because if you disagree with what I do, you actually disagree with who I am. You see, what I show in my work is part of me, part of who I am and part of how I perceive the world. It is that part that I make visually accessible to all. It is that part that I am willing to share with others. And no, I am not willing to change. Definitely not. I am not willing to see the world as a depressing or gloomy place. Call me delusional if you wish, but do keep it to yourself.

Audience

There is another aspect to this, and this aspect is the audience I am addressing. I am addressing an audience who loves what I do. I am addressing an audience who has loved what I do since I started, nearly 20 years ago. I am addressing an audience who is growing daily and who wants to see me go further in my approach, in my practice and in my style. An audience who knows that I manipulate colors, change things around a little, and who not only does not care one bit that I do so but actually loves that I do what I do. I am addressing an audience who loves my work for what it is.

So no, don't even give it a try. And if you do, don't expect me to care. I don't and I won't. I have already answered the question, and the answer is yes. Yes, I manipulate my work, change the colors and much more; and yes, I feel great about doing so; and yes, I am proud of it and have no remorse whatsoever; and yes, I have no intention whatsoever of changing this approach. In fact, this is my style. This is me.

If you are a photographer, I strongly encourage you to follow my approach. If nothing else, it will free you and liberate your creativity. I know it does for me. Remember that you must be free in order to be an artist. If you do not feel free to create whatever your heart desires, then you might call yourself an artist, but you are not really an artist. Art is personal expression. It is the expression of your personality, of your vision, or your view of the world, of your perception of reality. Art is not doing something because you believe someone else may like it better than what you would otherwise do. Art, in short, is freedom.

In closing...

What is art is another discussion altogether, one that I will address in a future essay in this series. For now, remember that the most effective answer to a question designed to stump you is the shortest, most direct and most honest answer you can possibly think of. In this situation it is a resounding Yes or a resounding No. It all depends whether you believe that your work is manipulated or not.

In general, and in closing, it is best not to act defensively when you find yourself confronted by someone asking questions such as the ones I mention in this essay. Often, these questions are aimed at making you take a defensive position. Unfortunately, if you do so you find that you have to defend yourself in regards to actions that you are perfectly free to conduct. Actions that, eventually, are nobody's business except your own. Actions that, furthermore, are perfectly legal but that your interlocutor may want you to feel are not. Unfortunately for them, what is illegal are things such as loan sharking, drug dealing or pistol-whipping a priest. It does not include image manipulation. You can't be arrested for doing it, you can't be taken to court and you can't be placed on probation or

otherwise legally punished.

The best solution for people who really do not like your work and who do not want to be bothered by the facts is to move on and go look at the work of an artist that they like. Therefore, if they ask you questions, there is no reason for you to feel threatened or act in a defensive manner. Just tell them the truth, and let them believe whatever they want to believe. Remember, if they don't like you or your work, they will never buy your work. And if they compliment you about your work, they are either lying or pulling your leg. So just say yes and let them be. That is what I do.

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