

WHAT'S IN A PICTURE

Selecting and Critiquing pictures in Black & White Street Art Photography



- Judge with arguments, do not pronounce -

by Michail Photography

INTRODUCTION

The question that comes right after the taking of the pictures, and which we have enjoyed as a process, is how to choose a good art photograph that tells those famous 1000 words.

In the book [B&W Street Art Photography](#) I have started talking about evaluation by saying that:

"- nobody can do it for you or teach you how to do it!

- we cannot explain with words why a photograph is art. Art came to complement Logos (words) not to be explained by them. Philosophy around a photo does not help.

- you should not even try to answer the question: why a picture is good? Art is creating more questions than giving answers. This is its spiritual power since the questions are more important than the answers to the human being."

Well ... it comes a moment when we have to talk about this after all. Be it as a judge or as a creator. And then it all becomes complex. Luckily only at first impression. We will see that none of these rules can affect the real creative experience!

A first question would be: Is visual literacy something to acquire as a skill or interpreting photographs is just a matter of feeling(s)? Visual literacy has to do with visual syntax and semantics. There is a lot to study about these but also about aesthetics (from the Greek αισθάνομαι, I feel).

Pieces of art combine form, composition and content in a magic way, unable to be explained by any predefined rule or method!

Nevertheless we will start going in review of the existing rules just to be able to take position in front of all this ...

We are sometimes obliged to state how good or not good is a picture. A "why" is requested and without giving reasons any evaluation is irresponsible.

So if you are obliged to evaluate a photograph, judge with arguments, do not pronounce!

SELECTING *OR* THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S DECISION

(on composition, moment, settings, focus)

The choice can be a painful process but also very liberating. It can be done in the same solitude as the taking of the photo or it can be collective (by expert eyes but of a great trustfulness).

The same rules that apply in the taking, apply here too. We should try to reveal the barriers to sincerity and break them so that the essence of a situation comes out.

How to look at our pictures? With brains, emotions, distance, memory?



a) The first choice or studying contact sheets

Quoted from the book [B&W Street Art Photography](#):

"It's time to choose the best pictures! This step is as important as the shooting. With digital we do not have any more contact sheets but we look at our thumbnails which is very much the same concept.

Not all famous photographers wanted to publish their contacts.

Magnum Agency was admitting photographers by examining their contact-sheets and not single photographs. So they could see their thinking.

They would rotate the contact sheets from all different angles to assess the composition of the images in an abstract way. Looking at your thumbnails can serve the same purpose.

Already in your camera viewer you can see if it is a good one!"



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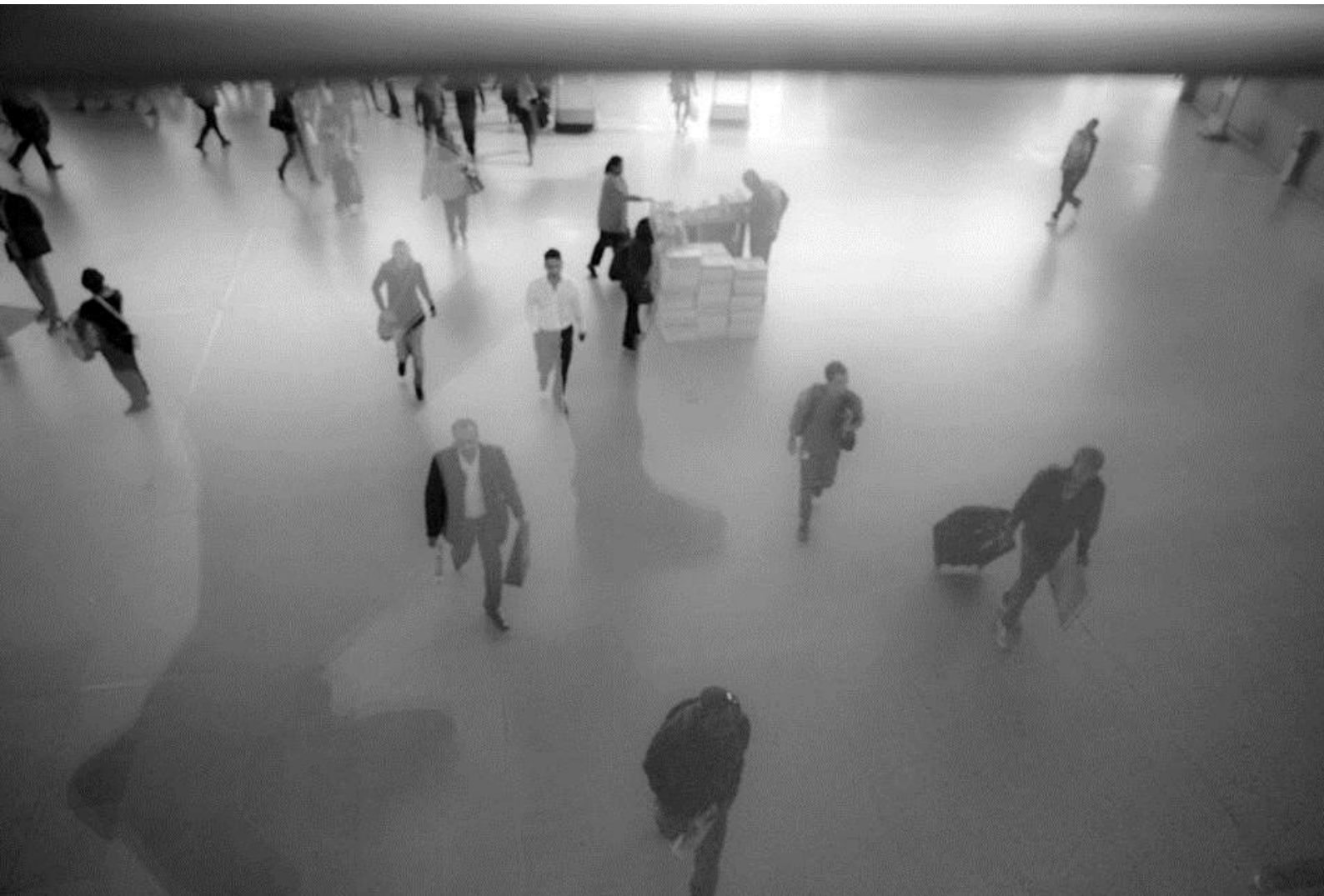


In conclusion, you start by describing how the objects in your photographs are organised.

This is highly necessary especially in the digital where we shoot many pictures and very close one to another .

Some quick tips in order to exclude a picture: unwanted blur, awkward mergers of objects, multiple points of interest, distracting objects, unflattering expressions of people, distorted lines ...

Look for dark, light, abstract shapes, rectangles, diagonals ...



b) The final selection

There are some main elements that draw our attention. The focal point (not only the focus), the depth of field, the light, the contrast, the leading lines ... are all influencing the viewer's POV.

More specifically:

A human presence is always searched in a photograph no matter which are the obstacles.

A spot even if it's tiny draws attention when in contrast. The viewer has the tendency to connect 2 or more spots like in the puzzle games. If a person puts a hand on another's shoulder it creates connections.

Horizontal lines inspire stability, vertical lines represent activity, motion. The same goes for jagged lines with tension and anxiety. Curved lines are related with grace and diagonals with lack of equilibrium or dynamic movement in the direction of the line. Lines in wave evoke slow movement while converging lines create a natural path to a centre of interest.



And in this way we make triangles, squares, we take lines and we create shapes.

Changes of tone on a shape creates 3-dimensional effect.

The human eye tends to complete a frame if there are incomplete shapes in it.

A viewer knows by intuition if a picture is balanced but on the other hand a perfect balance and harmony have a boring effect.

Right to left is more natural (reversing a picture can help to see the right placement).

Therefore you have to decide:

how much of a scene to show or which elements to leave out (during or after the shooting); what is the picture about; if the background is also the subject



CRITIQUING OR THE VIEWER'S DECISION

The artist has and will always have a professional life problem, sometimes a survival one. The fact that their main interest (art) absorbs all their mental and physical energy, makes them fail or just survive on the professional level. It could however be, exactly this, the reason behind their creativity. The absence of order and peacefulness pushes the artists to the quest of these elements. The superficiality and the emptiness of everyday life make them seek the truth and give birth to pieces of art. Probably having an easy and trouble-free life would mean the end of inspiration and creativity.

Competitions and prizes:

We are compelled to participate in competitions and do feel free to participate. However, bear in mind that there is no added value for your art when participating in competitions and/or winning prizes.

The winner is misled as being a good artist, the loser is misled as being a bad one. The judges are misled as being important persons while the public is misled to have chosen the best, to have understood the artists' endeavours.

This is happening because the (mostly) egocentric judges give the prize to something they can do themselves. Not to the one they do not understand how (s)he did it.

In the following case ([my successful participation in a competition](#)) the judges could not give the first prize to something which the "untrained" public have set their eyes upon.

A different audience will always vote for a different winner.

Most of the artists are either overconfident or underconfident. Both behaviors serve to protect them of being vulnerable.

That is why any critique should be supportive and friendly. When taking a judgment on a picture, it is necessary to have clear notions of what is criticism, its value and types.

Criticism is by definition a discriminatory act, be it pro or con in relation with a creation/creator.

It takes a real insight and a knowledge in depth of the artwork before we engage in a criticism. Studying art history is of paramount help, but even learning the basic solutions of visual problems is a great start.

The main actions to undertake (exhaustively and not partially) include much of observation (including the abstraction of the image by squinting or blurring the eyes, turning the picture upside down, etc), thinking (reductionism) and talking (conversation between artist and viewer).

Description is the first and essential step to arrive at a meaningful judgment. It is the moment when we collect data or facts. We answer the what, the where ... we acknowledge the content and the form.

Decoding pictures is a step further: answering not the What, Who, When and Where but the Why.

We are not looking anymore for the visible elements of the picture but for the invisible ones (what we do not see in the frame)

We are not looking anymore at the focused, emphasised elements of the picture but we are wondering why the others are not emphasised



We are seeking the preceding and the succeeding moment of the decisive moment.

We are going further than the factual angle of the picture and we simulate mentally other possible angles low, hi, left, right.

This helps us to interpret context. Especially when information is implicit, and there is no identification of the persons or their purposes, time or place.

The process is based then on own experiences and values. In order to see a picture thoughtfully we have to be able to communicate with the same language.



When judging try to look for talent. And talent cannot be taught. When looking at an art piece with "mojo" something we cannot really identify makes us look again and again.

Only half or even less is technical quality, the rest is feel, emotion.

Critical thinking focuses both on the content and the intention of the picture.

The main elements of a criticism include:

1) Emotional impact: Sadness, wonder, anger ... name it. The effects are immediate and transferred to the viewer with no warning. The first impression sets the rules for the rest of the viewing process. Usually we connect if we understand the message or if the picture is appealing to our memories. Pictures of human suffering have an immediate impact because we all have experienced pain.

Photographers that are aware of this are often trying in an aggressive or more subtle way to boost such feelings. However there is much



more than this first impression. The artist's intent (cf point 3.)

2) Technical quality: There are various indicators to measure this. Some of them include: presence of all tones (distribution, weight, and balance of tones from black-black to white-white), no totally flat blacks or whites, textures and how they are lit, focussing and/or blurring techniques. Other basic elements are the perspective, depth, exposure, contrast and brightness used.

3) The artist's intent: In order to convey an idea or a message the artists use their creativity to be original and inventive by the means of photography. Answering the following questions your criticism will be



much more on the point. What is the purpose of the picture? Documentation? Provocation? Story telling? This last one is the capacity of a picture to evoke imagination. Of course there might be as many stories as viewers.

The viewer is hence interpreting the factual information of the picture to define the meaning and the mood of the image. This process generates new information as to the initial intent and the final impact of the artwork.

In a dialectic approach, the artist can state if (s)he achieved the result randomly, intuitively or deliberately.

4) Composition: It is the process of bringing all the visual elements necessary to guide the viewer towards the artist's centre of interest. Pleasing or disturbing, its purpose is to hold the viewer within the frame and convey properly the message intended.



Important elements of the composition are the primary and secondary centers of interest or the lack of them when the whole frame becomes the subject.

Other key elements that impact images are:

- The arrangement of spots, lines, shapes, patterns, leading edges; the visual paths, the visual balance or the lack of it.
- The symmetry, the influence of extraneous elements, of negative spaces.



You can [find here](#) some smart lessons and multiple choice exercises to get familiar with the principles and the terminology in photography.

CONCLUSION

Someone who advances artistically experiences one of the oddest things in life: his/her admirers and supporters are getting fewer and fewer!

This is happening because his/her artistic work becomes more and more "difficult", more complex, more meaningful. The fact that the untrained viewers lag behind should not discourage them!

The likes on the FB or the comments on Flickr will give you an idea but is this what you are looking for ?



Street photography is like a child's dream: they start with some broken toys and then we fall asleep to arrive at the most complex of stories ever. Likewise, street photography starts with some accidental circumstances to then take form in a magic equilibrium and to tell a story in a fraction of a second.

Art is a personal, intimate endeavour. Nevertheless in a society we have the intention to share it with others. As it has been said: "Happiness is only worth when shared"

An artist's work has no ending point. We can revisit our work continuously ... check our archives ... be dedicated to improvement through education, practice and reflection.

Use the power of self-critique and share the experience with viewers and creators.

"Reasons, not rules make us stronger"



You can find Michail's pictures and opinions at:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/StreetArtPhotographyByMichail and www.facebook.com/mmichail,

Flickr: www.flickr.com/photos/michail-photography/, Website: www.michail-photography.eu/

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