

With Eyes Wide Open

How we see— Taken from *Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age*, Robert Hirsch, p. 169-70

Seeing is an act of perception that helps us to ascertain, experience, learn, and understand our world. It is an individual skill that is conditioned by our cultural standards, education, and physical anatomy. Western industrialized society depends on literacy to function. To be fully functional, it is necessary to be able to decipher messages that have been put into a written code or language. When dealing with images, another skill set is necessary to interpret the coded information, and we need to learn this language to be visually literate.

Literacy

Literacy is based on the quality and quantity of our stored information, yet at times we are reluctant to learn to read new images. Complacency leads us to favor the familiar and reject that which is different or new. Overcoming this fear and thinking for ourselves makes learning a more joyful and expanding experience. Fresh data adds to our information storehouse that can be called upon when dealing with new situation, thereby increasing our range of possibilities and outcomes.

Whatever type of communication is in use, a person must be able to understand the code. In the past, pictures showed something or recognized importance. Traditional picture-making used the act of seeing to identify and classify subject matter. This sort of typological illustration is all some expect of a picture-maker. Problems arise when something unusual or surprising appears and we have no data or method to deal with it. What we do not know or recognize tends to make us nervous and uncomfortable. This anxiety manifests itself in the form of rejection, not only of the work but of new ideas in general.

Becoming visually literate is one small step we can take in accepting responsibility for discovering and affirming our own values. Ultimately, it is such individual baby steps that can have widespread effects. As people become

visually educated, more aware of their surroundings, and able to see the world for themselves, they can participate more fully in making decisions that affect how their society operates.

Learning to Look

Looking at a picture is not like glancing out a window and viewing a known world. Initially, imaginative looking needs to be a conscious and directed act that requires thinking, sorting, analyzing, and decision-making. Simulating looking is an evolving system of thoughtful examination and scrutiny that can be taught and learned. Creative looking involves getting in closer and determining what lies below the realm of physical appearance.

The Difference between Artistic and Scientific Methods

Western formal education does not place much value on learning visual language. For some people, the purpose of art is simply to be recognizable, pretty, and comfortable. Such people are not aware of a picture-maker's role within society as someone who can perceive, interpret, and offer a wider understanding of life. Yet these same people may desire the products brought forth by these innovations and resourceful explorations. People do not make fun of a scientist working in a laboratory even if they do not understand what the scientist is doing because society sanctions and rewards scientific activities. The major difference between art and science is that art offers an intuitive approach to explain reality, while science insists on an exact, objective, rational set of repeatable methods and measurements. Science says there is only one right answer; art says there are many correct answers. The magnificence of our contemporary arts and letters and the contributions citizen artists make to democracy is diversity of thought, which is why art thrives in open societies. It is the recognition of an artist's responsibility to have something to say, to echo the culture (or lack thereof) we are embedded in, and directly or indirectly awaken our thinking.

Visual Literacy and Decision Making