

Winner of the 2015 Lyceum Prize
Iconography as Photography
 by Victoria Schaaf

Photography was once a career field reserved for the elite and talented. Those who could afford an expensive camera, film and perhaps even a private darkroom had the capacity to capture and develop beautiful photos. With the technological advances of the last twenty years, photography has become an art form available to the masses. Quality cameras are affordable and every new cell phone to hit the market is equipped with a high megapixel camera. Today, anyone with an iPhone can create art.

This claim may seem like a stretch at first glance. How is it possible that just anyone in the world with no formal training or practice could be a photographer? It is doubtful to believe that anyone could be such an artist. To claim that all photography created from an iPhone is good art is an event wider statement. However, the modern era has opened up a new world of possibilities for people with respect to photography. We live in an environment where owning a smartphone is common place. Everyone from the middle school student to the working parent in the family has access to an iPhone. The students I work with in youth ministry have coined the term, “iPhonography”, that is, the action of taking photos on one’s iPhone to share with the world. The common method of sharing these photos is through the social networking application Instagram. Instagram offers a place where a community of iPhonographers can choose to “like” or comment as a means of critiquing the art shared. The iPhone is everyman’s camera and

Instagram is the world’s fastest growing art gallery.

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Figure 1: I took this photo of a student who fell asleep in the sanctuary during a youth event. I felt it captured the interaction between real life and our Judeo Christian context.

I have been inspired to write this paper by my ever growing love for my iPhone and my constant use of the Instagram application. I will seek to argue reasoning for and against this paper’s thesis. I hope to provide commentary that will coax anyone to believe that if one has an iPhone, she can use it to create art. Instagram offers an individual the ability to share her captured moments with the world in real time. Her shared photo is Instagram’s version of the tweet¹ or the status update². Photos are taken and shared with the internet world as they occur in the real world. A person is able to engage her culture and tradition in the here and now with those who cannot be with her in the present. This process allows her to become what T.S. Eliot refers to as a more whole person. Eliot believed in “A continual extinction of personality.” That is to say that the personality of someone engaging with her culture will no longer be defined as her personality alone, but instead a learned persona shaped by the blending of herself, her culture and her tradition. “His

¹ Twitter users’ individual shared updates are called “tweets”.

² Facebook users’ individual shared updates are called “status updates”.

emphasis is not so much on the artist as creative individual, as on the complex interactions between the artist and the broad historical and cultural context of which he or she is a part.”³

Eliot says that to engage with one’s tradition is to become a whole person as a result of the impression a tradition and culture leaves on the individual. When an artist takes a photo with her iPhone, she is engaging her culture in several ways. First, her camera is a modern object. A cell phone is not designed to be a primarily a camera, but the installation of applications on the phone have made it possible for the camera to be used with the intent of sharing images captured. This is a method of engaging her culture. Second, she is sharing her photography with the world



Figure 2: A photo I took in Minto Brown Park of nature revealing herself to me. The trees are orange!

not through printing physical images, but by sharing them on the Internet by way of an application. And last, her audience is not a traditional paying audience who visits her photographs in an art gallery, but instead, her audience is a group of individuals who pay in a different way, through their buy-in of smart phones, the Internet and subscription to a social media network. While she protects her individuality by holding claim to her shared images, she releases her personality and artistic viewpoint to be impacted by the images she shares with others and the images others share with her.

Eliot goes on to say, “We endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed.”⁴ In taking our pictures and sharing them with the users of Instagram (and

linking networks such as Facebook and Twitter), we are seeking to isolate a moment to be remembered and experienced by others. We seek to add to the story of art as a whole. All art adds to the story of art, even Instagram. Eliot proves the validity of this claim when he says, “He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.”⁵ “iPhonography” is a new material of art and Instagram is a new perspective mode. Those who beg to differ will be forced to reconcile with more wisdom from Eliot. “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relationship to the dead poets and artist...You must set him for contract and comparison among the dead.”⁶

By its very nature, art is a combination of individual and other. This other is something outside the artist herself, be it culture, tradition, or the nature world. It is in this way that art, “Does not seek to impose the subjective will of the artist on the material from which it is made, but works in concert with nature’s own capacity for self-disclosure.”⁷

The artist’s own personality will recognize things which could be viewed as art in nature and she will capture it with her iPhone to be shared. It is in this way that she is a photographer.

³ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 53.

⁴ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 54.

⁵ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 56.

⁶ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 55.

⁷ Diarmuid Costello, “The Question Concerning Photography”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 70 Issue 1, Winter 2012, 106.

I have established with Eliot's writings as support that anyone with an iPhone can be a photographer. As an artist, a photographer gathers inspiration from himself and his tradition and culture to create his own world of fantasy. By fantasy, I do not mean this to say that his world is fake. Indeed his world is very real in its own context. It is formed from things within reality. As described by Freud, "He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality."⁸ In a similar way, photographs offer a person the ability to capture an experience that best describes his true viewpoint of life and reality. As philosopher Milton Glaser describes, "Photographs are really experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood."⁹ As we acquire images through the camera lens, we capture our fantasies.



12 likes

Figures 3 and 4: Photos taken and shared of my friend Alec and I dancing at the Oregon Coast and the Capital Building downtown. The sunset and cherry blossoms already exist and my phone has captured nature's artwork.

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⁹ Milton Glaser, "Dark and Light: The Strange Case of the Decline of Illustration", *Diogenes*, 51, 135, August 2004, 136.

¹⁰ Paraphrase of Christine Battersby's argument. Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 90.

¹¹ Richard Kearney, *The Wake Of Imagination*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 172.

¹² This idea of a person with an iPhone being a photographer is not limited to owners of the iPhone, but to any person who owns a smart phone with the ability to take photos and share them with the world.

Instagram allows an individual to share her fantasy world. This world is created through Eliot's weaving of personality, culture and tradition. It is also created through the intentional working of one's imagination. Imagination gives an individual the power to be an artist. She shares her reality through her photos. And as was stated before, though fantasy, her world is not fake. What she says is real, is indeed, very real. Like Copernicus' choice to place the sun and not the earth at the center of the universe, I choose to make myself the fulcrum of the knowable universe. "The 'I am' of the Kantian self brings the world into existence. Her 'I am' creates the world she lives in. It is a pretty grandiose conception of the power of the imagination!"¹⁰

This talk of a fantasy world might lead one to believe that all art is to be experienced outside of our existence. This is not the case. Photography as art is to be experienced in the here and now. As philosopher Richard Kearney states in his book *The Wake of Imagination*, "The goal of art is not to be found in an external or transcendent world, but within the artistic experience itself-what Kant calls the 'free play of imagination'."¹¹ Through the use of imagination, personality, culture and tradition the everyman

iPhoneographer brings his art into existence for all to enjoy and experience.¹² Photos taken in real time by a person with an iPhone make for immediate art.

Richard Kearney establishes that imagination is a key element of producing and recognizing art. This is true for a photographer using an iPhone as well. The

Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994,

imagination can aid an iPhoneographer in finding art hidden within the world. The idea of art having a hidden existence is supported by Kant. Kant believed that before you knew of something, it was already in existence. Using our creative imaginations, we are able to capture art that already exists within the world and share it with our friends via Instagram. As a philosopher, Kant thought that we are smarter than we realize. In the same way that psychologists believe there are things hidden to us and to others (think Johari's window), there are things that only exist in what Kant calls the 'transcendental imagination'. By transcendental imagination, Kant means, "That imagination is the hidden condition of all knowledge...art concealed in the depths of the human soul." (Kearney, 167). Within my imagination is the knowledge and ability to capture nature's art with my iPhone that already exists.

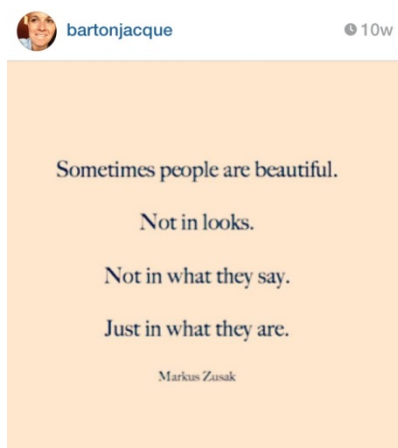


Figure 4: A quote shared on Instagram by my friend Jacque Barton



Figure 5: A meme shared on Instagram by my friend Brittney Fraley.

While art may be hidden in the depth of the human soul, it may not be very deep. Our ability to find art and capture it with our iPhone might be limited. Clive Bell writes in *The Philosophy of Art*, "Why should they bother to examine their feelings when for them to feel is enough?"¹³ "Why should they hunt for a common quality in all objects that move them in a particular way when they can linger over the many delicious and peculiar charms of each as it comes?"¹⁴

For some, art with an iPhone is not complicated or thoughtful. For some, art is as simple as Instagramming a quote or a meme. Can this be classified as art? Technically, yes. But is it good art? The answer to that question is probably not. Clive Bell would disagree that a quote or a meme shared from an iPhone could ever be true art. He states that descriptive pictures are not works of art and would refer to them as ethically valueless and undesirable.¹⁵

There are individuals who would uphold the idea that photos do not need ethical attributes to be valuable or desirable art. There exist individuals for which art is as un-profound as a delicious plate of baby back ribs and the peculiar charm of a soft Instagram filter over the image of what is for dinner.

Philosopher Guy Sircello believed that what artists do in the work of art itself contributes to the emotion felt by the viewer. Calm, serene, angry, happy or any other emotion is communicated through the piece.¹⁶ This is similar to what a person can do using the filters on Instagram. A filter like "Nashville" will give the photo an old-time effect, while a filter like "1963" will give the photo a look comparable to that of the

¹³ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 99.

¹⁴ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 99-100.

¹⁵ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 104.

¹⁶ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 164-165.

Brady Bunch family photo. The photo itself is not what is calming. The photo could be one of a violent hurricane in New Orleans, but under the right filter conditions, this photo could appear romantic or calm. The photo makes the emotion apparent to the one looking directly at it. This being true for Sircello, it implies that a photo of a mere quote, under the right filter, could be seen as calming or serene and be considered good iPhone art.

Regardless of Sircello's thoughts, Bell stands on his own two feet when he ensures us that human emotion is enough to make a photo art. But what if that emotion is completely self-centered? What if the artist is using her iPhone to share photos that are strictly about self-



Figure 6: "World's First Selfie" Edwardian woman in 1900 with a Kodak Brownie box camera.

promotion? Is it still art? This question is relevant in light of the booming "selfie" trend. Gaining in consistent popularity, 'selfie' was even added to the Oxford Dictionary as the 2013 word of the year.¹⁷ A selfie is the act of taking a picture of oneself in the mirror or otherwise¹⁸ and posting it on social media sites like Instagram for commentary and appreciation. In order to understand the evolution of the selfie, it is necessary to understand a bit about the history of creating art in general.

Dawn M. Wilson discusses the history of art in her piece, *Facing the Camera: Self-portraits of Photographers*. Wilson explains, "For several centuries, artists employed mirrors as an invaluable instrument for the art of self-portraiture. A flat mirror is a static, two-dimensional surface that displays, by reflection, a nonstatic, three-dimensional image."¹⁹

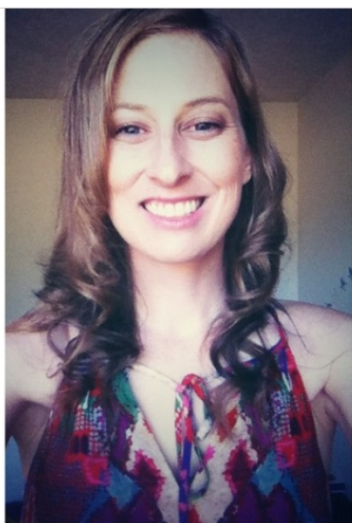
Before photographs existed, artists would use the mirror as a reflective base to see themselves as they painted a portrait or sculpted. There was a time before the invention of the camera that this was the only method of both viewing and transposing oneself into art at the same time. This method has become a choice rather than a requirement with the introduction of the iPhone camera into the art world. A person using an iPhone camera does not always have the ability to take a picture of her whole body. But with the use of a mirror, she does. The mirror is transformed from serving merely as a tool to help the artist paint herself and becomes an interwoven piece of the photo captured. The act of taking a photo of oneself in the mirror with an iPhone has been deemed a 'selfie'.

What has been called the "World's First Selfie" is a picture of an early Edwardian woman in 1900. She uses her Kodak Brownie box camera to take a picture of her full body in

¹⁷ Dassanayake, D. (2013, November 19). *Oxford dictionaries name 'selfie' as 2013's word of the year*. Retrieved from <http://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/443979/Oxford-Dictionaries-name-selfie-as-2013-s-word-of-the-year>

¹⁸ iPhone updates have allowed for front camera photos and the full body mirror shot is no longer the only option.

¹⁹ Dawn M. Wilson, "Facing the Camera: Self-portraits of Photographers", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 70, Issue 1, Winter 2012, 57.



♥ 29 likes
 Figure 7: My selfie sans mirror (taken with front camera on iPhone). 29 people liked it. Does that mean they can see me through the photo? Perhaps. Is it art? Technically. Is it good art? Probably not.

the mirror. The age of this photo alone is enough justification for many to call it art, but is it really art? If this is art, then it is both priceless and comical as the iPhone is now used to capture similar artworks of people in their day to day lives. I cannot tell you the number of times grown women have shared with me via Instagram their selfies taken in the mirror at the gym. Or when a teenager is prom dress shopping and decides to take a picture of her choice in the mirror. Or when a bored person takes a picture in the mirror at home just to show off how great a hair day she is having. This is what Diarmuid Costello refers to as the ability to, “see her through the photograph.”²⁰ The viewer can evidentially see the artist for who she truly is simply by staring at her selfie long enough. This first selfie ever taken and Costello’s opinion seem to form a good argument to support that selfies are good art, but I have a feeling most critics would disagree.

Taking a photo of myself with my iPhone on a day that my hair and make-up look nice, editing it with a ‘dreamy’ filter and sharing it on Instagram might make me an artist. However, doing so does not automatically make me a creator of good art. Critics might find that using my iPhone to capture photos in any way, shape or form does not necessarily make my creations good art.

Traditionally photographers have needed some form of training or formal education in the world of photography in order to create good art. I have neither. My ability to take a good picture is limited to years behind a disposable camera and the summer I spent working for a photographer posing little league players in team pictures to earn money towards my senior photos. In addition to my lack of training, using my iPhone requires no development of actual film. That being said, the essence of photography in its original form is missing. It could also be argued that the quality of photos taken with an iPhone are grainy and cannot be considered good portraits. The lack of training, education, lack of film and quality of photos contradict the statement that an iPhone can be used to create art.

In the new world of photography, where any person can be an iPhonographer, it is a dicey argument as to whether or not photos taken with my phone are art. While there are critics in the art sphere who would be delighted to argue for or against this art, beauty and appreciation lies in the eye of the viewer. It is for a viewer to decide if something is art. I believe most of the photos shared from the iPhone are mediocre. However, there are some which capture a moment in a way that it will never appear again. These photos instill a certain feeling in the viewer which cannot be compromised or discounted. As Clive Bell writes in “The Aesthetic Hypothesis”, “It is useless for a critic to tell me that something is a work of art; he must make me feel it for myself. This he can do only by making me see; he must get at my emotions through my eyes.”²¹ It is not helpful for a critic to tell a person that something is or is not art. If a person can feel the

²⁰ Diarmuid Costello, Dawn M. Phillips, “Automatism, Causality and Realism: Foundational Problems in the Philosophy of Photography”, *Philosophy Compass*, April 2009, 6.

²¹ Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 101.

emotion of a photo, it becomes art. Good art is not solely about meeting qualifications. Good art is about stirring up an emotion in the viewer which is real, meaningful and timeless. Can iPhonography be good art? Yes, it can. If an iPhone photo awakens an enduring emotion in the viewer, it is good art. Clive Bell goes on to qualify this enduring emotion. He states, "Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world."²² Anyone with an iPhone has with them the capacity to create good art.

²² Alex Niell, Aaron Ridley, The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, 110.

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