

# Honest photography

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Heidi Erdmann, curator of the Photographers Gallery in Cape Town is quoted as saying "When I look at a photograph I immediately and impulsively search for a degree of honesty, both in terms of the subject matter and medium.

"Once that is done, I scrutinize for quality, and only then do I move on to search for obvious markers, such as composition, drama, tension, rhythm, mystery, content, continuity in content, style and form." This gem of curatorial insight I picked up from an article by Mary Corrigan in the Sunday Life section of the Sunday Independent (Darkroom poetry, July 15 2007).

Corrigan's article highlights the emergence of photography as collectible art. There are now more art galleries in South Africa specializing in photography than ever before and it is not only big names like David Goldblatt and Roger Ballen that are selling well to discerning clients. Cape Town seems presently to be the leading centre in this wonderful development.



Photo: Guy Tillim: *Rosalina Nahamba holding baby ...*  
This image could be seen at the *Africa Remix*  
Exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery

I have often had it drummed into me that amateur photographers produce a different kind of photography (not necessarily inferior) that does not aspire to being fine art.

They take photographs "for fun" and like to compete with other amateurs, scoring bronzes, silvers, golds and certificates of merit in salons that are like sporting events. Sadly however, unlike sport, salons have on the whole become events with very limited appeal. Salon exhibitions are restricted to participants, other amateur photographers, immediate family and a handful of PSSA officials. The art loving public is neither informed about them nor interested. Art critics, gallery curators and art collectors do not attend these exhibitions. The works exhibited are not for sale.

This points to the existence of an almost totally unbridgeable gulf between amateur photography and photographic art as it is understood by the arbiters of artistic value. And neither side is willing to take the risk of finding out what is good on the other side.

Nevertheless there are also amateurs who speak glibly of "creativity" and one often hears comments about "artistic photography". I must admit to being slightly confused by these anomalies and I suspect that many other amateurs are even more confused than me – although maybe they fail to realize it.

Photography can be many things. Between the cell phone snapshot and an editioned print by a great master there are scores of different categories of photography. Most are merely a means to record a thing or a moment with limited significance or appeal and no pretensions to being art. There is however a growing movement both within and outside organized amateur photography that is seeking to fill an almost empty niche: that of amateur photographic art.

It is possible, one would like to believe, that some amateur photographers are capable of producing work that could well stand up to Heidi Erdmann's criteria (or those of any other reputable art gallery curator). What I would like to see happening would be a significant breakthrough from the very restricted and hermetic world of amateur photography to the bigger and more open world of art. One example of this kind of breakthrough is the Old Fort series by Louis Yudelman that was installed by the curators of the Constitutional Court art collection as a semi-permanent display on Constitution Hill. But as the ancient saying goes "one swallow doth not a summer make".

There is still a question hanging in the air: what do we understand to be 'honest' photography?

Erdmann qualifies her interpretation of honesty in terms of both subject matter and medium.

Choice of subject is a vital part of any creative photographic process. Does the photographer have a real feeling for the subject? Or is he or she merely photographing something that has already been taken by many others before? Do I choose subjects because they are popular with salon judges or because they have a

unique appeal to me? The really successful photographs have a kind of honesty that speaks of a genuinely empathic relationship between photographer and subject.

What are the essential qualities of the photographic medium that set it apart from other types of visual art? A photograph is an image momentarily formed by light falling on a sensitized surface. That light is mediated by a lens that forms an image corresponding to a visible reality. A dishonest photograph is one that tries to get away from the essential qualities of the medium; one that masquerades as another, different kind of non-photographic picture. There have been many instances of this kind of dishonesty in the history of photography: techniques such as excessive retouching, and attempts to make a photograph look like an etching, pencil drawing, oil painting, watercolour or pastel painting are all basically denying the essential qualities of photography. Excessive use of Photoshop filters often results in this kind of dishonesty in digital image making – if it is still putatively presented as photography. Digital images that subvert their photographic origins are not strictly speaking photographs at all. They are another kind of artistic medium, subject to very different criteria or they fall between two stools, being neither one thing nor the other and too often of dubious artistic value.

The almost unbridgeable gulf I referred to above can be explained in part by different priorities with regard to honesty in photography. It is barely a consideration among amateurs; while for gallery curators it is near to or at the top.

In my humble opinion I think Heidi Erdmann is correct to assess photographic art like that – up to a point. Art galleries are perhaps slightly behind the times in that they are rooted in the tradition of social documentary photography that transcends this genre and becomes artistic expression – an obvious example being a limited edition fine art print by one such as Guy Tillim.

Erdmann's "honesty", "quality" and "obvious markers" are well worth consideration by those amateurs who, contrary to the orthodox amateur standpoint, aspire to a more artistic kind of photography. Who knows, one day some of them may well be invited to exhibit at one of the photographic galleries in Cape Town, Johannesburg or Durban. There is one proviso though, and that is that only prints are really able to be satisfactorily exhibited and sold in an art gallery. E-photography is at present really too intangible, suffering from the same economic disadvantages as Internet music downloads.

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## Letter from Heidi Erdman

Dale forwarded a copy of the newsletter to me. I thought that you had written a good article. I just wanted to point out one thing; I find it more necessary to search for honesty in conceptual work than in documentary photography.

Conceptual or constructed photography is more demanding, as it is by nature more layered. The photographer needs to consider more variable, as he or she needs to construct a meaning but at the same time also de-construct the meaning to avoid being didactic. I find that very often the so-called conceptual photographs produced in South Africa are just interpretations of works by well known international photographers, Cindy Sherman and Nan Golding being the most copied in South Africa. The boundary between inspiration and a verbatim copy becomes obvious, and it is for that reason that I look hard and long for honesty in this particular genre.

I look forward to meeting you one day in Cape Town, please come and visit me at the gallery when you are next in Cape Town.

With warm wishes

Heidi Erdmann

The Photographers Gallery za

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