

## ART IN EVERYDAY LIFE

This ordinary, workaday world is rich and good.

It might not seem that way at six in the morning when you are rushing to prepare your coffee or tea and get out the door to go to work, or when you are tired and irritated after dinner and have to take out the garbage. Instead, ordinary life might seem hassled, repetitive, and boring. When you are impatient, resentful, or uninterested in daily life, you will be blind to the potential for living cheerfully and creatively.

Life seems repetitive and boring when you don't notice the uniqueness of each moment and the constant, subtle changes that are going on all around you. For example, you might have the same thing for breakfast every morning and not notice that it tastes different each day because of natural fluctuations of your body and mind and small variations in the details of your meal.

Even though things usually seem solid and enduring, nothing really lasts a second moment. Our experiences are always in the process of disintegrating and transforming. As photographers, we can know this intimately. Photographers are always working with light, and light is always changing. The brightness changes; the angle changes; the color changes; the diffuseness changes. Not only does the light change, whatever is illuminated changes with the light. As Mies van der Rohe, one of the great pioneers of modern architecture and design, famously observed, "God is in the details."

Ordinary experience is the raw material of our photographic art. Photographer, writer, and curator Beaumont Newhall wrote, "We are not interested in the unusual, but in the usual seen unusually." When we separate our artistic activity from daily life, we cut ourselves off from our most valuable resource. We divide the world into the worthwhile and the unimportant; the meaningful and the merely functional. Instead of appreciating

what we have, we look for something better, something more beautiful, more entertaining. Seeking extraordinary perceptions and special artistic experiences leads us to overlook the riches that surround us. We might dream of being successful artists, living in the south of France or northern California, while ignoring the golden glow of sunlight on the kitchen sink. Instead of looking elsewhere for nourishment, we can live artistic, elegant lives, appreciating the details of our ordinary existence.

We should be clear about what we mean by artistic living. It does *not* mean surrounding yourself with beautiful things and banishing everything that is ugly: choosing only to look at fresh flowers and rejecting dead leaves ignores the deep beauty that both share when you open your eyes to them. Labeling things “beautiful” and “ugly” masks what they *really* look like. When you pick and choose in this way, all you really see is the masks, which are your own mental fabrications. Living artistically means appreciating things just as they are, in an intimate, unbiased way.

Living artistically also doesn't mean cultivating an artistic persona. You don't need to create elaborate rituals so that preparing dinner and doing the dishes becomes “Art.” Trying to live an exceptional, beautiful life will only alienate you from the ordinary. Instead, the way to live artistically is to conduct ordinary activity in a relaxed and attentive way.

Finally, artistic living is not something you can go out and buy, like an extreme makeover. It arises from within.

Living artistically means seeing and caring for the details of your world. You can always take a moment to uplift your situation, no matter how basic it is. Just wiping the bathroom counter after you brush your teeth will remove the stains of resentment and carelessness. What matters isn't how luxurious your surroundings are, but how much you can appreciate the richness and freshness of your experience.

## Revealing Natural Artistry

Strangely enough, you don't need to learn how to be artistic. It is as natural as breathing and the beating of your heart. Nevertheless, natural artistry is often inaccessible because it is concealed by preoccupation or resentment. A good analogy for this is the way the sun constantly radiates light even though you can't always see it. The sun is *always* shining, even when clouds cover the sky. No one has to make the sun shine. Sunshine becomes visible when the wind removes the clouds. Like that, artistry arises from mind's natural wakefulness, creativity, and humor when the obstacles that obscure it are cleared away. This is the main point of the whole contemplative endeavor: you don't need to learn how to fabricate creativity; you need to learn to remove the clouds that prevent it from expressing itself.

Before you can learn to remove the clouds, you need to understand their nature. We have briefly mentioned the way preoccupation and resentment obscure our vision. Judgmental, cynical, and angry states of mind separate us from the richness of our world and cover over natural artistry. An angry mind may *seem* sharp, but it is a sharpness that is bewildering, lacking both insight and intelligence. Anger produces crudeness rather than artistry. An angry person is fixated on the object of his or her anger and blind to the details of experience and the environment. Anger overwhelms subtlety.

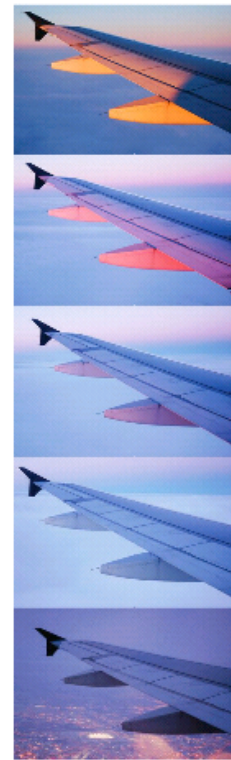
Possessiveness, craving, ambition, and other forms of desire cut us off from artistry because they are bound up with projections about objects of desire and possibilities of fulfillment. Being fettered in this way, we are unavailable to ordinary perceptions, and there is no room for the dance of creativity. Thus, even the desire to be artistic and creative can become an obstacle when we fixate on it. This is not to say that passion is necessarily a problem. The basic energy of passion, when it is not bound up with projections, brings out and energizes inquisitiveness and natural creativity.

Ignoring experience, however we go about it—dreaminess, dullness, laziness—is the emotional equivalent of putting out the do not disturb sign. No fresh perceptions or inspirations are welcome. Needless to say, ignorance is an obstacle.

These various types of emotionality are like billowing clouds that block the sunlight. Sometimes they erupt in damaging storms. Other times they are like long spells of wet, gray weather.

A different type of obstacle is the ongoing internal narrative that accompanies us from the moment we wake up in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night (even reappearing in our dreams). Sometimes this narrative is a monologue, sometimes an inner dialogue. Always, the “voice” *seems* to be the observer, looking out at the world. But what this discursiveness really does is fill up space, leaving little room for creativity and shutting out most of the light. Contrary to the way it seems, the inner narrator is more like a talkative blind person than a skillful observer. Occasionally there is a break in the discursive flow and a fresh perception gets in, but whenever this happens, the inner narrator quickly jumps in and smothers that perception, wrapping it in commentary until all freshness is lost.

Struggling with these various emotional and discursive clouds is a losing proposition. It only adds to their energy and solidity. There is also no way to really suppress them. Surprisingly, the best way to deal with these obstacles is to recognize whatever they are and let them be. A light



Andy Karr, 2005.



touch of awareness, repeatedly applied, cuts the momentum of emotions and discursiveness. Trying to get rid of them just leads to more struggle.

You can become skillful at developing this light touch of awareness, and this is a key to living artistically. Another key is learning to recognize naturally occurring breaks in the clouds: moments where the light naturally shines through. The more you cultivate these gaps, the longer they will last and the more opportunity you will have to settle into your experience and creatively engage with the world.

There are things you should cultivate to enhance these experiences. The most important is an inquisitive mind. You can be inquisitive about your confusion as well as what lies beyond confusion, the world of ordinary, fresh perceptions. The more curiosity you have, the more you will be available to your experience and the more you will see. Cultivating patience will also be a great help, since unraveling the layers of confusion that have accumulated over a lifetime is a gradual process. Finally, nurturing a sense of humor is essential. Our emotionality plays games within games to perpetuate itself. You can't help but get sucked in. If you take the whole thing too seriously, you'll be dragged down into the maelstrom. However, just one moment of seeing the irony of that situation brings you back to the surface. *Phew!*

## Art in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Art

Seeing the ordinary world clearly is a source of raw material and inspiration when you work with your camera. If art is life experience expressed through creative technique, photography is one method for concentrating those experiences into images. You don't need a lot of craft or technique to produce fine photographs. When you experience your world clearly, and you shoot what you see, the results will be artistic.

Training in artistic living will enhance your photography, and training in contemplative photography will deepen your ability to live a creative, artistic life. As the wonderful photographer Dorothea Lange said, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."<sup>2</sup> The practice of contemplative photography will definitely increase your appreciation of the world around you, which is infinitely richer than you could ever imagine.

The photographs in the following pages of this book were taken by the authors, their students, and their friends. They have been chosen to illustrate the subject matter of the various chapters. These images show just how rich and fresh the most ordinary things—a silverware drawer, a doorway, bathing implements—can be.



Michael Wood, Halifax, 2005.



Michael Wood, Boulder, 2009.



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## TWO WAYS OF SEEING

We use the term *seeing* a lot when we discuss contemplative photography, and it would be good to clarify what we mean by that. Ordinarily, seeing refers to a broad range of experiences: from barely noticing to complete immersion in the visual realm. At one extreme, you could be driving or walking along, talking with friends, and then you see a red light and come to a stop, all without interrupting the conversation. At the other extreme, you could be stopped at that red light, and then *see* it—you see brilliant, saturated color, the patterns formed by the facets of the lens, the red glow cast by the light on the orange housing, and the light blue sky that surrounds the whole thing. From a purely functional point of view, these two instances could be described in the same way. In each case you have seen a red light. From an experiential point of view, they are worlds apart.

When you notice the traffic light, what is happening is primarily *conceptual*. When you see that same light, what is happening is primarily *perceptual*. When we use the term *seeing*, we are pointing to this perceptual experience. The world of direct perception holds richness and detail that is totally lacking in the world of conception.

The process of perception is subtle and complex. Usually perception and conception are blended, which makes it hard to distinguish the two. For example, as you are reading these words, you *perceive* the shapes of the words and letters. You also *conceive* of the sounds and meanings of the words. Reading is primarily conceptual. In fact, it is often hard to see the forms of the letters clearly because the habits of conceiving are so strong. If this writing were in Tibetan or Aramaic, you would see the shapes of the letters but wouldn't experience it as sounds and meanings (unless you had learned to read those languages).

Another example of mixing perception and conception is what happens when you watch a movie. When you watch a movie, you see light reflected from the screen and hear sound coming from speakers, but you conceive of people and places. The effect of these conceptions is so powerful that you engage emotionally with them, the way you do with real people. You will even conceive of personalities for characters in animated films where there are no images of people at all—think of Mickey Mouse or WALL·E.

## Distinguishing Perception from Conception

To see clearly, you need to untangle perception from conception. To distinguish them, you need to take out your (metaphoric) microscope and look closely at each one.

If you bring to mind the tall buildings of New York or the Eiffel Tower, an image will appear to your mind's eye. That image is not the same as the visual image that appears when you look at the actual Manhattan skyline or the structure in the Champ du Mars with your physical eyes. The mental image is vague. The image that appears to the physical eye is specific. It is minutely detailed and complete. Mental images are like indistinct replicas of actual seeing.

To contrast perception with that, look straight ahead in a relaxed way, without labeling or conceptually identifying anything. It doesn't matter what you are looking at or whether you are inside or outside. You can do this anywhere. Gaze steadily in one direction, without moving your eyes, and become conscious of the different areas of your visual field. To put this another way, gradually become aware of different parts of your field of view without shifting your gaze. Start with the upper part, then move on to the lower part, then the right side, and then the left side. After that, just be aware of the whole visual field at once, without fixating on anything. That is perception.

Visual images appear when consciousness connects with the eye. Mental images appear when consciousness connects with the conceptual mind. What appears to conceptual mind is only an abstract, general image that encompasses all the views and pictures of a thing that you have ever seen. It is a very different kind of object from the specific ones that appear to the nonconceptual senses. The visual object that appears to the eye appears clearly, in great detail. You see—all at once—color, shape, texture, and the rest. This is true for the objects that appear to the other senses as well: the sounds that appear to the ear, the smells that appear to the nose, the tastes that appear to the tongue, and the tactile sensations that appear to the body. Each of these is experienced vividly and completely in an instant.

The usual sequence of perception is that in the first moment, there is direct sensory experience. In the second moment, a concept and label arise, superimposed on the direct



perception. The vivid perception is obscured by that concept and label. Instead of seeing, hearing, or tasting the clear, specific thing, you experience the conceptual replicas, as though you were seeing the original perception through a cloudy filter. These moments of perception and conception are extremely brief. The sequence happens very quickly, so quickly that you don't notice that a whole process is unfolding.

When you look at a vase full of irises, in the first moment, you see them clearly and completely. In the second moment, those luminous blue and yellow flowers are covered over by concepts and labels, for example, the thought "nice flowers" or the embryonic desire to possess them. When you taste delicious food, in the first moment, the taste is complex and brilliant. In the second moment, that vivid taste is covered over by the thought, "This is yummy!" In the first moment you are perceiving, but quickly this turns into conceiving. This is generally what happens when we notice something. The thing itself becomes vague as you lose contact with the vividness of direct experience.

## Liftoff

Following this, you might let go of the concepts and float back to sensory experience. Alternatively, thoughts might proliferate and take you off to conceptual realms. While looking at the irises, you could start to think about where they were grown, who bought them, and how nicely they are arranged; while eating the meal, you may wonder who cooked the delicious food, what ingredients were used, and how it was prepared.

Often these conceptual journeys will take you into the future, where you find yourself involved in all sorts of plans and anxieties. Some might be quite elaborate. For example, you might spend a long time thinking about how to handle a project you have been working on. Or the conceptual journey might be quite simple, such as wondering where you should eat lunch. In either case, the concepts will take you away from the present and distance you from the vividness of your immediate experience.

Sometimes you will find yourself caught up in thoughts of the past. These could be brief memories, like remembering that there is no fruit in the house and that you need to buy some apples when you go to the store. They could also be long, absorbing recollections, filled with mental images of other places and times, such as revisiting somewhere you vacationed as a young child. Journeys into the past also take you away from the brilliance of present perception.

Sometimes you will find yourself daydreaming, deeply involved in imaginary activities that have nothing to do with past, present, or future. Sometimes when you take off, you won't find yourself anywhere at all! You will be lost in space, and everything will be vague and uncertain, like moving about in dense fog.

Wherever you go, it can be compelling. It is easy to get absorbed in these realms of imagination and completely lose contact with the ground of direct perception. However, most of these excursions are unnecessary. Their only function is to insulate you from the vividness of life and from your own heart. When you are lost in thought, simply recognizing the thinking once or twice will bring you back. It generally doesn't take much more than that. If you can't let go of a particular train of thought, just let the thinking exhaust itself. It always will.

Concepts are useful. Without them, you wouldn't be able to arrange to get together with friends for dinner, use a computer, or read this book. Abstract thinking can help you navigate the complexities of life, just as maps help to navigate to new physical destinations. But concepts can also blind you to what is vivid and real. If you can't distinguish conceiving from perceiving, you might be looking at the map instead of the road. Not only is it dangerous to drive with your eyes glued to the map—you will also miss the beauty of the journey.