Over the years, I’ve gathered a lot of snippets of thought on photography. Most often these take the form of little scraps of paper stuffed in a folder I have labeled Random Thoughts On Photography. I often find it useful to just scan through this folder and use it as a means to jump-start my creativity or to shake me out of my ruts. Here is an eclectic sample of ideas which I publish here for no other reason than it helps me justify having kept these scraps of paper so long.

Here goes …

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I have two cats, both of them the same breed. They are Korats from Thailand – a small, all-gray breed. When friends come over they can never tell them apart. I’m consistently amazed at this. In fact, my friends wonder how I tell them apart! But, to me the two cats, although similar, are as different as can be. This comes, I’m sure, as a result of living with them on a daily basis. I see the subtleties that separate them; my friends see the similarities that make them the same.

This must be true for photography, too. Working with a given subject matter over and over develops the eye to the subtleties that can’t be seen when the subject is first approached. This ability to distinguish is not an act of will; it is a result of experience, careful looking and a certain degree of concentration and involvement with the subject over time.

One frightening implication is that this might also be true for those who look at our photographs. Because we are photographers, we see differently. The subtleties of tones and details that make a photograph sing for us might be completely invisible to our audience. We might marvel at qualities that are simply invisible to others. I once had a gallery owner tell me that almost no one who visited his gallery could see the difference between a silver print and a platinum print until he showed the tonal and density differences to them.

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As artists, we are supposed to be willing to sacrifice a great deal for our art. But, the very concept of sacrifice is one that can have no end. How much should I be willing to sacrifice for my art? I’m not willing to die for a photograph. I am willing to be uncomfortable making one. Somewhere in there is the line that defines the limit I am willing to endure
for making art. My limits should be chosen with care and purpose. If I am not pragmatic about this it will be far too easy to become guilty or lazy.

For example, in the darkroom I know that it is functionally impossible to ever make a perfect print. Every print I made could be improved. So, at what point do I stop? This is a critical question that every photographer needs to ask of themselves.

I remember once feeling that I wasn’t spending enough time in the darkroom and that the answer was to schedule myself into the darkroom on a regular basis. I first thought that I would print every Saturday. But, on further reflection I realized that family obligations and work would make this a practical impossibility. So, I decided to print every other Saturday. This, too, when balanced with every other obligation, seemed like a schedule too aggressive to be practical. I finally decided I would print one Saturday of every month. But then it dawned on me that such a lax schedule would mean that I would only print twelve times a year. How could I expect to be a photographer with such a paltry commitment? If I were a musician, such an inconsistent schedule would be ridiculous.

It’s funny how the artist’s signature influences a print. It shouldn’t, but it does. If I look at a photograph and see that it was done by a “Master Photographer” I’m often predisposed to assume that it’s a better photograph than it really is. Conversely, if the signature indicates the artist as no one I’ve never heard of, I tend to be a bit more critical. In order to really see the work for its merit, it’s important not to let this happen.

Intellectually, I know there is absolutely no relationship between how easy/hard it is to make a photograph and how good it is. Nonetheless, it’s a natural temptation of every photographer I know to diminish the prints that came easily and overvalue the ones that took Herculean efforts.

Every time I attend a lecture on photography I’m glad I went – I learn a new idea or two regardless of who the speaker is. Every time I attend a lecture on painting, on sculpture, on music, on poetry, on writing, on woodworking, or on dance I am challenged, stimulated, boggled, slapped upside my head and habits, spun around and walk away thinking I need to start my education about art all over again from the beginning. I wish I had paid better attention in art class and read as many books about the other arts as I have about photography. I could have avoided so many pitfalls and mistakes that the other artists learned long ago.

I’ve noticed that my method of
photographing in the landscape has changed considerably over the last 20 years. I used to scurry around driving through the landscape at 50 mph searching for a good subject from the corners of my eyes. As a technique, it worked. But lately it seems that this method has become less functional. Now I find it better to stop the car, walk around, soak-up a place, study it leisurely, and then make a series of photographs, often within a hundred yards of the car. In fact, this technique seems to work so well it almost makes no difference where I stop the car. I wonder if this is an observation about youth, or only about me?

When I started photography my photographs were all gray and pasty. For the longest time I thought the magic was in getting a great Dmax black. In the next phase, my prints were way too contrasty and dark – black and white with hardly any grays to speak of. Now that I’m older and a much better printer I find that all the magic in a photograph is in the grays. I’ve come back to where I started but it is certainly not the same place.

When I started photography, I had very little equipment and made horrible photographs. Over the next ten years I bought all kinds of new equipment with very little improvement in my photographs. When I finally learned how to see, I got rid of most of my equipment and my images improved dramatically.

Said a parallel way, when I started photography I didn’t really feel like a photographer because all of my equipment fit into a small camera bag. I started to feel like a serious photographer when I found myself toting into the landscape several cases of equipment, a rolling cart and a big photographer’s vest. I started making good photographs when I got rid of most it. This may be as simple as this: after I got rid of so much equipment I found I spent my time managing my vision rather than managing my stuff.

It’s too bad the apprentice system has died-out in photography. There is no doubt in my mind that the best way to learn photography is to become an assistant to someone who really knows what they are doing. Then just watch them, study them, absorb from them, and keep your big mouth shut for a long, long time.

The process of being a photographer is to work diligently to minimize the degradation in each step from conception to the final result. The subject is always better than the vision in my mind’s eye; the vision in my mind’s eye is always better than the negative; the negative is always better than the print; and the print is almost always a disappointment. Each step along the way introduces a bit more
degradation. The trick is to manage and minimize this slippage from vision to print. The devil is in the details.

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The process of being an artist is to forget everything that you know and to really see, with eyes and hearts that are simultaneous naïve and sophisticated.

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As a general rule of thumb, photographers who insist they cannot say anything of importance about their photographs should try more diligently to do so. Those who insist on talking about their photographs should refrain from doing so at all costs.

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One of the deadliest traps in photography is defined by whatever is the current trend. In certain group-think herds, this mentality might be useful – for example, in team sports or the military. But, when an artist follows the herd they just end up looking foolish with cookie-cutter results. As a case in point I direct your attention to jumping dancers caught in mid-air. Lois Greenfield did it brilliantly, but everyone else’s just look, well, wrong.

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For years I’ve noticed that I see some of my best photographs when I’m really tired. I believe this has something to do with the natural quieting of my thoughts and the cessation of my natural tendency to intellectualize about my images.

Thinking non-thinking is the key. When I quiet my mind it’s as though I hear better. When I insist on thinking, my pictures always look contrived.

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There is a great benefit to being organized and almost no benefit to being disorganized. I never leave the darkroom messy or the trays unwashed. I label and file my negatives immediately after they are dry. I keep printing notes on every print. I number, categorize, sequence, order, file, clean, pick-up and systemize everything. I may be fastidious about this, but I find it allows me to focus my thoughts on the creative process rather than searching for something I can’t find and desperately need. Worse, every time I get sloppy I re-learn this lesson all over again.

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Why is it that when a group of photographers get together they always talk about cameras and lenses – or now, cameras and software? I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve had conversations over dinner or drinks with other photographers where the conversation is about images. The exception to this is in a workshop setting. Maybe this is why I like going to workshops so much.

In fact, the minute I hear someone ask “What lens did you use?” or ask about the film, I intuitively know I am talking to a copycat or a novice.
We have five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The best photographers seem to be the ones who don’t ignore the other four. Think of Brett Weston, Minor White, and Eugene Smith, just to name a few. Their reputation as sensualists is almost as great as their reputation as photographers. I can’t help but wonder if there is some connection at some deep level.

If the history of photography teaches us anything, it is that the tools we use to make photographs are constantly changing and becoming obsolete. (Who now uses wet plates?) So, why all the fuss about new equipment? And, why all the fuss about digital?

As Sister Wendy says, the progress of art – unlike technology – is not built up like an ever higher-reaching ladder. A calculator is better than an abacus, which is better than counting on your fingers – there is a linear progression of technology that improves with each new advance. This is not true in art. Albumen prints are not better than silver prints which are not better than inkjet prints, nor the other way around. They are all just different. A given image might look better as a silver print or as a platinum print, but platinum as a medium is not inherently better than silver as a medium nor are these better as a medium than the newer technologies.

In all cases it is the sensitivity of the artist that is of paramount importance.

If I had to restrict myself to just one activity that would improve my photography the most, what would that be? There is no doubt in my mind that I would finish more work.

I agree with Oliver Gagliani that photography took a giant step backwards when money got involved. Not that there is anything wrong with money, but the twin seducers of money and fame seem to be seen as a right by some photographers, not a reward for a lifetime of achievement. That one chooses to make art does not mean that one has accomplished anything. I might choose to make dinner, but this does not make me a chef. I might choose to play an instrument, but you should be glad that this is an intellectual example only. No one has a right to have their work exhibited, published, purchased or admired. These results are all earned, not guaranteed.

I’ve concluded that I cannot make good photographs with my friends in tow. When I go out photographing with my friends, I am too interested and diverted by conversation and camaraderie to make images that matter. I wish this weren’t so, but in looking back on my 30 years in photography I find it is true. My best images seem to be those that I made after
being out photographing all alone for more than a few days. It takes a while to drop-off daily life and get into a creative and receptive frame of mind. Professionals cannot afford this luxury – perhaps there is something I can learn from them.

Similarly, I cannot photograph well when there is music playing. Nor when I am eating. Maybe I am just a one-sense-at-a-time kind of guy.

Photography can be such a fun hobby. But, I find artmaking is a completely different thing than a hobby. A hobby is a diversion, a vacation, a relaxation, a pastime – i.e., a way to pass the time. Artmaking is a battle, a confrontation, a pursuit, a matter of the soul and survival, a passion, a pile of frustration and a grain of reward, an irresistible impulse, an addiction, a form of self-imposed insanity in a world that does not require me to make art at all. My art is, therefore, a great joy simply because it is of no use whatsoever to anyone at any time. In fact, if it had a great purpose I would find it work.

A hobby is a collective activity. Artmaking is solitary. A hobby is about stuff. Artmaking is about the soul. A hobby gives us a break from everyday life. Artmaking is the core of everyday life. Grocery shopping is real and the hobby is time-off. Artmaking is real and groceries are time-off.

Photography is and can be both. I find I slip back and forth and my relationship with my camera changes from season to season, from year to year. Sometimes it is a hobby. Sometimes it is my mentor. Sometimes it is my slave driver. I used to feel guilty being a hobbyist and tortured being an artmaker. Now I see it as a spectrum – one I can move around in as I choose. Photography is just a tool – and hammers can hang pictures or build houses. It is not the tool that defines the challenge, it is the user and the decisions he or she makes that count.

Glass is the most marvelous and amazing thing! It can be clear or smoky, distorted or transparent, bend light as a lens or reflect light as a mirror. It can be cleaned to a spotless, invisible nothing. It can be ground to a diffusing glow. It can be colored and thereby color the entire world. It can be shaped, bent, folded, stretched, hollow or solid, thin or thick. It is the first and most important part of the photographer’s tool that actually touches the light. If glass can be all these things, how much more so the photographer’s mind.