

HUFF POST **TED** WEEKENDS

Ideas Worth Spreading, Every Weekend

: Reality In The Age Of Photoshop



Blair Schulman

Technology and Using Your Illusion

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- Posted: 05/16/2014 12:00 PM
- Updated: 05/16/2014

Click here to watch the TEDTalk that inspired this post.

Erik Johansson's Surrealist-style photography comes from a long history of manipulation within the discipline itself. Any fashion magazine bears evidence to this type of engineering; skin is made to look more porcelain, a wrinkle disappears and the image of a naturally attractive person is now indeed unrealistically beautiful. Almost impossible to replicate or emulate in real life. And it is this imagery that the audience compares itself to. Cognitive restructuring is employed and we recalibrate our brains to decide this is how it is going to be. The fantasy of one's mind now appears on the page, (or on the wall), and the messaging is complicated when we try to achieve an unattainable perfection in reality. But for the sake of Johanssons' work, it leads us back to what is being fleshed out in the first place. I ask myself, what comes first, the magic or the manipulation?

In an email exchange with Kansas City photographer EG Schempf we discussed the propositions involved in Johansson's imagery. "It is to me the 'extreme' of what you can do with Photoshop. I agree with his principles of how to make the illusion work, same light and working with actual photos. Many users of (Photoshop) aren't as obvious. (It) is used mostly to 'tweak' reality. Remove a blemish, correct perspective, control contrast, exposure, composition...The main job of the photographer is to 'direct' the eye. Directing the eye is done with composition, light and dark."

Schempf goes on to say, "What (Johansson) is (discussing) in the TED talk is 'compositing.' He really is totally restructuring reality."

Sometimes, a reversal of this refashioning is undertaken and a foothold into brutal reality takes us out of the fantasy and deep into the gutter. If you examine the banality of photographer Stephen Shore's Americana you are expected to look for the cracks in the ceiling or carelessly strewn trash lingering in the corners. Going further, there is a cruel honesty found in the work of Tulsa, Oklahoma's drug scene shot by filmmaker Larry Clark from 1963-1971. Both artists create imagery that is stripped to an unflinching honesty where we do not necessarily see their subjects first, but the circumstances that surround them, and therein lies the wonder or despair which gives us pause for reflection and contemplation.

Other times the lines are blurred between certainty, fantasy and circumstance, as with the art of Cindy Sherman whose *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) recreated a world of unreality. At first they were an experiment of what supposed fans of an imaginary icon, portrayed by Sherman herself, wanted to see. They progressed into an entire series of "unguarded moments" that would purportedly be shown in a magazine or social column; movie starlet at home, ice cold socialite, sex kitten, until Sherman eventually exhausted clichés and archetypes to emulate.

Sherman, Clark and Shore are singular artists using environment and culture to traverse between actuality and fantasy, but as technology progresses, are artists like Johansson relying on tools to transcend our imaginations? Manifesting itself into a tangible embodiment takes dexterity and patience. To not co-opt your vision is limited to how technological manipulation serves you, as a servant or a tyrant.

In photography, timing is everything; the right location, the right light, the right subject; the artist then might rely on tools, like Photoshop, to transcend the imagination. How such tools reveal itself into a tangible embodiment that ordinarily takes dexterity and patience depends on how the creator decides who is serving whom.

Does it become more about design than vision? At what point do you put down the keypad and take to the street? It is there that the machine of the mind is set in motion, you have an understanding of what you want to achieve and try to figure it out both creatively and logistically. Understanding how the light for merged images is necessary to be identical. But does one not need to comport an original idea before setting off on a technological rabbit hole?

Johansson is right when he says we are only limited by our own imagination. However, with such a heavy reliance on technology to demonstrate our dreams, it might be until we run out of clichés that we reach our limit.

We want to know what you think. Join the discussion by posting a comment below or tweeting #TEDWeekends. Interested in blogging for a future edition of TED Weekends? Email us at tedweekends@huffingtonpost.com.

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Erik Johansson

Impossible photography

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1 / 1

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