

Jonathan Jones – A Response
By Kat Gollock

I'm not normally one for comment when it comes to articles so obviously written for that purpose alone. With that said, however, following an article written by Jonathan Jones about the pointlessness of exhibiting photography in a gallery, I felt unusually compelled to respond. I worry that by writing this I am, unintentionally, adding impetus to Jones' writing. However, I am also intrigued as to why this time I have been so compelled to write a response to such a clearly reactionary article.

It would be easy to start with the headline where he describes photography as 'soulless, flat and stupid' but that's the whole point of a headline. Punchy enough and intriguing enough to draw the reader in. You would assume then, that what would follow, would be a clear and concise debate with the author posing a far more nuanced argument to what the crass headline would suggest. And, indeed, Jonathan Jones starts off well enough by recognising that photography can be powerful and beautiful and capture the immediacy of a moment like nothing else. Sadly, however, that's where his empathy ends. What we go on to read is a flimsy argument filled with grandiose statements that does little to dispel the myopic point of view that is expressed in the headline.

It's fair to say that exhibitions of any form can be taken too seriously. Jones, however, complains that it is, specifically, photography exhibitions that are taken too seriously. To pen such a sweeping statement is bad enough but to then follow by saying that instead of 'wasting space' on large photographic prints, all photos should be viewed using an ipad is just unfathomable. Having stood in front of a Cindy Sherman Clown, for a considerable length of time I hasten to add, I can't even begin to understand how viewing it on a small screen is in any way comparable. How can he possibly think that an ipad can ever successfully convey the complexity of an image like Invisible man by Jeff Wall or the beautiful simplicity of a Sugimoto seascape?

Of course there are terrible photographs, but to suggest that all photographs aren't made with the same 'time and difficulty, material complexity, textural depth, talent and craft, imagination and mindfulness' that paintings are is an insult and discredits every serious photographer. I'm sure the likes of Victor Burgin, John Berger, Roland Barthes and the countless others who have written extensively on the critical theory behind photography would more than object to the medium being classed as one dimensional.

Jonathan Jones claims to be a critic of art yet he seems to have glossed over that whole period during the late 1960s and 70s where a space was created that facilitated debate within the field of photography, contributing to its acceptance as a viable, creative discipline. And how the encouragement and execution of the practice, at all levels of society, contributed to the development of an inclusive and powerful visual medium and shaped the way photography is taught and practiced today. This is the reason why, perhaps, I felt the need to respond. To ignore such a relevant period of modern art lacks huge insight and emphasises Jones' inability to accept that engagement with art by everyone should be encouraged. It is that attitude that I oppose so greatly and, have, in fact, spent a lot of time and energy throughout my work as a photographer trying to repudiate it.

Photography gave artists the freedom to be more prolific in their creative output and offered them a choice out with the institutionalised principals of painting and sculpture, liberating them from the confines of the old tenets of the traditional artistic disciplines. It inspired them to take the techniques and tools of the mass media, that had surreptitiously been shaping them all their lives, and use them against itself to make artistic and political statements about culture and society more effectively than, some would argue, a painting ever could.

If we are to go by what Jones is saying then these photographers would need to paint over their photos to then merit them a place on a gallery wall. Which brings us to the subject of photo realism or photo montage and what their legitimacy is as gallery fodder. And I wonder where he stands on Gerhard Richter, an artist who has created compelling bodies of work by emulating photographs from the mass media and does, in fact, paint over photographs. Rather interestingly, he has a lot to say about Richter and all of it complimentary, stopping just short of comparing him to a modern day Da Vinci. Although he defiantly states that Richter is not a photographer he does say that 'what I never understood before was in how many ways the camera opens Richter's eye, and how energetically he shows these new perspectives to us.' Surely the same can be said for the work of the likes of the Pictures Generation or the several other students from CalArts who graduated under John Baldesarri in the 1970s. With all this in mind, I find it infuriating when I see someone, an art critic no less, trying to relegate photography to its pre-1970s standing.

Continuing with the comparison between painting and photography, which Jones continually seems to do as a result of his self confessed inability to separate the two, I find it interesting that he closes his argument with a challenge to see one millionth of the vitality in a photograph that can be seen in a Rembrandt painting. I wonder if he has ever looked into the eyes of *The Migrant Mother* or *The Shell Shocked Soldier*? Unlike a painting those eyes are very real and they convey a real sense of strength coupled with an almost heartbreaking vulnerability. To dismiss them as a 'quick fix of light, lacking depth and soul' rendered unacceptable for a gallery wall is an absolute nonsense.

By the time I get to the end of this article it seems to me that the problem that Jonathan Jones has with photography exhibitions is, perhaps, not their stupidity but more their accessibility and the increased level of audience engagement that brings with it. You need only refer to his article about the installation by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* and we can see again his clear distaste for what he deems as popular art. Of course, the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award images are designed for print and brings in a specific audience but that doesn't mean it's not worthy of a gallery wall and it certainly doesn't mean that all photography exhibitions are of the same ilk. It is clear that Jones still views photography as a second class citizen in the art world despite the vast amount of work proving otherwise.

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Original article can be found here -

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/nov/13/why-photographs-dont-work-in-art-galleries>