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The camera today? You can't trust it. Hockney sparks a debate

Artist says ease of manipulation has made photography a dying art

Jonathan Jones and Gerard Seenan
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David Hockney, the celebrated pop artist who has worked extensively in photography, has fallen out of love with the medium because of its digital manipulation and now believes it is a dying art form.

In an interview with the Guardian, Hockney says he believes modern photography is now so extensively and easily altered that it can no longer be seen to be true or factual. He also describes art photography as "dull".

Even war photography, once seen as objectively "true", has now been cast in doubt by the ubiquitous use of digital cameras which produce images that can be easily enhanced or twisted.

Hockney points to the case during the Iraq war when the Los Angeles Times sacked a photographer for having superimposed two images to make them more powerful.

"A reader spotted it; they then printed the two photographs with the story and fired him. Why? Because he was not using photography as 'I was there and this happened in front of me'. A newspaper has to have that, or thinks it does," he said.

The result, Hockney believes, is that photography has been pushed closer to drawing and painting. The veracity of what he calls the "chemical period" of images produced faithfully in the darkroom has been lost.

No going back

"We can't go back: Kodak got rid of 22,000 people when it ended its chemical developing. You've no need to believe a photograph made after a certain date because it won't be made the way Cartier-Bresson made his. We know he didn't crop them - he was the master of truthful photography. But you can't have a photographer like that again because we know photographs can be made in different ways."

Hockney also points to the degrading of truth in celebrity photography. He cites a portrait of Elton John taken by a well-known photographer from California. The difference between the final touched-up image and the original was "hilarious", the artist told the Guardian.

The impact of computerised images was most strongly brought to his attention much closer to home: "My sister, who is just a bit older than me, she's a retired district nurse, she's just gone mad with the digital camera and computer - move anything about. She doesn't worry about whether it's authentic; she's just making pictures."

As more and more people emulate his sister and realise that the camera can be made to lie, Hockney hopes there will be a positive side-effect for painting, which will gain in standing in reverse proportion.

The photography world, however, was unwilling last night to see the medium dismissed.

Russell Roberts, head of photography at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, said Hockney's argument was "simplistic".

Mr Roberts said manipulation of images was as old as photography. He could cite numerous examples from the 1840s, the first decade of photography, of images which claimed to be accurate depictions of events but were in fact highly stage managed.

"It would be great if David could cite examples of photographers he felt worked in an era where manipulation was not widespread, before this collective conscious of how manipulative photography is developed," he added.

Manipulated

Eamonn McCabe, a former picture editor of the Guardian, said it had become increasingly difficult for picture editors to tell whether a picture had been manipulated and a growing number of digitally manipulated pictures were being published.

"I think there was perhaps a point where there was a general perception that photography was truth, but we have lost that," he said.

But McCabe said this did not detract from the value of good photography. "To say that photography is dead is faintly ludicrous. It would be better to say that you should be wary of everything."

Hockney, who worked in photography during his photo-collages of the 1980s, now says that photography is inherently inferior to painting as an art form.

He says no photograph or video could ever capture the tenderness of a Rembrandt drawing showing a young family teaching a child to walk.

"For a work of art you need the hand, the eye and the heart. Many people would video that moment, but again, the video would turn it into a performance. Fellini says everything in front of the camera's a performance."

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