

## NOTES BY BROOKS JENSEN

He was young, naïve, just starting. As the saying goes, “Out of the mouths of babes...” He asked, “*What are the most important things I should do to improve my photographs?*” It was such a straightforward question – and I have been involved in photography so long – you’d think I would have had a simple and canned answer. I did not. I was nonplussed. I decided I’d better think about this seriously if I was to answer in a useful way. “Let me get back to you.”

And how do you answer such a question? By looking back – at my negatives, my prints, my methods, successes, failures and, in short, my personal history in photography. From this scrutiny (a rich source of what *not* to do) I compiled a list, narrowed it down, found the common threads. At the risk of sounding somewhat undeservedly authoritarian, here are...

### TWENTY-ONE WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ARTWORK

1. SHOOT MORE THAN YOU DO; PRINT MORE THAN YOU DO; AND BE A RUTHLESS EDITOR. I’m serious. There is a great deal to be gained in sheer volume – not that volume itself is any virtue, but *practice* is. Besides, relentless practice does have a twin sister known as luck. And in photography, unlike golf, a lucky shot when one is just practicing can count as much as a skilled shot when one is serious. Speaking of volume, if you are not throwing out ten finished prints for every one you exhibit you’re not being critical enough. If you are not shooting 100 negatives for every one you print, you are not being energetic enough. Motor drives don’t count.
2. IF I COULD DO ONE THING THAT WOULD IMPROVE MOST PHOTOGRAPHS MORE THAN ANYTHING I WOULD SIMPLY TAPE A BIG DOT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE VIEWFINDER SO THAT YOU CAN’T SEE WHAT’S IN THE DEAD CENTRE OF THE COMPOSITION. Avoid bulls-eye composition whenever possible. Whenever I see the subject plopped in the dead centre of the frame, I know the photographer is confused; they are confused about the purpose of making art. We don’t make art to show someone what something looks like. All this requires is eyes (or a lens). Art is supposed to have meaning, emotion, power, or magic. Don’t merely show what the subject is; show what it *isn’t*, show what it *means*, show *why* it is, *how* it is, *for whom* it is, *where* it is, and/or *when* it is. Imagine a novel with only descriptions; without plot, motivation, depth, crisis, or crescendo, a novel would be merely a catalogue of object descriptors. It is the same with photographs.
3. THINK IN TWO-DIMENSIONS. You are not making a picture of something; you are *making something* – and what you are making is two-dimensional. If you can’t learn to see flat, use Polaroid materials. If you don’t have Polaroid materials make a sketch/drawing of your photograph before you make the exposure. Learn to see edges and shapes instead of details and colours. Squint and look at the world through your eyelashes so the details dissolve. Or, try looking through a lightly frosted piece of plastic. See your composition in terms of its large masses first, and let the film reveal the details. Learn that composition is about shapes and that texture is about details.
4. THE BEST TELEPHOTO LENS IN THE WORLD IS YOUR FEET. Move closer. Move even closer. Use wider-angled lenses and get closer. The best photographs are almost always ones in which the viewer feels directly involved in the world in the image, and this happens most successfully with direct engagement. Become engaged with your subject material. The easiest way to do so is with wider lenses and physically closer involvement. Of course, not every great picture of the world is made with a wide-angle lens. But, if 30% of your images are made with a wide-angle lens and 70% with a telephoto, reverse this ratio and you will find your photographs improve dramatically.
5. PHOTOGRAPHY IS PART ART AND PART SCIENCE. It involves the human heart, but is made manifest through optics, chemistry, electronics, and the laws of physics. The science part of photography is composed of an infinite number of variables and is much, much easier to learn if you reduce the number of variables. In the first several years, choose one good film and paper and stick with it. Limit the number of cameras you own, especially early in your career. Learn thoroughly what your materials will do and don’t get seduced by the idea that better photographs reside in better equipment. Never forget that all the great photographs in history were made with more primitive camera equipment than you currently own.

6. **WORK IN PROJECTS.** Make lots of images and look deeper. Allocate time to rephotographing things you've already photographed. Look at the clues in your images and see the things that your photographs tell you they would have liked to have been. Assume your first photographing session is a warm-up, a sketch pad, a get-acquainted session. Allow the images to unfold as you work the project repeatedly. Learn to be receptive to the inanimate objects around you, because they speak to you as an echo of your subconscious creativity. The same can be said of your photographs. Pretend as though your previous photographs are teachers, not children. Every project, no matter what the project, requires research – the kinds of research you do in the library as well as in the field. Read, study, ask questions, look at the work of those who've gone before you, think, ask questions, listen some more, and ask more questions. Write things down. If a project doesn't occupy a serious percentage of a notebook full of notes, you probably haven't done enough to think about the project before you pull out the camera. Mull over projects from the very beginning to the very end. What do you need to know? Who knows it? What will it look like in its final state? Where will you need to go? Who's going to care? What are the components? How does this fit? When is the deadline? Is there a budget? How much will it cost? What defines success? What are you willing to sacrifice in order to complete this project?
7. **REVERSE ENGINEER YOUR EQUIPMENT.** Every image, every project, is best created with a certain set of tools. Start with the image or the project and figure out which tools will best help you to succeed. If you find you are constantly needing new equipment, review #5 above and be honest about whether or not you are choosing the right projects.
8. **SEEK OUT THE ADVICE OF EXPERIENCED PHOTOGRAPHERS.** Attend workshops. Read books. There is no virtue in reinventing the wheel other than the intellectual exercise of doing it. If you want to make great photographs, look at great photographs and talk to great photographers. Be someone's apprentice for a while. Assign yourself the task of reproducing great photographs as closely as you can. Then, when you've succeeded, throw that film and those prints away and never show them to anyone. Learn from the masters, but don't become them. Don't seek the masters; seek what they sought. This relates to...
9. **WORK THROUGH THE COMPULSORIES.** It has truly been said that to see farther than others you should stand on the shoulders of giants. Great photographers and artists before you have made work that survives today as a testament to their creativity. In order for you to carry their torch, you must first tread their path. Don't be discouraged if it takes you years to learn what they already know; it took them years to learn from those who came before them. Study history. Know the conventions, the rules, the clichés, the techniques – know the mind of those who have already asked and answered your questions.
10. **FINISH IT.** Don't allow yourself to use negatives or raw data files as a storehouse for *potential* artwork. There is nothing to be gained by having the *potential* to be great. To paraphrase the movie cliché: if you finish it, they will come. There is a universal Law of Audience that says if you finish work, the universe cannot stand that it remains unseen. Opportunities will unfold as if by magic. In addition, when you are old, you will be able to look back and see which of your projects were the best ones. This is inevitable. But if your best project is, for example, your 10<sup>th</sup> project, there is no way you could have gotten there until you completed the first nine. There is no faster way, no more efficient way, to get your life's best work than to finish the necessary work you need to do that prepares you for your eventual best work. Finish it, let go of it, move on.
11. **REALISE THAT CREATIVITY DOES NOT WORK ON A CLOCK.** Be prepared for your creative subconscious whenever it is prepared to show itself. Use a memo recorder. Carry paper and pen. Be disciplined about capturing odd thoughts at odd moments when they pop up. Do photography (or at least think photography) every day. Don't be surprised if your best and most creative ideas happen when you least expect them.
12. **LET GO OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND MAKE ART.** By that I mean recognise the highest purpose of photography as art is to communicate and connect with your fellow human beings. The objective of photography as a fine art pursuit is not to accumulate artefacts that will impress collectors and curators. Ultimately, your real work is to connect your Self to the world. In doing so, you will pass on to the viewer an artefact which connects them to the world and back to you. Ultimately, if your work does not move someone, it does not move anything.

13. DEVELOP YOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC LITERACY. Read books, attend exhibitions, subscribe to magazines (particularly ones with photographs that are non-photographic magazines) and develop your own personal mental gallery of images, image-makers, imaging trends, and likes and dislikes. The more you know about other photographers, strange as it sounds, the more you'll know about yourself – and in particular, when it is that you are walking your own creative path and when you are walking someone else's creative path in delusion.
14. IGNORE ADVICE FROM OTHERS IF THEY TELL YOU HOW TO DO IT THEIR WAY. Of course, ultimately I suppose this advice also pertains to this list. But, fundamentally, I mean this to apply to photo criticism. There is no more useless critique than when the comment starts out, "If it were my picture I would have done..." It is *not* their picture, and how they would have done it is totally *non sequitur*. The best critics will tell you what it is they see in your photograph and leave it up to you to decide whether or not what they see is a function of their unique vision or your success or failure in making the image you intended.
15. LIVE WITH IT FOR A WHILE BEFORE GOING PUBLIC. Create a space in your home or your studio where you can thumbtack lots of pictures to the wall. Keep them there, look at them repeatedly, look at them at different times of day, in different light, in different moods, to see how your response to your image changes with time. See both inside and outside the frame of mind you had when you were creating it. The process of doing so will likely lead you to try printing variations, cropping variations, and even entirely new approaches with a given image. This is good and generally shows that the image is speaking to you – and that you are listening.
16. FORGET GRANTS AND FIGURE OUT A WAY TO MAKE IT HAPPEN ON YOUR OWN. Don't let the lack of resources get in your way. Do not let limitations prevent you from doing your art. Do not rely solely on the generosity of others; this is a seductive trap. To do so will mean that your work can only progress when someone else wills it. Ultimately, no one cares about your artwork or your artistic progress more than you. Recognise, as Stephen Bender said, that the art life is a benefit you must be willing to pay for.
17. THINK CLEARLY ABOUT YOUR OBJECTIVES. Which is more important to you: earning an income or getting your work distributed? Which do you care about more: making images the public loves or making images that you must? If you're lucky, these are the same, but if they're not, clearly knowing which is more important to you makes everything else easier. There are no right answers here. There is only confusion when you work at cross-purposes to your objectives.
18. PHOTOGRAPHY IS NOT A GROUP ACTIVITY. Learn to work alone. Learn to work without distractions. Turn off the music. Surround yourself with silence. Each one of us has a muse within us who tries to communicate and advise us on the creative path. There are no exceptions to this. But there is also a universality that all muses tend to whisper. To hear them clearly one must reside in a very still place.
19. DON'T PHOTOGRAPH WHAT IS "PHOTOGRAPHABLE". Photograph what interests you, even if it is impossible to photograph. It is almost impossible to make a great photograph of something that *doesn't* interest you. Passion about the subject matter, about the way it reacts with light, about the way it moves and changes, about the way it makes you feel – this is the subject of photography, not the things in the image. There are no boring subjects in the entire universe – there are plenty of boring photographs made by bored photographers. Become passionate about something and that passion will, with time and dedication, manifest itself in your images.
20. THINK. Think from your subject's point of view. Think from your audience's point of view. Think about what you are communicating. Think about how this will look in the passage of time. Think about what's on the edges, just inside, just outside the photograph. Think about what you have said. Think about what you haven't said. Think about what people will think you have said, and what they'll think you haven't said. Most importantly, know *when* to think and when to suspend thinking on purpose. Art without thought is incomplete. Art with thought is incomplete. Artmaking requires both thinking and non-thinking in order to become more than mere pretty pictures.
21. REMEMBER, ART IS NOT ABOUT ARTWORK. ART IS ABOUT LIFE. To become a better artist, first and foremost become a better person – not in the *moral* sense, but rather in the *complete* sense. Remember that the greatest artist is not the one with the best technique, but the one with the most human heart.

That's about it, although I do reserve the right to amend and modify this advice as I grow older. I do so because – and this is the real key – artmaking is a process, and lessons wait in every moment to be discovered. I'm still making art and still learning every day. And I have faith that the most important lessons – as well as my most important works of art – are yet to be discovered. Come to think of it, that in itself is a lesson worth remembering.