Photographic documentation for artists: some notes

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Caveats: These are my thoughts on a practical technique of photographic documentation for artists. There are many ways to approach this – mine is far from the only way.

Photos an artist needs:

- Head shot of you
- Shot of you working in the studio
- Shot s of your work cropped to show just the work, in the case of a painting. For an object, a small to moderate amount of neutral background space should be shown. (There are exceptions to this directive, for example when you need to show scale or how the work looks in its natural setting. Some art works, such as installations, cannot be shown separated from a setting.)
- Detail shots of your work
- Shots of your work in situ (for example, displayed in a gallery, in a home, etc.). This may help viewers judge the scale of the work or understand more about what it would be like to see the work in person.
- Photos of source material and inspiration for an artist's talk (could be photos of people, objects, etc.)
- An artist needs current versions of these photos. In other words, a working artist is always needing new photos. It's like laundry or dishwashing – a constant task.

How to get photos:

- Learn to take them yourself. This means you need to learn some technical information about cameras and photography and invest in equipment and software, and update your knowledge, equipment, and software on a regular basis. –OR—
- Hire a professional photographer. But be aware that there are various kinds of professional photographers. Wedding photographers are common. Professionals who understand the full needs of artists are uncommon. Your best bet is to learn what to look for in good photos of your work and to search around carefully for photographers who are willing to work with you. You are going to need to learn some technical information so that you can recognize technical quality in photos and so that you can converse with the photographer. You will also need to be willing to pay the photographer and to schedule photo sessions often enough to keep up with your art production.
- Note: some people get a friend, husband, etc. to take their photos. Gradually, the artist realizes that the friend is an equipment enthusiast who doesn't have the visual skills to make great photos. If your friend is a good technical person with a great eye, you are unusually lucky. If not, then hire a professional photographer or learn to use the equipment yourself.
- For head shots and shots of yourself in the studio, it won't be easy to take those yourself. You could trade photo shoots with artist friends. You can ask non-artist friends and family members – but ask for many, many shots so that you have a lot to choose from.

Technical specs on your photos:

- Is the photo easy to "read" or understand? Everything could be correct technically about the photo, yet it lacks something in terms of attracting the right attention. You might want to get feedback from artists you trust, and use some creative thinking to solve the problem.
- It should be in focus from front to back and all over.
- Clear (when looking at the photos at a quick glance AND when blowing them up to actual pixel size, is there the right level of clarity?). Clarity is compromised by poor lighting conditions, camera movement during the shot, and inadequate camera quality, among other things.
- The colors match the actual work.
- Perspective is correct (if the painting is rectangular, does it appear so in the photo, or is it skewed?) For an object, the camera perspective changes the view significantly – experiment to find the best result.
- For an object, what about the background? This is a vexed question for which there is no one answer. The best backgrounds will probably be neutral (i.e. shot using roll of photo backdrop paper). Sometimes a gradient background is very desirable; be sure you can accomplish this in a convincing way if you attempt it.
- Photo is the right size (right number of pixels or inches for the task at hand; also does the photo have enough pixels for future use?). This is an editing issue unless your original photo does not have enough pixels for a later use.
- If the photo has been edited using image software, is the editing convincing? Judge by glancing quickly at the whole photo, then blow it up to actual pixel level and examine it. All editing should look plausibly real. (Of course, the editing over the art portion of the image should be absolutely faithful to the real art work.)
- Future of technology: how might this affect the kind of photo you take now? If this is the only photo you can take of your work and then the work passes out of your hands, will you be happy in 10 years with this photo? You might want to consider making sure your photo is of the highest quality you can manage today.

Technical camera terms

- The camera is a lot like an eye in terms of function, but has limitations compared to a human eye in terms of how it interprets light. The human eye/brain combination is much more adaptable in terms of adjusting for light variations. This is why a photographer has to be so picky about the light used. For example, avoid stripes of sun and shadow. Light that we see as white has a color in photography. Incandescent light is yellow, sunlight is often blue, and fluorescent light is often a hazy green. The flash setting on your camera will create nasty whiteouts and harsh shadows, so turn it off.
- Point-and-shoot cameras are automatically adjusted for common photographic purposes. But these are not your purposes as a documenter of art work. It will be very useful to learn the photo terms that your point-and-shoot camera is trying to protect you from. You may be able to use a quality DSLR camera that has various automatic modes, as long as you choose the manual mode, or perhaps the aperture-priority mode (and then select a high-numbered f-stop).
- Aperture. Depth of field. Shutter speed. ISO. Zoom, wide-angle, telephoto lenses and how they affect depth perception. How to hold the camera and depress the shutter with the least movement of the camera. What is the greatest shutter speed that you can use and generally be able to count on a vibration-free photo. F-stop. Focusing: although most cameras will focus automatically, there are various focusing systems. Do you know how to maximize your chances of getting both the nearest and farthest point of an object in focus? Exposure settings (I prefer

to slightly underexpose my photos and then adjust via software later). Tripods: when and how to use them. All of these are examples of technical photographic information that are vital to know if you are taking your own photos. With an old-fashioned manual film camera, we had to learn and calculate all of these things. Now, if we understand these concepts in a general way, we will know how to select the right software mode and when to override the camera's computerized suggestions. You can learn these things in a traditional photography course, and/or by reading and analyzing your photos.

Equipment and software

- The bad news is that the small and inexpensive point-and-shoot cameras are not good enough for documenting art work. These days, 10 megapixels is on the small side for a serious camera, but more mp doesn't mean it's a good choice for documenting art. Beyond having enough megapixels, basic lens quality is important. And the quality and size of the camera's sensor are critical. You're going to need a serious DSLR, and it's going to cost some money. You'll need to ask various people who are serious about photography for suggestions. It's a good idea to read reviews online, even though it can be hard to read through all the geek talk. Small snapshot cameras yield photos that are not clear and precise enough for your purposes. Choose a lens package that meets your needs. Personally, I use a moderate zoom lens. A current DSLR should have vibration control software on the lens. This is really worthwhile in my view – I can get very sharp photos while holding the camera naturally in my hands, without a tripod. A good way to start researching the camera question is to examine photos in actual pixel view – this way you can really see what is going on.
- Other equipment. This depends on how you decide to work on documentation. You could buy photo lights, reflective umbrellas, and other stuff.
- Image editing. You will need a computer with plenty of processing speed, plus an excellent monitor and graphics card. Laptops are usually too limited in these areas. A good bet is to choose an entertainment model of computer – those are pretty well tweaked for image processing. You'll also need image editing software. A convenient choice is Photoshop Elements ($99 or less), though there are others. You might want a graphics tablet for greater control than a mouse can provide. Then you'll need to learn to use these things. Even if you hire a photographer, it would be very convenient to be able to edit and resize your own photos.
- And along with the equipment and software, you might need some training. College level photography I course? Continuing Ed courses at a local university? Online courses? Making experiments, doing some reading, then making more experiments? Choose the option that meets your needs best.

Common photo issues

I have the work needed for an exhibition, but they want photos of it – today! Yikes!

- Solution: make (or schedule) regular photo sessions as you finish a batch of work.

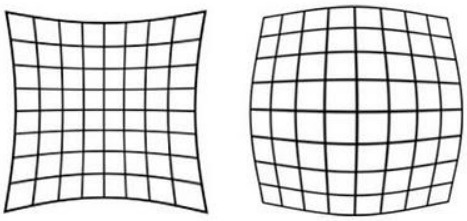
I know I have a photo of this piece – somewhere. But where?

- Solution: devise a way to organize your photos – a way that works for you. I use folders in the Pictures folder on my PC. The folders nest by type of work and date. There are many ways to organize photos, and you can get software to help.

My painting is square, but in the photo it looks like a weird trapezoid.

- Solution: while you are taking the photo, make sure the back of the camera is parallel to the plane of the surface of the painting. Look in the viewfinder or camera screen to make sure the sides of the painting are parallel to the edges of the screen or viewfinder. Take extra photos and

choose the squarest one later, when you edit. DON'T count on complicated editing procedures to square up the image later. It's easier, and the final result will look better, if you do only very minor editing of this kind.



The edges of my painting look puffed out or shrunken in.

- Solution: this is a problem with cheap cameras – the dreaded "pincushion" effect. Photoshop Elements has a filter correction for this. But good cameras have more accurate lenses.

The color is off. I'm trying to adjust it with software, but every time I change one color, another color goes off kilter.

- Solution: shoot your work with a piece of neutral gray paper in the frame. Then when you edit, color correction is one click on the neutral gray paper area in Photoshop. This will usually adjust all the colors back into a realistic relationship with each other. Then you can do other adjustments for brightness, contrast, saturation, etc. At the end, crop the gray paper out of the photo. Also note that if your computer screen doesn't reproduce color accurately, you can't control the color adjustment of your image properly.

My photos are just slightly fuzzy. Why doesn't the automatic focus on the camera handle this?

- Solution: This might be because your camera is too inexpensive to take a really sharp photo under the lighting conditions you have. Or you might not be depressing the shutter slowly enough to allow the automatic focus time to work. Or you might need to alter other settings on your camera (aperture and f-stop) so that you have the right depth of field. Or there might have been too much vibration or camera movement when you took the photo. Retake the photo with a tripod, or take it again handheld but with more consideration for shutter speed and camera movement. Or this might be a situation in which automatic focus doesn't work well (for example, when you try to focus over an area that has very little detail or contrast). Sometimes it helps to focus over a more detailed area, keep the shutter halfway depressed to hold the focus, and reframe the photo before depressing the shutter all the way.

The gallery asked me for photos of the work, and I sent them. Now they are complaining that the images are too small. Or they said I crashed their email with giant images.

- Solution: The gallery has a reasonable complaint! Either pay your photographer to make you images in the requested size, or learn how to resize images using software such as Photoshop Elements. Your original photo should be quite large. Ask the gallery what size image they want in terms of numbers of pixels and overall file size. Then go into your software and save a special version of your image in the desired size.

Other useful thoughts:

- You can buy photo backdrop paper in a roll. Search online for a vendor. I have used phototechinc.com. Over the years, I've found good uses for "aluminum gray", "neutral gray", and "jet black" paper. If you just need a bit of neutral gray paper in a photo for color adjustment, you might be able to order some sheets of gray drawing paper and see which shades work best.
- There is something weird about fluorescent light. The camera sees the light as a funny color (greenish), and it is sometimes impossible to achieve accurate focus. I suggest avoiding fluorescent light.

- You can use various other kinds of light, and then adjust for the color using a bit of neutral backdrop paper. Avoid direct sunlight and turn off the flash setting on your camera. The most neutral outdoor light is a bright but fully overcast gray day. You can shoot in shade on a sunny day, but there will be a blue color cast (shoot with a piece of gray paper in the image so you can take the color cast out in the editing process). Mixed sources of light are a problem (daylight and artificial light at the same time). Avoid mixed light sources if you can.
- Take lots of shots of the same thing, even if you're sure you are shooting every shot the same way. There will be minor variations in depth of field, placement of image, focus, etc. Just discard the less-than-optimal shots. Also, don't take all the shots in the same way. Experiment a bit.
- Vantage point and perspective matter in shots of objects. Experiment with squatting and standing in front of the object – which vantage point shows the object at its best? Turn the object around to find its best side. The big problem with shooting objects is that you are turning a 3D experience into a 2D one. You have to work harder to try to communicate the best qualities of your sculpture in a flat image. The angle setting of the lens will affect the perspective view of the object for better or worse. Wide-angle settings can increase a sense of bulge, while telephoto settings flatten. Which is better? The answer is often somewhere in between wide angle and telephoto. Shoot alternate views of 3D works.
- When editing your images, you can delete all the ones that aren't optimal. Save one of every view that is optimal. Save one version of that original shot with no editing at all – this comes in handy sometimes, even years later, when you figure out a better way to edit your images, or perhaps technology has changed in some unforeseen way. Save both an original unedited version of the file and also a fully edited version. I put those in a separate folder nested within the folder for that art work. You want to make sure these don't get written over when you make smaller file size versions.
- If you use the file folder method of organizing your photos, you can also insert an info file into the folder for a specific set of work. The info file, which might be written in Word or Excel, could contain the physical dimensions, materials used, comments about how and why you made the work, where it has been shown, who owns it now, etc. Or you can enter this information into a database program.
- Sometimes the most useful shot of an art work is not the most neutral one. For example, if you are shooting a work of sculpture that is surprising in terms of scale, then you might need to show enough context that the viewer realizes what size it actually is. For instance, if you made a 12-foot sculpture of a mouse, and you photographed it on a perfectly neutral background, many viewers will miss the label that says it is 12 feet long. Their brains will tell them it's probably the size of an actual mouse. So the best solution may be to choose a background that gives just enough information to show scale without being distracting. You'll come across other examples in which the best practice is to break the usual rules for photo documentation. Use your creative brain, and keep looking and thinking.