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Timelessness in Art and Photography

1. Timelessness as Universality and Intuition

The term "timeless" often carries a positive connotation in art. But, what does it mean? A common usage of this term is associated with universality, to be specific, some kind of aesthetical value that transcends across all cultural contexts. For instance, one art critic said, "A masterpiece (of art) expresses what is universal, timeless, and meaningful for all people. It does so using the media of choice to its very fullest, and in doing so, creates new relationships and shows us something we have not seen or felt before." To elaborate this point, another art critic said, "This is true of art that deals with materials or utilizes strictly sensuous means to express ideas or feeling. This is why this type of art becomes timeless, if it is successful; it speaks directly to the intuition and the instinct." In my view, this concept of "timeless" may be problematic, because it is doubtful whether our intuition and instinct in reaction to aesthetical objects can be entirely devoid of cultural contexts. Does the preceding notion imply that in response to a piece of timeless art, our aesthetical experience appeals to our sensation or reaction to some universal form, instead of intellectually interpreting a localized content?

This dichotomy may have a root in the 18th century Empiricist philosophers, who classified object attributes into primary and secondary categories. In the 20th century psychologists and philosophers who subscribe to the view of syntacticalism extend this classification of primary and secondary properties. For example, Ned Block explained that a bull is enraged by a red cloth because the cloth has two properties. The primary property is redness, which is intrinsic to the object. The secondary property is provocativeness, which is functional in its relation to the the bull's reaction. However, provocativeness does not make the bull angry because the bull is too dumb to interpret it. Redness does the entire job and provocativeness just takes a free ride along. Thus, Block argued that our mental processing deals with syntax or primary attributes rather than intentional content. Cognitive psychologists can immediately see insurmountable problems in this argument. According to Clark Glymour, language of human psychology is not only about syntax or universal form, but also about relations, including intentional relations. Cognitive psychologists indeed can and do know the state of the external relationships. Hence, I hesitate to equate "timelessness" to "universality" or "intuition."

2. Timelessness as Dimensional Reduction, and Distortion

Interestingly enough, although “timelessness” literally implies that it is a temporal concept, dimension reduction or distortion in either space or time can create an illusion of “timelessness.” Consider this ancient example: in ancient Egypt some of the scribal professionals were also artists. As a result, hieroglyphic inscriptions were an integral part of Egyptian art. Calligraphy is two-dimensional while pictorial art is supposed to depict three-dimensional objects. However, the tight integration between writing and visual art in Egypt produced pictures without spatial depth, which is in a sharp contrast to Western art that employs techniques of perspectives. This spatial reduction results in a sense of “timelessness.”

A modern example can be found in the Surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali. It is well-known that his Surrealist treatment distorts spatial relations of objects. One of his famous motifs is a melted clock, which conveys the message of temporal distortion in terms of spatial distortion. But no doubt viewers are highly disoriented in both spatial and temporal senses. A more recent example is the Surrealist-oriented work “Dream temple” by Japanese artist Mariko. Visual art, unlike performance art, is a spatial art rather than a temporal art. Nonetheless, Mariko created the dreamy effect of timelessness by manipulating spatial re-arrangement of objects instead of time (actually it is very difficult, if not impossible, to directly “re-arrange” time in visual art). His artist statement is: “By using technology and the spherical projection I am trying to immerse the observer in a timeless space, a placeless space. At the same time I am committed to giving shape to my imagination, or better yet, to the idea of consciousness such as I imagine it, to immerse myself in it and look inside it. This is what I’m trying to communicate inside the Dream Temple.”

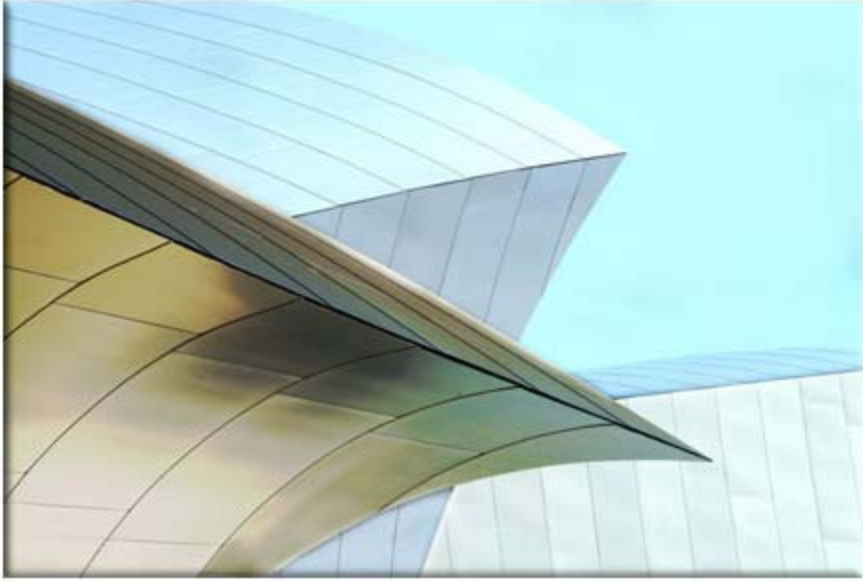
Strangely enough, dropping one dimension, even a spatial one, or distorting/manipulating a spatial dimension in a picture, can mysteriously create a sense of “timelessness.” Nevertheless, this can be explained in terms of Gestalt psychology, which emphasizes wholeness and continuity of human perception. Indeed, we are beings of four dimensions—three spatial and one temporal dimension. When any one of those dimensions is reduced or distorted, the wholeness and continuity is upset, and as a consequence, spatial disorientation leads to a temporal disorientation. And that’s why this type of “spaceless” Surrealist art is “timeless,” too.

3. Timelessness as Liquidity Between Reality and Deception

Another meaning of timelessness is concerned with photography, and it is probably the most simplistic meaning of timelessness. In

an article entitled "The timeless moment," Sara Sklaroff asserted that one of the amazing features of photography is its independence from the laws of time. Beautiful boys or girls in old photos are old people by now. But their innocent look is still timeless. One may argue that painting, which can also capture a person in a precious moment, also possesses the same feature. But I argue that photography has even more of this timeless element. According to Sklaroff, paradoxically photography is both a medium of depicting reality and deception. This is especially true in the digital age. Actually, in film-based photography many pictures are also retouched in the darkroom or enhanced by one-the-lenses-filters. In spite of this, we still tend to accept that the image must be based on some object in a certain place at a certain time, but simultaneously we also know that it is not an exact representation of reality. This tension leads to this kind of tantalizing curiosity, "How beautiful was the woman when she was in her 30s? Are her eyes always so sparkling? " "How handsome was Alex when he was in his 20s? Is his smile really so sweet?" In this sense, the image has a high degree of "liquidity." The look in the image is considered "timeless" because we cannot tie the image to an actual look even though we can trace the photo being taken back to a certain time and place.

I always try to make my photography timeless art. Is my goal accomplished? You be the judge.



Alex Yu in his 20's

[Chong Ho Yu, Ph.D.](#)

Website: <http://www.creative-wisdom.com>