

The Ethics of Digital Photo Manipulation

(about.com) “Doctored photographs has been around almost as long as photography itself, but as digital imaging hardware and software has both advanced and come down in price, the practice of digital image manipulation has become much more commonplace and faked photos are becoming harder to detect. In fact, digital photo manipulation -- commonly referred to as 'photoshopping' -- has recently become a popular pastime, and many consider this photographic fakery to be a new art form. But when it works its way into photojournalism and the media, the issue of ethics comes to the forefront. How far can we take digital image manipulation and still maintain photographic integrity?”

Nat Press Photographers Assn Digital Manipulation Code of Ethics

“As journalists we believe the guiding principle of our profession is accuracy; therefore, we believe it is wrong to alter the content of a photograph in any way that deceives the public.

As photojournalists, we have the responsibility to document society and to preserve its images as a matter of historical record. It is clear that the emerging electronic technologies provide new challenges to the integrity of photographic images ... in light of this, we the National Press Photographers Association, reaffirm the basis of our ethics: Accurate representation is the benchmark of our profession. We believe photojournalistic guidelines for fair and accurate reporting should be the criteria for judging what may be done electronically to a photograph. Altering the editorial content ... is a breach of the ethical standards recognized by the NPPA.”

Why do we do it?

The software is magical and powerful.

We get images that are boring and we have to make them work in a publication.

We can give old pictures new life.

Levels

- 1) fixing contrast problems, correcting color, cropping
- 2) enhancing color, using contrast to enhance drama
- 3) removing distractions (phone wires, spot on wall)
- 4) making people look thinner, removing facial blemishes
- 5) compositing

Issues

- * Are the rules for a report different than for a album cover?
- * Is the image of JFK and Marilyn Monroe getting married on the tabloid meant to deceive? If not you, who is it intended for?
- * What constitutes “enhancement”? The same photo of OJSimpson was run on Newsweek and Time covers. The Time cover looked obviously darker, blurrier, and unshaven. (Time explained: “More artful. More compelling.”)

Questions to ask ourselves (Bonnie Meltzer, Digital Imaging Teacher)

- * Where did I get this photo? Is it mine to use?
- * When can I use a copyrighted photo?
- * Why am I changing this photo?
- * How will the readers interpret this photo?
- * How would they have interpreted it without editing?
- * What is the context of the photo? Is this photo supposed to be truth (journalism) or fantasy (art)?