

THE IDEA

Matt Siber

Revised, August, 2012

So, you're struggling with the idea of an Idea. We have ideas for how to approach our projects, but those aren't The Idea of the project. These are ideas about how to express The Idea. Here is a framework that might help clear things up. These are particularly geared toward photographic projects. Other media will have different categories. There is also the very confusing issue of history. At different times in art history, these parameters were differently arranged. For instance, during the Modernist period, "light" could have been an acceptable "idea." In the current paradigm, this is would be tough to pull off.

The Idea

This is what your project ultimately aims to express to the viewer. In fine art, this is usually based in personal interest and expression. In commercial, the artist is provided with an image or idea to express by the client. This is based on the "image" the client wants to project about their brand. With journalism and documentary, the artist has to decide how they are going to represent their subject. How will the rest of the world view the subject matter I've chosen to focus on? What are my responsibilities to my subject and the public? Are my images in line with those responsibilities?

Subject

With photography it's nearly impossible to divorce the subject from the work because there is always the implication that the subject existed at one point in front of the camera (I suppose digital is starting to change this). This relationship is different with painting, drawing, sculpture, etc.. But again, the subject is not The Idea. What you want to express ABOUT your subject IS The Idea. In commercial terms, you might have clothes as your subject, but the more important aspect of the project is what message the images are expressing about the brand. This is why many ad campaigns don't even show the product very well. They're more concerned with image than displaying their goods. Or maybe they don't actually manufacture anything (insurance, financial services, banks, etc.).

Approach

This can encompass all kinds of possible variables. How will you go about making the pictures? Are they head and shoulder portraits or do they have a great deal of context within the space? Are they traditional landscapes or images that don't include the sky? Am I in the studio or out on location? Am I using available light or strobes? Camera perspective, location, interaction with your subject, gaining access to a specific place, are all part of your approach. Your approach will be dependent on your idea.

Color

Almost all photographs are made in color these days. We use color as artists to help get our message across but we also use it for aesthetic purposes. Color can create mood. It can make certain parts of the picture leap forward while others recede. Color isn't an idea (with apologies to Mark Rothko), it's one of the creative variables we have to help us express our idea. We can also choose not to use color at all and work in black and white. This also has a great deal of meaning and should be a decision made very carefully.

Light

I know everyone has to do the Light assignment for Photo I at Columbia College, but light isn't really a subject (arguable, I suppose). All photography uses light. It's inherent in the word photography - photo means light. You can't make a photograph without it. Like color, light is one of those creative variables that we can manipulate to help us better express The Idea. The quality of light can greatly affect the appearance of our subject, thereby changing the way the viewer thinks about the subject.

Putting it All Together

In an ideal scenario, we start with The Idea, or maybe the subject. The approach, color use, lighting, etc. should all follow in line with The Idea. They are decisions you make in order to best express The Idea that you're interested in. Of course, our ideas come from all kinds of different places and through many different processes. Our ideas might be inspired by light, color, etc.. None of these are hard and fast rules. This is a framework to help clarify the various aspects of creating deliberate, meaningful artwork in the early years of the 21st Century.