Is Instagram The New Gateway to Photography?

Instagram, are you on it? Have you dismissed it? Instagram the mobile phone photography App created by Kevin Systrom an American entrepreneur/programmer and Mike Krieger a Brazilian entrepreneur/software engineer. The App that’s filled with photography created by amateurs and professionals alike. Instagram, the new gateway to photography? Let me explain.

I’m not an early adopter of any form of hard or software so it took four years for me to open an Instagram account. I didn’t ‘get’ why I needed it, despite hearing tales of photographer’s work being ‘discovered’ by high-paying clients amongst its many supposed ‘positive’ features. It seemed like a platform I could take or leave so for a few years I left it alone.

Finally, I dived into its image saturated depths and ‘lo and behold’ I was re-born, or at least my enjoyment of photography was. Once I got over the fact that many professional photographers were using it as a self-promoting digital portfolio re-posting their archives, I started to discover new work, new photographers and those creating and distributing work at a furious pace that gave great insight into working methods and developing narratives. I started to follow these photographers alongside others I was already aware of that I was interested in.

I ‘got it’ but I still wasn’t sure how I would use it in my practice then slowly but surely I started to realize that I could use both my smartphone and the platform as a form of digital photo sketchbook. This realization soon developed into a process of seeing and documenting that I refer to as #photosketching that I have shared with the university students I teach as part of their exploration and enjoyment of photography as a visual language.

Many of the students – although by no means all – were using Instagram as a photography only version of their Facebook pages documenting and posting nights out, boyfriends, girlfriends and holidays but with little understanding of how it could relate to their photographic studies. It has been two years since I began introducing the #photosketching concept to address this issue and in that time things have changed and this is how.

When recently interviewing students looking to join the programme I teach on the same answer was repeatedly given to a range of different questions which we ask prospective students at interview. Where do you look at photography? Instagram. Where do you find out about photographers? Instagram. Where do you show your photography? Instagram. Do you visit exhibitions? No, I look on Instagram. To these students Instagram is photography and photography is Instagram.

Not many talk of a passion for reading or looking at books, very few look at magazines, few can name photographers that inspire them and perhaps most surprisingly almost none look at photographer’s websites for inspiration. Looking online at work is viewed as research based upon teacher suggested Google searches and seems to be rarely self-initiated. Whereas Instagram is theirs, it’s free – unlike books and magazines – they have ownership of it and it acts as their personal researcher and promoter of images. Instagram is their gateway to photography feeding them the images they want to see based on what they have seen but not necessarily the images they need to see.

It is not in Instagram’s interest to push their subscribers out of their comfort zones or to introduce them to images that challenge perceptions. The Instagram account holder is a customer and therefore someone to be kept happy with what Instagram knows about them and the students I interviewed spoke positively of their experiences with photography through the App, they are happy customers. But if we are to understand and accept that Instagram is the gateway to photography and potentially photographic education then those of us in positions of education need to understand how to create a journey for the young photographer once they have come through that gate. To do this requires a respect for the platform and the process of image creation through a smartphone, it also demands a personal engagement with the concept of new pathways into photographic creation and study.

I have previously written about the negative issues which an over reliance on single image observation can have, particularly in an understanding of developing narrative – <https://witness.worldpressphoto.org/why-is-narrative-such-a-difficult-concept-for-young-photographers-to-master-ccef10fb1064#.9jln5n1yz> – However, by explaining how students can take control of their learning through the use of Instagram I believe it is possible to not only maintain and develop their excitement with the medium but also to utilize a tool they are already engaged with to explore photography outside of the Apps contextual parameters.

What I mean by this is to introduce students to the concept of photography as part of their lives outside of the mobile phone. To introduce commercial and artistic contexts for photography and to explain how work they see on Instagram relates to these areas of implementation. If you discovered photography through more conventional and traditional pathways this may seem to be an irrelevant suggestion but for those who have come to photography outside of any context other than within an App it can be a difficult connection to make. This lack of context awareness can also lead to a lack of understanding concerning copyright/image ownership and the act of commissioning amongst student photographers.

Traditional communication formats such as books, magazines, newspapers, billboards, television and exhibitions have long been recognised as gateways to photography for those taking their first steps into the medium of photography. But these are formats that the young student is not engaging with and it is therefore only natural that the platforms they are engaging with will become the new gateways. To deny this would be to deny that the world of global communication is constantly evolving and that photography has an intrinsic role in that evolution.

For a photographer to ignore the impact of Instagram on lens based image creation should be an act of informed decision making but for a teacher involved in photographic education to ignore its impact on the next generation of photographers well, that would be an act of denial and negligence.