

Originals, Prints and Reproductions
Photography's Role in the Art World
by Larry Berman and Chris Maher

From the beginning, photography has been attacked by those who saw it as a threat to other art mediums. The art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) called photography "*the refuge of failed painters with too little talent.*" He went on to declare: "*If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether.*"

We recognize that despite photography's wide acceptance as a fine art medium, there are still issues that some people struggle with. The very concept of multiple originals can be perplexing. Painters and other artists that produce work that can not be identical often try to insist that photography should be held to similar limitations. The argument seems to be that, unless photographs are restricted in some way, they are not original, but are a form of reproduction.

As lifelong photographers, we certainly have our own opinions about reproductions and editions, but for this article we interviewed recognized experts who sell fine art photography on a daily basis. Helen Wright is the exclusive North American representative of photography giant Henri Cartier-Bresson. Margit Erb is gallery director of the Howard Greenberg Gallery that handles the fine art sales of the Life Magazine archives. Kim Bourus is head of the cultural department at Magnum Photos, the world's most prestigious photographic agency.

According to Margit Erb: "*A reproduction is a photograph of a photograph. It could mean a poster or a reproduction in a book. But NEVER one of the prints made from the original negative. It is very important in photography, as it is in other art fields, that the provenience be explained upon the sale. We explain exactly where the print came from.*"

Those who insist that photographic prints should be produced in limited editions propose a different form of restriction. It would be good to remember the origins of the 'tradition' of editioning photographs. Helen Wright says: "*Limiting editions came into being from the dealers when they first started selling photographs in the 1970's. They [photographers] had all graduated with degrees in photography. Life Magazine and Look Magazine had folded and what were they to do, they were photojournalists. They*

would show their stuff to the dealers who had also just begun selling photographs. The dealers said that in order for us to sell your work, you have to make limited editions so we can ask for more money. So there we are, it's as simple as that."

Ms Erb adds: *"As for limited editions, the older prints are not editioned because Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen or any of the other photographers from that period weren't editioning. Modern photographs would have more monetary value if they were in editions, but that wouldn't make them any less of an original photograph. EDITIONING IS A MARKETING TOOL that contemporary photographers started doing as early as the 1970's to basically make their prints more rare. It has nothing to do with originality. There are photographers like William Klein, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Gordon Parks, that were printing in the 1950's and are still selling prints today, that don't edition. Yet Cartier-Bresson's photographs continue to increase in price and break auction records despite the fact that they're not editioned."*

Another restriction that is discussed is whether or not a photographer should be required to print their own photographs. Kim Bourus says: *"Magnum sells 'Collectors Prints' which are first generation prints, made from the original negative. Included are scans that are printed on a Lambda where the photographer oversees the process to make sure they are 100% the way they want. The photographer has ultimate control over what the image looks like. Both processes fit the Magnum definition of an original photograph and a 'Collectors Print.' The fact that the photographers themselves are not doing the actual printing, in fact some of the photographers have never printed, doesn't devalue the print as it still fulfills the requirement of the 'Collectors Print' as being the best it could possibly be."*

There has been a growing trend among art festivals to update rules for photography in order to keep up with technology. Insisting that photographers print their own work was a restriction that did nothing for print quality, and was almost impossible to police. Most notably, in contrast to what the article that this is in response to said, the Milwaukee Art Museum's prestigious Lakefront Festival of the Arts dropped the "photographers are required to print their own" regulation in 2003.

More changes are on the way. Digital technology has radically changed how photographers can print their images. No longer must a photographer go into

a darkroom and work with noxious chemistry. For the photographer skilled in Photoshop, the darkroom now consists of a computer, a monitor and in some cases a printer. The digital files produced can either be printed on an archival ink jet printer or taken to a service bureau and outputted on a digital printer such as the Light Jet.

In conclusion, photography has always been a medium of multiple originals. If photographers choose to edition their photographs, that is a marketing decision that they should be free to make. And finally, no matter what method of output they choose, the critical thing is whether they, as artists, are completely satisfied with the presentation of their vision? Be suspicious of those who, due to their own personal agendas, demand restrictions on photographers.

Larry Berman and **Chris Maher** are photographers who have been selling their photographic prints as fine art for more than 25 years. In addition, they write for Shutterbug Magazine and have written a book titled "50 Fast Digital Camera Techniques" for Wiley Publishing. They specialize in building image intensive web sites for artists and currently host the www.ArtShowPhoto.com forum where more than a thousand members discuss issues relating to selling photography at art shows. Their most recent credit is an article for the Smithsonian Craft Show web site explaining the new digital jury system. More information and articles are available at www.LarryBerman.com and www.InfraredDreams.com