

Picture Imperfect — Digital Image Manipulation Ethics

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If you believe the adage, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What about when that beauty is manufactured through digital image manipulation? The beholder doesn't have as much of a choice then.

Digital image manipulation - or editing with software that stops short of manipulation - has become a routine practice in photography. The range of changes that photo editors can make varies from correcting background lighting to transforming a human model's body type. The technology and software available today allows amateur and professional photographers alike to alter their shots. More complicated image manipulation may take the touch of an expert, but some software programs, such as Photoshop, are commonly used by average computer users.

Some degree of digital image manipulation can be seen as necessary and beneficial to those in the industry. Becky Olstad is a Photography Instructor at The Art Institutes International Minnesota and says using computer applications like Photoshop is a routine part of the process.

"There is a general misconception that the use of Photoshop inherently means 'manipulation,'" she adds. "It allows us to control exposure, contrast, color balance - things that are also routinely controlled in a traditional darkroom."

Launched in 1990, Photoshop is the current market leader for image manipulation software and is considered an industry standard. More than 90% of creative professionals have Adobe Photoshop software on their desktops, according to a fact sheet from Adobe, the parent company of Photoshop. The onus of any ethical decisions about digital image manipulation lies with the photographer or editor, not the application, industry professionals say.

Fabio Apelbaum graduated from the [Media Arts & Animation program](#) at The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale in 2001. He currently works as Director of Graphic Arts at a television station. Apelbaum says Photoshop is at the core of almost all post production projects - and that it is a good thing.

"Photoshop is one of the most commonly used pieces of software," he says. "From the smallest to the largest artwork, Photoshop has delivered an excellent result and performance to accomplish our needs."

But the quality of the product has not stopped the debate over how some use it.

The list of celebrities involved in controversial, manipulated photo imagery seems to grow longer every day, and already includes Kelly Clarkson, Demi Moore, Kate Winslet, Beyonce Knowles, and even Sarah Palin. Inches are shaved from waists, hips, thighs, and arms. Skin tones are lightened. Muscle tone is added.

The celebrity angle pushes the issue further into the spotlight. But those who appear in front of the camera as professionals - the models - are far from immune from the digital image manipulation debate.

In one recent dust-up, a size-four model for Ralph Lauren appeared grotesquely distorted in a company ad, with a head that appeared larger than her waist. In the wake of the public and media criticism of the ad, the model says she was fired for being too fat. The company refuted her charges and took responsibility for the manipulated image in the advertisement.

Olstad says there are no industry guidelines or rules that photographers and editors are expected to follow. Models typically sign documents allowing their image to be manipulated and used at the discretion of others. But when public figures and celebrities pose for editorial photographs that are later republished with significant alterations, the practice can be more controversial, Olstad says.

"These types of cases raise this question of whether the subject has any control over the subsequent manipulation of the image and what the role and responsibilities are as a photographer," she adds. "It boils down to the photographer's personal ethics."

Apelbaum agrees. At his current workplace, digital corrections are employed but there is a limit as to how much retouching occurs.

"We happen to be the plastic surgeons of digital media," he says. "We will improve their defects but make sure to not exceed our rights as artists."

One of the criticisms of digital image manipulation is that it contributes to the fostering of an impossible standard of beauty. The website About-Face exists to "resist harmful media messages," including a section dedicated to exposing over-altered photographs called the Gallery of Offenders. A Blog titled Photoshop Disasters encourages readers to submit any "truly awful piece of Photoshop work" and human models altered beyond recognition are regular features on the site.

Despite the criticism, Olstad says the collective standard of beauty and any problems it presents is not the responsibility of photo editors.

"I don't think you can pin our society's unrealistic expectations of beauty on any one person or industry," she adds. "Isn't the designer who sends over only size 0's of the latest line just as responsible as the editor who prints the photo?"

As technology and software continue to evolve and become more and more accessible to the general public, use of digital image manipulation and the questions it raises will likely only increase.

Meanwhile, how can the public know if they are looking at "real" images? The quick answer from those in the industry is - they can't.

"When you look at a magazine, 98% of what you see in the fashion industry is unreal," Apelbaum says. "We have taken the human beauty to an extreme that beauty itself cannot compete with."