Photography and the Photographic Image

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Three-quarters of a century ago, the efforts of the Photo-Secessionists resulted in photography's acceptance as a serious form for artistic expression. Until recently, serious photography has continued to be defined by Photo-Secessionist aesthetics—prints produced without retouching or alteration, sharply focused, with full tonal range and made without the intervention of the artist's hand—*i.e.*, "straight photography." The stand of the Photo-Secessionists was crucial to preventing photography from becoming a debilitating mimicry of oil and brush techniques. Yet such a stand could not, because of the newness of the form, differentiate photography from the larger aesthetic traditions of western art.

The emphasis in this definition was on the characteristics of the photographic print. The only concern with the lens was that the image it produced should be sharply focused, a criterion which derived from traditions of pre-Impressionist easel painting. The application of the *camera obscura* to painting was important to the development of perspective with its physiological descriptions of spatial relationships, and until the mid-19th century easel painting was concerned with detailed descriptions of material reality. Consequently, the characteristic that distinguished photography from painting for aspiring turn-of-the-century photographers-cum-artists became the emulsion, for it was the emulsion which enabled them to take full advantage of the *camera obscura's* capacity to project, with mathematical reliability and predictability, images of extraordinary detail. Where Vermeer depended on his skill in the application of pigment to canvas, Stieglitz could rely on the consistency of emulsion and formulae. To have based a definition of photography on imagery and the image-producing capacity of the lens would have caused chaos, as in a very real sense all western art, to the degree that it employs perspective, can be said to be photographic. For example, Vermeer's painted images would have had to be considered "photographs," as they derive so totally from the camera that they include depictions of planes of focus and lens aberrations.

As the achievement of the early photographer-technicians was the substitution of mathematics and chemistry for pigment and manual dexterity, the determinant for differentiating photography from the other arts came to be the photographic print. For this reason Man Ray's Rayographs, Moholy-Nagy's photograms or Coburn's vortographs (lensless manipulations of printing paper) are considered significant in relation to the history of photography, while Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* or his *Electric Chair* (photographs silkscreened on canvas) are considered significant in relation to the history of painting.

The ultimate refinement of the principles of photographic

purity and predictability is previsualization, made mathematically dependable by the mystical zone system of Ansel Adams and Minor White. This system reduces the tonal range of the black-and-white silver print to ten zones. The relation of the actual tones of a given scene to these ten zones is variable, depending on the degree of exposure and development of the negative. This variability compensates for extremes of illumination and makes possible shifts of scale. It demands, however, that the selection of what is seen and photographed conform to the characteristics of the "expressive print" (*i.e.*, full tonal scale), essentially reducing that kind of photography to a process of selecting images suitable for a given printing style. Images or imagery that are not appropriate to this type of reproduction must be excluded from consideration as vehicles for expression.

The print is, of course, significant to photography as the performance of the imagery, in the same way that a concert is important as the performance of a musical score. Like music, it can be interpreted differently by various performers, *i.e.*, Rauschenberg's reclamation of disposable imagery by transferring newspaper photos onto canvas, or the Library of Congress' mass production of the personal images of Farm Security Administration and Civil War photographers, or Berenice Abbott's resurrection and interpretation of Atget's work. There is nothing inviolable about a print. It is the photographer's opinion of how an image should look. Unfortunately some of the richest modes of photo printmaking have been all but eclipsed by the ubiquitous silver print. Transparencies, for example, are images that are not *performed* in any material sense. There is no print; they are projected, and are pure imagery, and like stained glass are mysterious and ephemeral, dependent on the presence of an illuminating sun, with all attendant mythological implications, for viewing. The elusive image characteristic of the slide is also characteristic of the cinema, and it is this sensation of being a source rather than an object of illumination that gives Grand Central Station's colossal Kodachrome its awesome impact.

From a preoccupation with emulsion emerged a narrow definition of photography that for a long time limited photo printmaking to being a subcategory of the graphic arts. This put great restrictions on the variety of images and content available to photographers. Further, access to the specialized and complex technology of photography required time, money and scientific background, so that popular participation was limited to having one's portrait taken. This situation was radically changed though by the democratization of photography, which occurred roughly at the turn of the century and was brought about principally by the discoveries of George Eastman and the subsequent proliferation of film, commercial processing and mass-produced cameras.

If critical consideration is to be given to the popularization of photography, the traditional definition of photography as a printing process is inadequate to encompass the phenomenon and must give way to a discussion of imagery. The great impact of photography (a uniquely mechanical-age form of communication), does not derive from personal, handmade prints which most people never see. It derives rather from the imagery itself, its distribution through mechanical reproduction, and most importantly from the possibility that the ordinary person may be an agent of its creation.

As in the other plastic arts, the production of photographic images is a dynamic form, and the way an image is created is implicit in its final structure. Since the "substance" of photographic images is the phenomenal world, the relationship between photographer, tool and material is apparent in the resulting imagery. This imagery can be usefully, although not rigidly, divided into three basic categories: directorial, improvisational and autophotographic images. These categories are not based on relationships to physical laws or physiological structures, but rather on the photographer's subjective attitudes toward photographic processes and the capacity of an image to possess and communicate meaning. Directorial images, as A. D. Coleman has termed them, are most often associated with "fine art" photography. These images are produced in much the same manner as is cinema, hence the term directorial. An idea or concept pre-exists in the mind of the photographer, and camera, chemistry, and objects or events arranged in front of the lens are tools for communication. The finished images, whether propaganda or personal art, are presented as evidence of the truthfulness of that viewpoint. For example, when Paul Strand made *Un Paese*, a book about a small Italian village, he went with the author of the text, an Italian screenwriter, into the village and had the mayor assemble the townspeople. Strand cast the book like a movie, taking the portraits against carefully selected "locations." Weston arranged vegetables or collaborated with models, Duane Michaels designs eclectic scenarios, Ansel Adams searches out Wagnerian landscapes. All work directorially.

Directed images are illustrations of points of view or personal philosophy, where the juxtaposition of the impersonal descriptions of a lens and a subjective viewpoint create a comparison that can be termed metaphoric. In the case of Weston or Stieglitz, this comparison is explicit, as in the former's *Nude 1925*, where a nude's back is easily mistaken for a pear, or in the latter's reference to a series of cloud photographs as *Equivalents*. In the case of Arbus' photograph of Eddie Carmel or the woman in swan sunglasses it is implicit. The portrait of the giant Carmel recalls the feelings of bewilderment that parents invariably experience at some time when confronted by their grown and overgrown children. The nude wearing the sunglasses echoes Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, and invokes the archetypal nature of all Venus images.

The use of arranged or specially selected objects, locations or events as vehicles for the presentation of a personal point of view is the hallmark of the directed image. Weston, Steichen, Adams, Strand and their aesthetic progeny utilized this form. Curiously, as they became more dependent on the material aspects of photography, their imagery became more preoccupied with the spiritual implications of phenomena. The work of Weston, White, Caponigro, and others reveals a pantheistic concern for nature and the transcendent spiritual and archetypal qualities possessed by vegetable forms, geological occurrences and human anatomy. Paul Strand's images were often concerned with people and man-made objects and their potential political implications. His evocative portrayals of the inherent spirituality and dignity of the suffering and impoverished are too consistent to be anything but the product of religious/political zeal.

Contemporary advertising images derive from this tradition, and like the directed "fine art" photograph are illustrations of and/or propaganda for faith in the transcendent value of material objects. They attempt to create a belief in the possibility of achieving earthly paradise through the

Photographer unknown, ca. 1930.
"My first Rattle Snake with head shot off. Caught with stick in my other hand. *Rattle snake Pete!*"
Snapshots are a ritual reaffirmation of the lives of the participants—an attempt to "shoot" and "mount" an ever-fading present.

acquisition and consumption of products. Advertisements are illustrations of the theology of our time, educating consumers as medieval stained glass educated illiterates. In this sense products may be seen as the deities of the 20th century, advertising images its icons, jingles its hymns. Fantasy beings 40 feet tall on the sides of buildings are linear descendants of neolithic cave paintings.

Improvisational images are spontaneously created and are almost exclusively concerned with people. There is no observer, no one asking, "what is going on here?" There are only participants. The traditional role of the photographer/director, outside the action, does not exist. The images are created by the event itself rather than by the will of an individual, and the photographer has to be considered as a participant in the event. According to the uncertainty principle, an observed event is changed by the presence of an observer, and in the case of improvisational photography this principle is a key ingredient in the image's power. The finished photograph is the product of the same forces responsible for creating the original photographed event and from which the identity of the photographer cannot be isolated. It is an integral characteristic of this type of event that it records itself. The resultant image is unselfconscious of the here and now—improvisational.

"Snapshots" are the purest example of improvisational photography and are vehicles for collective human expression. They are an industrial folk art. The act of making a snapshot is a ritual act. The subject or location is not significant. It is the repetition of the symbolic act of taking the picture which is fundamental, transforming an ordinary occurrence into a ritual recreation of the photographer's universe—a reaffirmation of the lives of the participants.

The presence of the camera has a significant role in the creation of snapshot imagery. Attitudes are assumed for its benefit, and it is often the focus of the activity. The images, however, indicate not so much how the subjects think of themselves, as how they wish to be thought of by others. It is the tension in this confrontation between the fantasy and the reality that once again creates metaphor and the poignancy and impact of the images.

Most snapshots are fundamentally formal portraits. Superficially, the photographic act is casual and inconsequential, yet it has as much psychological significance for those "civilized" people who participate in it as for those "primitive" people who flee from it. The difference is that the latter fear it will steal their souls, while the former hope to immortalize their souls through images of themselves and/or accompanying totem objects.

These portraits are rarely candid. Rather, one finds conscious and deliberate interruptions of social or private activity. Despite the apparent intimacy of the situations, most subjects of snapshots relate to the camera with the same sense of ceremony as do the subjects of formal portraits. The latter subjects, however, have time to prepare themselves for the confrontation, to face immortality with dignity. But the snapshot photographer, like the known and intimate assassin, presents enough time to acquire only the posture of dignity. The subjects are caught with no chance for preparation, and are revealed in whatever environment or situation the photographer has confronted them.

Photographs are a reassuring way of apprehending reality, but can serve to diminish rather than intensify experience. Taking a snapshot can act as a substitute for assimilating the psychological and sociological implications of what has been witnessed. The tourists who run from their car to snap a picture of magnificent vistas and drive off can use the camera to defend themselves against a potentially overwhelming confrontation. A tiny 3" × 5" rendering of monumental scenes is testimony to both the impotence and poignancy of the act. Exotic or mundane experiences, with their attendant emotional crises and exhilarations, are simultaneously defined and kept in their place through the act of being photographed. The camera allows one to safely experience or re-experience cathartically an event which would be threatening or dangerous to experience as a participant.

The hallmark of a great photograph is the subtle interplay between the formal elements and the content. In snapshots, where there is a blend of the accidents of technology, cultural and personal imagery, appropriate content or context, and aesthetic elements such as light, form and sense of moment, works of real artistic consequence are created. The principal technical difference, other than format, between the traditional "fine art" photograph and the snapshot, is that the snapshot print is the consequence of anonymous

Anonymous carte-de-visite, ca. 1863. Photo courtesy Pfeifer Gallery.
In autophotographic images, the aesthetic of the photographer is absent. The photograph is the product of the interaction of the subject and the camera. They are self-portraits.

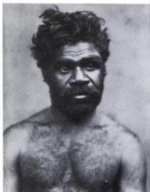
mass production and not personal sensibility. People are always making art. Whether an extraordinary photograph is created by an artist as art, or anonymously and intuitively by an individual as part of his or her life, the result can be a work of aesthetic significance.

The autophotographic image is the ultimate improvisational image and one in which there is no distinction between objective and subjective elements.

The events or persons are as they appear to be, and this similarity between objective reality and subjective imagery results in works that are not metaphoric, *i.e.*, "a rose is a rose is a rose." They are distinct from their manufacturer in that they are not personal creations of a photographer but exclusively the product of an interaction between the camera and the subject. Any photographer could and would have taken essentially the same image. An obvious example of this sort of photograph are those little pictures made by machines in subway stations and amusement parks. Here the absence of a photographer either as participant or observer forces the interaction to remain between lens and subject. They are self-portraits.

In what has been termed by art historians as "primitive photography," generally referring to 19th-century sensibility, there is also a noticeable absence of a personal point of view. The photographer in such images functions as an unselfconscious conduit rather than a generator of imagery. In the translucent portraits so typical of the 19th century, the finished photograph was significant as a transmitter of numen through time. Similarly, Sung Dynasty landscapes were not conceived as literal descriptions of geographic phenomena, nor designs of ink on paper, but as physical expressions of the same forces that created the landscapes. The task of the artist was to eliminate personal point of view and become an agent for the expression of nonpersonal forces.

"BLOWING ROCK, altitude 4,350 feet, overlooking St. Johns Valley, Western North Carolina." Collection J. Hoberman.
The collectors of postcards are predominantly tourists. The mythic self-image of Americans as conquerors of the planet, *i.e.* pioneers, is a common theme in American postcards.



Henry King, Australian Aborigine, ca. 1875. Photo courtesy Pfeifer Gallery.
"Something remains that does not testify merely to the art of the photographer . . . , something that is not silenced, something demanding the name of the person who lived then, who even now is still real and will never entirely perish into art." —Walter Benjamin

Walker Evans, "Bed" Fields family, Alabama, 1936. Photo courtesy Pfeifer Gallery.
Evans' painfully direct portraits, like the works of 19th-century explorer/photographers, are a faithful record of what has been witnessed. In contrast, Arbus created a metaphoric family. Her subjects are related to each other, related to her, and most importantly, related to the viewer.

It is characteristic of "primitive" photographers that they often did not think of themselves as artists, but as workers or scientists who had the specific task of documenting the phenomenal world. Muybridge had a scientific interest in animal locomotion, Brady in documenting the Civil War, Sander in photographing everybody in Germany, Bentley in tediously recording and classifying snow crystals, Edgerton in fragmenting motion into its finest constituents.

Improvisational photographs are the product of the interaction between photographer, camera and event. Directed images are a product of the photographer and the camera in which the real nature of the event is largely irrelevant, functioning as a foil for the photographer's ideas or feelings. In autophotographic images the photographer is actually or effectively absent. The subject presents itself selfconsciously through the camera. An obvious example is the situation in which a person who is aware that he is being photographed strikes a pose and holds it until he hears the sound of the shutter indicating that the exposure is completed.

Postcards are important examples of autophotographic photography, and are designed to mark the interstices where personal life and anonymous reality meet. Like snapshots, they document the material world and aspects of life that are important and worthy of celebration: the commonplace as memorable and significant. Postcards, however, make no pretense to personal expression. The subject reveals itself through the egoless lens, and in the context of postcards awesome phenomena acquire a significance equal to that of irrelevant vistas or artifacts. Grotesque content (like the atom bomb) is taken with the same dispassion as views of Swiss mountains or bathing beauties.

People in postcards have the anonymous quality of extras in a Hollywood extravaganza. They are not real people; they stand for real people, like store mannequins. The absence of

Top: *Red Detachment of Women.*
"The Army and the people unite to defeat the enemy."
Bottom: Bathing Beauties on the Beach at Miami Beach, Fla., ca. 1950. "Plastichrome" by Dick Pope. Collection Hattie Krein.
In the Chinese image, from a popular ballet, explicit choreography connotes the belief in the underlying necessity for an imposed order to achieve social harmony. In the American image, the *implicit* choreography expresses the Depression-nurtured Hollywood fantasy that individual self-expression will result in a wholesome, orderly society.

any conflicting personal point of view with which observers would have to contend allows them to project themselves into the scene, believing that they can rely exclusively on the lens to record faithfully what might have been witnessed.

Photo-postcards are universalized snapshots, ritual vehicles for collective human expression. Their content reveals the collective psyche of the culture that produces them and what aspects of life people feel are important to commemorate and celebrate. What Americans think of America is revealed in postcards with as much clarity, compassion and aesthetic competence as what Brassai thought of Paris or Adams of the Grand Tetons. Postcard photographers must consider how the rest of the human race would respond to the scene before them. The concern of the photographer is not his/her interpretation of the scene, but the nature of the place or event itself. In its most exaggerated form this can produce photo-images of virtually nothing. When, for example, the image is of a landscape devoid of any significant landmark or event, the card becomes the documentation of a map coordinate.

In the photographic image, aesthetic creation is the product of selection, not fabrication. The image that the camera makes results from a choice among infinite variables. With postcards, the finished image is selected not from the world, but from a rack and is mailed or collected as a consequence of aesthetic choice. The *auteurs* of postcards are their collectors: people away from home, viewing the world with the heightened perceptions stimulated by things new, unfamiliar, uncertain, or foreign.

Like snapshots, postcards are a reassuring way of apprehending reality. They act as a stabilizing force in the assimilation of the psychological and sociological implications of what has been witnessed. For this reason, postcards of different cultures are dissimilar. In America, where we have yet to evolve a cultural veneer like that of Europeans, or a political integration like that of the Chinese, random cultural psychopathology lies closer to the surface and is starkly revealed in these images. That people actually take these pictures and send them to each other is amazing.

Many personal/directorial artists such as Lisette Model, Ed Ruscha, Marcia Resnick, Cartier-Bresson, and Walker Evans (who collected postcards from an early age) draw on and/or are influenced by improvisational and autophotographic imagery. Elaine O'Neil's pillow/postcards, for instance, like the photograph/samplers of Betty Hahn, combine snapshot and postcard motifs with stitching and needlework techniques.

Images that evidence subjective visions are valuable when identified as such, but when labeled as "documentary photography" risk becoming propaganda, to be embraced or dismissed according to passions and without thought or critical evaluation. This is true, for example, of Strand's *Un Paese*, which according to A. D. Coleman, documents only Strand's "white, bourgeois, American vision of what is picturesque about Italian poor people," or Riefenstahl's *Last of the Nuba*, exposed by Susan Sontag as a perverse transposition of the Nazi cult of the master race, a glorification of physical superiority, evoking comparisons of African "aryans" with tribes of barbaric *"untermenschen."*

The most powerful documentary images are those that provide non-subjective descriptions of events. However, this can occur only with the absence (police mug shots), suppression (postcards) or Zen-like harmony (Riis, Atget) of personal point of view with observed events. The work of photojournalists such as Weegee or Ron Galella, most famous of the *paparazzi*, are spontaneous snapshots of high and low society paralleling those of Lartigue and Belloc at the turn of the century.

Eugène Atget, St. Benoit, ca. 1913 (Neg. #6591). Photo courtesy Pfeifer Gallery.
Atget's harmony with his subjects results in images in which the presence of the photographer is not felt, allowing one to discover the photograph as one might discover the place. His images are as much "evidence" as Woodhead's insurance document.

In the 19th century the invention of photography generated in the art world a shock wave of imitation and reaction. Degas, through his work as an "amateur" photographer, discovered the arbitrary nature of the photographic viewfinder. Heads, arms, legs, houses, trees, etc., are included or amputated by the lens with no regard for consistency or continuity. He incorporated this ruthless composition into his paintings, most notably in his famous ballerina series and several of his race track paintings. Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* is predicated on the motion studies of Marey, Eakins and others, which predate the painting by 25 years. In Marey's "negative of a man walking clothed in black and white stripes," ca. 1885, the relationship is particularly clear.

The use of improvisational and autophotographic imagery has, in the '70s, achieved status and acclaim, but curiously only as subject matter for Photo-Realist painters such as Don

Woodhead Photo Co., Inc., Springfield, Mass. Photo courtesy Pfeifer Gallery.
"Camera on west side of River Street, West Springfield, Mass., on property of John Hall Gas Station, looking east, March 12/32. 3:05 PM, Woodhead Photo Co., Springfield, Mass. W.H. Woodhead, operator."

Eddy or Chuck Close, who utilize the prestige of traditional easel painting to lay renewed claim to photographic imagery. At the same time, photographers such as William Eggleston or Steven Shore, by using that same snapshot imagery and updating the magnificent photographic formats originally responsible for the obsolescence of painted realism, are making powerful references to the traditions from which straight photography emerged. In contrast, Arbus' use of raggedy borders and her seeming indifference to printing techniques acknowledged, to the despair of traditionalists, the popular origins of snapshot imagery. Thus the story has come full circle. As in the struggle over realism in painting, which began in the first decade after the invention of photography and was a key ingredient in the evolution of Impressionism and modern art, contemporary photographers and painters are again struggling for dominion over the imagery of the *camera obscura*. This is unfortunate, as the imagery is just as potent when rendered in oils on canvas and hung in a museum as it is transformed by Evans or Arbus, or printed by Kodak and enshrined in a family album. ■

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