

Contemporary Photographer

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Some Experiences with Photography

BY HUGH EDWARDS, *Curator of Photography, the Art Institute of Chicago*

When I came to Chicago, Proust and Spengler were new; Hart Crane, Sherwood Anderson and Thomas Wolfe were still alive. Reading them was like starting life all over again, and if it had been necessary to die in order to take on this other existence, with all its pessimism about the future, there was the compensation of having added the previous years of one's life to whatever the total might be, instead of having lost them.

It is always salutary to change one's mind and rejuvenating to begin another way of thinking. We are told repeatedly that some artist or writer can recreate the world and our way of of seeing it, but we know there are few such influences in a lifetime. I waited for several years before I came across another, and my Spenglerian saturation glorified somewhat the fact that this one practiced, in this age of techniques and competition, what people called "a purely technical art of expression" and made the world about me entirely new once more and filled it with marvels. To feel at home in a landscape of factories, railroad yards, filling stations and billboards became more natural, and my interest in humanity and human expression, aroused by spirits as various as Dostoyevski and André Gide, found authority right here in America.

The book which brought all this about was *American Photographs* by Walker Evans, and my feeling of having discovered something new about myself is just as strong, every time I look at it nowadays, as it was twenty-five years ago. Like most of the red letter events in life, it had been found accidentally and unexpectedly. I saw it first in an exhibition of books chosen for their qualities of design and production, and I had supposed it to be an anthology of photographs by someone named Walker Evans. So it was ordered with the expectation of obtaining, at last, some good reproductions of the Civil War photographs with which I had spent so many unforgettable hours in the old Review of Reviews edition, and I hoped it might also contain a few by Jacob Riis and Lewis

Hine. What I received was a notable surprise which embodied personal discovery with the justification of my preference for photography as a way of picture making.

Just at that time, Carl O. Schniewind had come from Brooklyn to The Art Institute of Chicago to be curator of the department of prints and drawings, where I was working. He was one of the most passionate print lovers who ever lived, and his taste did not stop at photography, as was usual with so many museum people. Also, for several years, Daniel Catton Rich, the Art Institute's director, had hoped to establish photography and films as part of the museum's interests. However, it was not until 1940 that we had the first of several exhibitions in which were shown, among others, prints by Alvarez Bravo, Lisette Model, André Kertesz, and—in 1947—a large number by Walker Evans.

These intermittent affairs were dropped when Peter Pollack was asked to be curator of photography and began his long sequence of shows which continued through 1957. Meanwhile, in 1949, we had received the gift of a large and handsome part of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection from Georgia O'Keeffe, which has always been housed in the department of prints and drawings. After Peter Pollock left Chicago in 1957, I requested the depositing in this department of several hundred prints he had acquired during his exhibitions. Later, when Harold Joachim was appointed curator of prints and drawings, after Mr. Schniewind's death, he made plans to include photography in our activities and I was made curator.

This brief history may be tedious and seem insignificant, but it is put down here to illustrate how, quite naturally, photographs appeared in the permanent collection and activities of a large and very popular museum. It is remarkable and commendable how this took place with no opposition and without trying to bait the public with the paradisiacal rewards of some restricted philosophy of the camera's purisms. I remember well how this new turn of affairs in my direction

frightened and tempered me with its responsibilities and difficulties.

The first intention was to have two large shows each year, but the announcement that photographic exhibitions were to be resumed brought such response that we decided to make a program for photography which would cover the entire year. Huge "expositions" have never appealed to me: people may remember the show and a few subjects, but hardly ever can they recall the characteristics—or even the names—of individual photographers. So, for the most part, we have presented one-man shows, trying to represent an individual's use of the camera and a summary of his discoveries.

We made a principle of avoiding the gadgety installations with which many museums like to make "sensations", although they make people feel as much at home as if they were in department stores. Pictures would be allowed to show themselves and the worries of sequence and spacing would take the place of décor. One of the abominations of photography is the huge enlargement, probably the most successful misrepresentation a photograph can have. This covering large areas is a modern mania: after you have looked at hundreds of lithographs and metal plate prints, none of them less than thirty-by-four inches in size, you will never forget the up-to-date lament by the hero of Fellini's *8-1/2* when he confesses he has nothing to say but wants so much to say it. Even in bars and motels—of which it is always reminiscent—the monstrous photograph is oppressive, dull and vulgar. People are compelled to admit its presence, then look away or pass by, but it is the small print which arrests their attention and may lead them to prolonged contemplation. One of the best rewards for our efforts is the proof that people do prefer seeing photographs as nearly as possible in the formats in which their makers conceived and realized them.

Before long, anyone who has anything to do with photography begins to worry about the public. Just as most of us expect love on our own terms, we demand the public's acceptance of all our precious vagaries, peculiarities, ingrown obsessions and intractabilities, then end in petulant frustration when we do not receive it. The best work is done without concern for an audience, but hardly anyone thinks of that today: witness the examples of so many successful artists who are driven by the shady motives of exhibitionism and trying to impress others.

In any case, every expression is an attempt at communication, even when the artist denies it or is unconscious of it. How to assure the arrival of the message at its destination is a big question and has no answer: even the surest batteries of publicity may fail on the most favorable occasions. Promising objects too often turn out to be indifferent. Of all those photographers who talk about the public and blame it for what may be their own faults and dishonesties, few have had any realistic experience with it, and others refuse to meet it on any grounds. As an entity, the public is impossible to define in specific terms. It cannot be accounted for in economic, esthetic or social classifications, and all we can do is try to share what we have with as many of this unnumbered, anonymous mass as it is possible to reach. In Chicago, we knew the public meant everybody, and our hope was to cause them to want to look at photographs, not to drive them away with some *épater le bourgeois* attitude which would require an entire grammar of questionable esthetics for explanation and excuse.

Any artist who can count on a small number to accept his work honestly and impersonally is fortunate, although if he does not have this support, he should begin finding out what is wrong with him. The "happy few" of Stendhal now number millions, but this has taken almost as much time as the whole history of practicable photography. For photography we want the apotheosis to take place overnight and do not reflect that, in relation to the other arts, it is in the youthful stage of its development. Photographers have always been impatient and angry at the slowness of museums to accept their medium. There may be only a few museums as yet which carry photography as a constant part of their programs, but occasional photographic exhibitions are beginning to be more frequent in most of the others, and there is the example of the Art Institute where just such beginnings were made. Snobbery as to medium has been difficult to overcome, but it is disappearing. At the moment, can you think of anything more absurd than someone who would praise or condemn a great picture because of the medium in which it was produced?

In 1959, when our exhibitions were resumed, we did not expect the lively response which followed. People seemed to linger in photographic shows longer than they did elsewhere, and it did not take long to discover why. They were finding a statement of themselves and the life around them which

was denied in other contemporary arts. A photograph by Aaron Siskind communicated with them over a lesser distance than did an abstract painting.

An effort was made with the shows to represent as many facets of the photographic category as possible. After three years we found our two most popular exhibitions had been by Minor White and Robert Riger, the kind of paradox which always delights me, because it disproves cult theories and evangelisms and indicates an unconscious resistance to dictatorships of taste. That both exhibitions were by excellent photographers heightened this. The order of shows which followed these in the attention of the public have been Robert Frank, Dave Heath, Rudolph Janu, Dennis Stock, Ray Metzker; and the one by Art Sinsabaugh, which is current, is well on the way to joining them.

In the beginning I wanted to present one-man showings by people who had not had them elsewhere. This presented no difficulty; I was both astonished and disappointed to find almost none of those I had in mind had been given an exhibition anywhere. My intention was also to exhibit each year at least two photographers of the past, for it is just short of amazing how little is known—and by photographers—of masters like Fox Talbot, David Octavius Hill, Roger Fenton, Peter Henry Emerson, Alexander Gardner, George M. Barnard, and countless others. The approval given alike to the old and the unfamiliar new justifies our continuing with both.

In addition to these public activities, making the permanent collection of photographs available, at any time, to any visitor, in the print study room has been one of the most rewarding experiences of the whole project. The photograph is an object for contemplation and is enjoyed and understood more fully in privacy than when looked at on the walls of galleries. Our collection has more than doubled during the last four years, but accomplishing this has been an uncertain and trying business. It seems certain the photograph is no prestige symbol for donors, and what we have been able to acquire has been due to the unselfish responses given calls for help made to the Committee on Prints and Drawings and other rare individuals. Few photographers know that funds established for the acquisition of photographs do not exist in most museums.

This state of affairs suggests that the thousands who admire photographs do not form a buying public. Just why this is true would require a long explanation. It is a sad fact that no one—not even Atget—has made a decent living by selling prints. Photographs in any original state have seldom been considered as objects of decoration, and only occasional devotees seem to want to own them. Collectors of anything are becoming fewer and fewer: we seem to be losing all love for objects and personal association with them. In this time, when most objects we use are produced by pouring a dubious substance into molds and are not touched by human hands until they encounter our reluctant ones, they do not acquire the distinctions which are conferred by use and age. We are haunted by the premonition that everything about us—even art itself—will be reduced to the level of commodity productions, to be discarded and replaced by something just as worthless.

There has been much concern during the last few years about making permanent the position of photography with the other arts and enlarging its audience. What is wanted is photography as a fine art, not *in* the fine arts. The photographer working with his medium as an independent means of expression is a peculiarly American phenomenon today. Yet we look in vain for any précis of photography's accomplishments and traditions, even as an expedient, in books concerned with art history; and publications—including the most popular—which are devoted to the subject, have only the initiated as readers. Usually the writers are photographers or others too immediately involved, and many of the results could be placed with the worst writing the world has ever known. It seems much of this uncouth and incredible bombast, with its misunderstanding flair for poetry and its odd, folksy mysticisms, is read by somebody, either the "sphinxes without secrets" of our most hipster youth, or those people who believe anything is profound that makes no sense. The most valuable writing has been done by historians, as in the books and essays by Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, which combine the humanizing of broad knowledge with sensible writing and rare judgement. The best single piece is the afterword to *American Photographs*, written by Lincoln Kirstein, a complete outsider to the photographic *tohu-bohu* who refuses to have anything more to do with it. Jack Kerouac's introduction to Robert Frank's *The Ameri-*

cans and Jonathan Williams' appreciation in *Railroad Men* by Simpson Kalisher are other solitary classics. All these cause one to wish for others of the same sort: what would Edmund Wilson have to say, or Norman Mailer, and surely the whips of Mary McCarthy are often needed. None of the so-called "national" magazines publish anything about photography, although many depend on it for their existence.

So we are at the beginning of something which involves much, and, although Goethe believed the beginning of anything is always good, it is often so only in retrospect.

However, a lively enthusiasm, new beliefs, even a small smug satisfaction are justified when we look at the strained absurdities of much of the most fashionable painting and sculpture, the expectorations and drippings, the kiddy pop-art and anti-art, the head-on crash with which so much has ended, for we can be grateful the camera has not yet reached this state of senility, and that still photography and the cinema are actually the media triumphant.

