From a photographic print, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense.

— Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

My ideal is to achieve the ability to produce numberless prints from each negative, prints all significantly alive, yet indistinguishably alike, and to be able to circulate them at a price no higher than that of a popular magazine or even a daily paper. To gain that ability there has been no choice but to follow the path that I have chosen.

— Alfred Stieglitz, catalogue preface to his exhibition at the Anderson Galleries, 1921

Photography, at least from the inception of Fox Talbot's negative/positive technique, would seem the very type of what Jean Baudrillard has recently called the “industrial simulacrum”—his designation for all of those products of modern industrial processes that can be said to issue in potentially endless chains of identical, equivalent objects.¹ Duplicability, seriality, "copies" that refer back to no "original": these are the hallmarks of Baudrillard's "order of simulacra." They are, as well, precisely those characteristics one might ascribe to photography as the principal source of the mass imagery that ceaselessly circulates throughout the global *société de consommation*.

This perspective, needless to say, is considerably at odds with the institutional trends that have, in recent years, borne photography triumphantly into the museum, the auction house, and the corporate boardroom. A curious denial—or strategic avoidance—of the fact of photography's sheer multiplicity informs much of today's authoritative discussion of the medium. Consider the assertion of the present director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography that "a photographic print is a much less predictable product than a print from an engraving or an etching plate," or his assurance that the likelihood of a photographer's being "able truly to duplicate an earlier print is very slight."²

This passage from multiplicity, ubiquity, equivalence to singularity, rarity, and authenticity seems conveniently to account for the kind of closure effected by photography's gradual reconstitution as an art and as the museum's natural and special object of study. When we turn, however, to consider the institutional setting in which this transformation might be said principally to have taken place, we quickly discover the process to have been more complex and equivocal than suspected. I speak, of course, of the MoMA Department of Photography, which for nearly half a century, through its influential exhibitions and publications, has with increasing authority set our general "horizon of expectation" with respect to photography. MoMA's assimilation of photography has indeed proceeded, on the one hand, through an investing of photography with what Walter Benjamin called the "aura" of traditional art—accomplished, in this case, by revamping older notions of print connoisseurship, transposing the ordering categories of art history to a new register, and confirming the workaday photographer as creative artist. But equally important has been the museum's considerable effort to reappropriate, on its own terms, those very aspects of photographic reproducibility believed by Benjamin to signal the aura's demise.

The cultural transformation of photography into a museum art provides, and in no small degree, an ironic postscript to the thesis that Benjamin elaborated in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." And it is for that very reason that I shall retain, in the background of the discussion that follows, the pair of terms "cult value" and "exhibition value." Their opposition provides the basis for Benjamin's claim that "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art."³

This oft-cited fragment compresses into aphorism a rich and ingenious argument, one by now sufficiently familiar to require no full-scale treatment here. In brief, Benjamin proceeded from what he saw as a historical distinction

The Judgment Seat of Photography

between two modes of reception of art. Cult value was rooted in art’s origins in religious/magical ritual, whence the unique presence manifested in the aura of the work of art. Exhibition value involved the gradually changing function of the work of art as it became portable and (later) duplicable—thus, the passage from the fixed fresco or mosaic of the Renaissance to the mobile “public presentability” of easel painting. Tracing these two modes to modern times, Benjamin described a secularized cult value that revealed itself in a preoccupation with the singularity and the physical authenticity of the treasured art object. Here, moreover, religious mystery was progressively displaced by the mysteries of creative genius and eternal value, mysteries whose meaning could be interpreted to art’s public only through the mediations of the art expert and the connoisseur. In this view—and Benjamin is writing during his least ambiguously Marxist phase—the aura of the secular work of art, the “unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be,” is disclosed as a function of its embeddedness in the constraining discourse that bourgeois society calls cultural tradition.

But tracing the course of exhibition value in similar fashion to the present, Benjamin saw in the nineteenth century’s perfection of technically precise reproduction media such as photography and film the opportunity not only to prise art from its cultural constraints, but to transform radically its traditional functions. As the singular original gave way to a plurality of increasingly precise copies, so would the previously unbridgeable gap between art and its audience give way to universal availability and accessibility. Hence, Benjamin anticipated a “dissolution” of the aura, a proliferation of meanings, in short a “tremendous shattering of tradition.” It is here that the Marxist thread of his discourse emerges explicitly, for Benjamin welcomed the de-sacralization of the work of art, the “liquidation” of cultural tradition, as clearing the way for a radical critique of bourgeois society. In particular, he identified photography and film—forms conceived as inherently reproducible—as the indispensable instruments of such a critique, since they promised to introduce new modes of perception and analysis in ways immediately comprehensible to a mass public.

Now while the last decade has seen a remarkable renewal of interest in those facets of Benjamin’s thought that I have so schematically outlined, there has been a notable absence (at least in America) of a corresponding reexamination of the shrewdest criticism it originally received—that of Theodor Adorno. After reviewing what he called Benjamin’s “extraordinary study,” Adorno nonetheless voiced a strong skepticism in regard to its argument. By setting up an enabling opposition between cult value and exhibition value, privileging the latter, and representing it as an unequivocally positive agent of change, Adorno felt that Benjamin had lapsed into a technological determinism. The techniques of reproducibility, Adorno claimed, having arisen wholly within the framework of the capitalist order, were not to be so easily disentangled from their role in the functioning of that order. If the historical processes that
Benjamin condensed under the rubric exhibition value were not, in fact, incompatible with the values of bourgeois culture, they could not fulfill the conveniently one-sided role that Benjamin wished them to play. Of the relation between the traditional forms of high art and the new technical modes, Adorno insisted, "Both bear the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are torn halves of full freedom, to which however they do not add up."4

One can only share Adorno's belief that Benjamin's undeniably pioneering effort carries more than a trace of the social and technological romanticism so evident in Germany between the wars, evident in figures as diverse as Brecht and Moholy-Nagy. With this proviso, however, and aware of the utopian aspect of exhibition value, we can see Benjamin's two modes of reception as providing a useful starting point for the consideration of a remarkable process: the way in which photography—the medium believed by Benjamin to have effectively overthrown the "judgment seat" of traditional art5—has in turn been subjected to the transfiguring gaze of art's institutional guardian: the museum.

From the time of MoMA's opening in 1929, photography received the museum's nodding recognition as one branch of modernist practice, doubtless spurred by MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s awareness of the photographic activity of the European avant-garde. The first showings of photography at the museum resulted, however, from the intermittent enthusiasms of Lincoln Kirstein, then one of the most active members of the MoMA Junior Advisory Committee. It was Kirstein who, with Julian Levy, in 1932, arranged the first exhibition to feature photographs (in this case giant photomurals by Steichen and Berenice Abbott, among others) in "Murals by American Painters and Photographers." The next year, Kirstein sponsored the showing of photographs of American Victorian houses by his friend Walker Evans—a project Kirstein had conceived and personally financed. Until 1935, however, the date of Beaumont Newhall's arrival as librarian (replacing Iris Barry, who now headed the new Film Department), no MoMA staff member spoke with authority for photography's interests.6

6. Kirstein was the author of what was apparently the museum's first major statement on the subject, "Photography in the United States," in Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., eds., *Art in
Newhall's exhibition, "Photography 1839-1937," is usually cited as a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as a full-fledged museum art. Considered from a slightly different perspective, it also emerges as an important link in the series of four great didactic exhibitions staged at MoMA during 1936–38; the others were Barr's "Cubism and Abstract Art" (1936) and "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" (1936), and the retrospective "Bauhaus: 1919-1928" (1938). Together, these exhibitions demonstrated MoMA's influential modernization of what had come to be known among museum profes-

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*America in Modern Times*, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934. The essay was based on a talk given as part of a series of MoMA-sponsored coast-to-coast broadcasts introducing the American radio audience to modern painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, and film.
The central tenets had at first been spelled out in the dramatic reorientation of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts three decades earlier. At that time the educational role of art museums had been sharply distinguished from that of history or science museums. Rather than provide useful information or technical instruction, the art museum was increasingly directed toward the service of “joy not knowledge.” That is, it began to serve as vade mecum to aesthetic appreciation; it became a treasure house of “eternal” monuments of art, the guarantor of art’s continuous tradition. Like Barr, Newhall had been schooled in the essentials of this approach—connoisseurship and rigorous art-historical scholarship—in the famous museum seminars led by Paul Sachs at Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum. By the mid-’30s, MoMA’s refinement of these methods—through the rationalization of collection building, the augmentation of the role of the research library, and the extension of scholarly commentary to exhibition catalogues—accounted in part for its reputation in museum circles. The four exhibitions of 1936–38—with their vast installations, exhaustive documentation, and ambitious catalogue essays—carried the process one step further. They sought to impart a convincing retrospective order to their heterogeneous domains, and, by so doing, to confirm MoMA’s claim as the preeminent institutional interpreter of modern art and its allied movements.

Turning again to “Photography: 1839–1937,” we can see that Newhall’s exhibition is frankly uninterested in the old question of photography’s status among the fine arts; rather, it signaled MoMA’s recognition that implicit in photography’s adoption by the European avant-garde was a new outlook on the whole spectrum of photographic applications. The approach of photography’s centenary year provided reason enough to stage in America the kind of far-reaching examination that had been common in Germany, for example, for over a decade. Newhall’s exhibition—comprising more than 800 catalogued items grouped according to technical processes (daguerreotypy, calotypy, wet-plate, and dry-plate periods) and their present-day applications (press photography, infra-red and X-ray photography, astronomical photography, “creative” photography)—clearly seems guided more by Moholy-Nagy’s expansive notion
of *fotokunst* than by Stieglitz's *kunstphotographie*.\(^9\) Moholy was, indeed, one of Newhall's principal advisers and "teachers" before the exhibition. Stieglitz, on the other hand, who still insisted on the utter opposition of fine-art and applied photography, not only declined to cooperate with Newhall, but refused to allow his later photographs to be represented.\(^10\)

Without resorting to devices as overtly didactic as Moholy's eight "varieties of photographic vision," Newhall nevertheless conceived the exhibition primarily as a lesson in the evolution and specialization of photographic techniques; the work of Muybridge, Atget, Stieglitz, and Anschutz, for instance, was presented under the rubric of dry-plate photography. The scope of the exhibition, its organization primarily along technical lines, and Newhall's refusal to make the expected pronouncement on photography's place among the fine arts— together these represented a notable departure from the usual practice of an American art museum. Lewis Mumford raised the question in the *New Yorker*:

> Perhaps it is a little ungrateful for me to suggest that the Museum of Modern Art has begun to overreach itself in the matter of documentation. . . . What is lacking in the present exhibition is a weighing and an assessment of photography in terms of pure aesthetic merit— such an evaluation as should distinguish a show in an art museum from one that might be held, say, in the Museum of Science and Industry. In shifting this function onto the spectator, the Museum seems to me to be adding unfairly to his burden. . . .\(^11\)

Mumford notwithstanding, we need only to look more closely into Newhall's catalogue essay to locate the emerging signs of MoMA's reordering of photography along lines consistent indeed with the conventional aims of the art museum. In Newhall's long essay (the seed of his subsequent *History of Photography*), we find an explicitly articulated program for the isolation and expert judging of the "aesthetic merit" of photographs— virtually any photograph, regardless of derivation. Newhall's method here seems to me directly related to that of Alfred Barr in his *Cubism and Abstract Art*, published the previous year.

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9. Newhall's exhibition follows precisely along the lines of the series of large photography exhibitions held in Germany from 1925 until the early 1930s, as described by Ute Eskildsen, "Innovative Photography in Germany between the Wars," in *Avant-Garde Photography in Germany 1919–39*, San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1980. These joint showings of scientific, commercial, and creative "new vision" photography and film placed the camera at the center of the postwar technological aesthetic in Germany, and should be seen as forming part of the background of Walter Benjamin's writings during this period.


Barr’s famous flow charts of the various “currents” of modern painting depended on an admittedly formalist supposition: the existence of a self-enclosed, self-referential field of purely aesthetic factors, untouched by the influence of any larger social or historical forces. What is explicit in Barr (and what provoked, by way of rejoinder, Meyer Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art”) reappears sub rosa in Newhall. Drawing on the earlier, overwhelmingly technical histories of photography (those of Eder and Potonnié, in particular), Newhall outlined photography’s history primarily as a succession of technical innovations— independent, for all intents and purposes, of developments in the neighboring graphic arts or painting—that were to be assessed above all for their aesthetic consequences.

How were these aesthetic factors to be isolated? Newhall found the key in the purist/formalist appeal to those qualities somehow judged to be irreducibly intrinsic to a given medium or, in Newhall’s words, “generic to photography.”

In this case, “In order that . . . criticism of photography should be valid, photography should be examined in terms of the optical and chemical laws which govern its production.” On this basis, and taking his cue, I suspect, from Barr’s well-known opposition (in Cubism and Abstract Art) of the “two main traditions of abstract art,” Newhall likewise located two main traditions of aesthetic satisfaction in photography: from the optical side, the detail, and, from the chemical side, tonal fidelity. This “schism” is found “to run through the entire history of photography” from the daguerreotype (detail) and calotype (tonal mass) to the modern high-resolution products of the view camera and the less precise but graphically more forceful images of the miniature camera. The creative application of these primary qualities consists, for Newhall, in the recognition of “significant” detail, and in the arrangement of “large simple masses” or a “fine range of shimmering tones.”

The aims of this method, as specified in the preface added to the next year’s revised edition, were “to construct a foundation by which the significance of photography as an esthetic medium can be more fully grasped.” The limits and constraints of these aims are nowhere more clearly revealed than in Newhall’s remarks on the nineteenth-century French photographer Charles Marville. Marville had, in the 1860s, documented the condemned sections of

13. Ibid., p. 41.
14. Ibid., p. 44.
15. Ibid., pp. 43–44. This duality was already a commonplace in the 1850s, as evidenced in Gustave Le Gray’s preface to his Photographie: Traité nouveau of 1852. For a contemporary “inquiry into the aesthetics of photography” along the same line, see James Borcomon, “Purism versus Pictorialism: The 135 Years War,” in Artscanada, vol. 31, nos. 3–4 (December 1974).
old Paris before they were razed to make way for Haussmann's boulevards. For Newhall, Marville's photographs can be considered “personal expressions” principally by virtue of the photographer’s “subtle lighting and careful rendition of detail.”\textsuperscript{17} Having once established this priority, any social/historical residue can be unobtrusively rechanneled as nostalgia—in Newhall's words, “the melancholy beauty of the condemned and vanished past.”\textsuperscript{18}

The appearance at MoMA, three years before the founding of a full department of photography, of this rudimentary way of “looking at photographs,” seems in retrospect the real point of interest in Newhall's 1937 exhibition. By carefully limiting his attention to what he later codified as the “relationship of technique to visualization,”\textsuperscript{19} Newhall opened the door to a connoisseurship of photographs that might easily range beyond the confines of art photography, yet still avoid the nettlesome intermediary questions raised by the photographic medium’s entanglement in the larger workings of the world.

Newhall never fully explored the implications of such a method; by 1940, when he was named the museum’s curator of photography (the first time any museum had created such a post), he had already redirected his interests to what he conceived as photography’s creative, rather than practical or applied, side. In his “Program of the Department,” he now called for the study of photography to be modeled on that of literature, conventionally conceived: as the examination “under the most favorable conditions, of the best work that can be assembled.”\textsuperscript{20}

In practice, this involved a new dependence on the connoisseur's cultivated, discriminating taste; on the singling out of the monuments of photography's past; on the elaboration of a canon of “masters of photography”; and on a historical approach that started from the supposition of creative expression—in short, an art history of photography. For the sources of this reinscription of photography within the traditional vocabulary of the fine arts, we must look not only to Newhall, but to the two others who presided with him over the inception of the department: the collector David Hunter McAlpin and the photographer Ansel Adams.

Signs of this reinscription were already clear in 1938, when Newhall's earlier essay reappeared, revised, as \textit{Photography: A Short Critical History}. Where Moholy-Nagy might be seen as the guiding spirit of 1937, now Stieglitz was firmly installed as \textit{genius loci}: a new dedication rendered homage to Stieglitz,

\textsuperscript{17} Newhall, \textit{Photography: 1839–1937}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid}. Newhall was aware of the very different method at work in Gisèle Freund's \textit{La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle}, Paris, Monnier, 1936, which he cites. The validity of his own method must have seemed self-evident, for the possibility of alternative procedures is nowhere acknowledged.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}. 
and one of his photographs was reproduced as frontispiece. More revealing was
the disappearance of that section of the earlier essay in which Newhall (echoing
Moholy) had scored the dependence of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group on the
models of genre painting, and pointed out that its members' production of
prints had been "arbitrarily limited, in spite of the fact that an inherent char-
acteristic of photography is its ability to yield infinite identical prints." 21 In its
place there now appeared a paean to Stieglitz as visionary, which revolved
around the claim that "the step to modern art was logical and direct, for
Stieglitz and the group were alive to every type of revelation through pictures." 22

Newhall's new alignment with such a transcendent claim of modernist
photography, rather than with the more openly functionalist claims of the "new
vision," can be seen as one means of attracting the support necessary to establish
a full department at MoMA. The key step was the involvement—thanks to
Newhall's friend Ansel Adams—of David Hunter McAlpin, a wealthy stock-
broker related to the Rockefeller family, whom Stieglitz had groomed as a col-
lector of photographs. It was McAlpin who initially agreed to provide funds for
the museum to purchase photographs, and who was subsequently invited to
join the MoMA board as the founding chairman of the Committee on Photogra-
phy. In 1940, it was McAlpin who arranged to bring Ansel Adams to New York
as vice-chairman of the new department, to join Newhall in organizing its first
exhibitions. 23

Looking at the first exhibition staged by Newhall and Adams, "60 Photo-
graphs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics," and reading the texts that accompanied
it, one finds a number of markers set in place to delimit the kinds of photographs
with which the new department would be concerned. Quick to appear are no-
tions of rarity, authenticity, and personal expression—already the vocabulary of
print connoisseurship is being brought into play. The collector David McAlpin
introduced the theme of the rarity of the photographic original:

The history of painting, sculpture, and the other arts . . . is widely
accessible to all. By reason of the perishable nature of plates, films,
and prints, original photographic material is scarce. Much of it has
disappeared. What remains is scattered, its whereabouts unknown. 24

Newhall, elaborating upon this idea, broached the possibility of a rarity of
still greater degree:

22. Newhall, Photography: A Short Critical History, p. 64.
23. Newhall's account can be found in the interview included in Paul Hill and Thomas
Modern Art, vol. 8, no. 2 (December-January 1940–41), 3.
From the prodigious output of the last hundred years relatively few great pictures have survived—pictures which are personal expressions of their makers' emotions, pictures which have made full use of the inherent characteristics of the medium of photography. These living photographs are, in the fullest sense of the word, works of art.25

Having indicated the narrowing scope of his interests, Newhall went on to imply a comparative system of classification of photographic prints, one ultimately enabling him to suggest the way in which the question of authenticity might be addressed. Physical authenticity could be referred back to considerations of technical process, which had figured so prominently in his 1937 essay; "60 Photographs" allowed Newhall to emphasize his expert familiarity with the special characteristics of calotypes, albumen prints, platinum prints, direct photogravures, palladio-types, chloride prints, bromide prints, and so on. But a more subtle test of authenticity was the degree to which a photograph might be enveloped, without incongruity, in the language and categories usually reserved for fine art. Thus Newhall called attention to the photographic interpretation of such traditional genres as landscape, portraiture, and architectural studies. Further, a way of placing photographs according to the degree and direction of visual stylization was suggested, along an axis bounded by the terminals of "objective" and "abstract" renderings.

But the chief claim made for the work presented in "60 Photographs" was this: "Each print is an individual personal expression."26 As the ultimate guarantee against the charge that the photographic process was merely mechanical, this claim presents no special difficulty when made, as it was here, on behalf of photographers like Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Sheeler, and Walker Evans—self-conscious modernists all. The stakes are somewhat different, however, when the same claim is extended to earlier photographs made in a variety of circumstances and for a variety of reasons. And it is here, I think, that we may look to Ansel Adams for the first flowering of a practice that reappears, in the tenure of John Szarkowski, as a crucial feature of MoMA's critical apparatus: the projection of the critical concerns of one's own day onto a wide range of photographs of the past that were not originally intended as art.

Not surprisingly, Adams undertook a modernist rereading of the work of the nineteenth-century wet-plate photographers of the American West in the light of the post-Stieglitz "straight" aesthetic. Just before his move to New York in 1940, Adams (with Newhall's help) organized a large exhibition in San Fran-

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cisco that highlighted such early western photographers as Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, Jack Hillers, and Carleton Watkins. By confining his attention to questions of photographic technique and the stylistics of landscape (and pushing to the margins the very different circumstances that had called these photographs into being), Adams was able to see in them “supreme examples of creative photography,” belonging to one of the medium’s “great traditions” — needless to say, his own. The same pronounced shift in the “horizon of expectation” brought to earlier work is evident, as well, in the essay— “Photography as an Art”— that Newhall contributed to the same catalogue. In it he redrew the boundaries of art photography to accommodate the Civil War documentation of the Brady group. Admitting that the photographs had been made “without any implied esthetic intent,” he claimed them for art on the grounds that they seemed, to him, undeniably “tragic and beautiful” and that they specifically prefigured the concerns of latter-day documentary stylists like Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott. These Civil War and early western photographs were brought together at MoMA two years later, beginning their long rehabilitation as independent, self-contained aesthetic objects.

To a remarkable degree, the program of nearly thirty exhibitions mounted by the MoMA Department of Photography from 1940–47 anticipates what has emerged only in the last decade as the standard practice of other American museums. The exhibitions centered on historical surveys (“French Photographs—Daguerre to Atget,” 1945), the canonization of masters (“Paul Strand,” 1945, and “Edward Weston,” 1946), and the promotion of selected younger photographers (Helen Levitt and Eliot Porter, 1943; Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1947). Typically the photographs were presented in precisely the same manner as other prints or drawings — carefully matted, framed, and placed behind glass, and hung at eye level; they were given precisely the same status: that of objects of authorized admiration and delectation. In this museological mise-en-scène, the “outmoded” categories of artistic reception that Walter

27. “Above all, the work of these hardy and direct artists indicates the beauty and effectiveness of the straight photographic approach. No time or energy was available for inessentials in visualization or completion of their pictures. Their work has become one of the great traditions of photography” (Ansel Adams, introduction to A Pageant of Photography, San Francisco, San Francisco Bay Exposition Co., 1940, n.p.).
29. Any assessment of Newhall’s department must bear in mind the complicated comings and goings that marked the war years. On Newhall’s departure for military service, his wife Nancy became acting curator. The next year saw Willard Morgan (husband of the photographer Barbara Morgan) named director of the department, an arrangement that lasted only one year. And in 1942 and 1945 Edward Steichen was brought in to stage spectacular patriotic exhibitions.
Benjamin had expected photography to brush aside—"creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery"—were displaced onto a new ground and given new life. Photography—an admittedly narrow range of it, initially—was laid out on an institutionalized interpretative grid and made the object of expert aesthetic judgment. Moreover, by extending the axes of this grid—formalist reading, the presupposition of creative intent, the announced preciousness of the photographic print—it was conceivable that a related order might eventually be imposed on the outlying regions of photography's past.

One may reasonably wonder, then, seeing that Newhall's curatorial policies so clearly anticipate today's uncontested norm, why, in the summer of 1947, did MoMA's trustees cancel their support for those policies, name the sixty-eight-year-old Edward Steichen as director of the photography department, and accept Newhall's sudden resignation?

Simply put, it seems clear that Newhall's exhibition program failed equally to retrieve photography from its marginal status among the fine arts and to attract what the museum could consider a substantial popular following. While Barr's exhibitions, "Cubism and Abstract Art" among them, were instrumental in creating a flourishing market for modern painting and sculpture, thereby
confirming MoMA’s status as an important art-world tastemaker, Newhall’s photography exhibitions had no comparable effect. A striking index of photography’s marginality can be found in a curious 1941 MoMA showing called “American Photographs at $10,” which offered for sale limited-edition prints by the photographers who figured most prominently in Newhall’s emerging canon—Stieglitz, Weston, and Adams, among them. The language in which the prints were presented all but confessed the absence of an audience attuned to the proclaimed transcendent aims of modernist art photography:

The exhibition and sale is an experiment to encourage the collecting of photographs for decoration and pleasure. Once a photographer has worked out a suitable relationship between grade of paper, exposure and development to make one fine print, he can at the same time make many more of identical quality. Thus the unit cost can be lowered.30

More seriously, Newhall’s insistent championing of photography as fine art drew the open hostility of that section of the photographic press that claimed to speak for the nation’s millions of amateurs: the department was called “snobbish,” “pontifical,” and accused of being shrouded in “esoteric fogs.”31 In light of the museum’s desire for funds for expansion in the mid-1940s, the declaration of John A. Abbot, vice-president of the museum’s board, that MoMA intended actively to seek the “support of the photographic industry and photography’s vast and devoted following”32 clearly spelled trouble for Newhall. In Newhall’s later recollection:

Suddenly I was told by the director that the Trustees had decided to appoint Edward Steichen as the Director of Photography. I’d felt that I could not work with Steichen. I respected the man, I knew the man pretty well by this time. I just didn’t see that we could be colleagues. It was as simple as that. My interests were increasingly in the art of photography; his were increasingly in the illustrative use of photography, particularly in the swaying of great masses of people.33

The approach that Newhall had mapped out at MoMA survived, of

30. Wall label for “American Photographs at $10,” visible in an installation view filed in the MoMA archive. As the history of the Julian Levy Gallery during the 1930s made evident, the market for original photographs was never strong enough to support even one gallery specializing in photography.
32. Ibid., p. 86.
course: as an influential text (his *History of Photography*, first published in 1949\(^34\)) and in an important institutional enclave (the George Eastman House, whose first director he became). Nevertheless, the next fifteen years at MoMA were marked by Steichen’s inclination not to give a “hoot in hell”\(^35\) for photography conceived as an autonomous fine art.

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In his 1947 study of the former Bauhaus artist/designer, Herbert Bayer, Alexander Dorner offered this ironic conception of the classically conceived exhibition gallery:

The gallery shows works of art containing eternal ideas and forms in an equally immutable framework of space which itself has grown out of the absolute immutability of the inner form. . . . The visitor . . . is supposed to visit a temple of the eternal spirit and listen to its oracle.\(^36\)

Announcing to his American audience that the age of art forms such as these was at an end, Dorner hailed the Bauhaus for its “explosive transformation of the very idea *art*”; in language strikingly similar to Walter Benjamin’s he described the situation brought about by the decline of traditional art forms as one “bursting with energies which, once set to work in the practical context of life, might well influence life on a tremendous practical scale.”\(^37\)

Bayer’s own contrasting idea of the aims of the modern exhibition descended from El Lissitzky’s revolutionary use of repetitive photographic/typographic clusters in the late 1920s, mediated by the Bauhaus’s rationalization of Lissitzky’s techniques in the 1930s. Bayer called on the modern exhibition to apply all of the techniques of the “new vision” in combination with color,

34. In light of the increasing awareness of the problematic role played by narrative representation in historiography (see, for example, Hayden White’s “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 2 [Winter 1973]), it deserves to be noted that the narrative strategy of Newhall’s 1949 *History* was devised with the aid of a Hollywood scriptwriter, Ferdinand Reynar. See Hill and Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography*, pp. 407-408. In Newhall’s words, “The History of Photography was deliberately planned with the help of a storyteller.”
35. “When I first became interested in photography, I thought it was the whole cheese. My idea was to have it recognized as one of the fine arts. Today I don’t give a hoot in hell about that” (Steichen on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, as reported in the *New York Times*, March 19, 1969).

Herbert Bayer. Diagram of extended vision in exhibition presentation. 1930.
scale, elevation, and typography—all of these to serve, moreover, a decidedly instrumental end. The modern exhibition, he wrote, 

. . . should not retain its distance from the spectator, it should be brought close to him, penetrate and leave an impression on him, should explain, demonstrate, and even persuade and lead him to a planned and direct reaction. Therefore we may say that exhibition design runs parallel with the psychology of advertising.38

In the Germany of the 1920s and early ’30s, this turn of emphasis could well be seen as essential to the rapid education of a backward public to the complexities of an emerging technological culture; such, of course, was one of the overriding themes of the entire Bauhaus project. But these principles, transported to the America of the postwar period, proved quite readily adaptable to very different ends—particularly when used to shape the extravagant thematic exhibitions that marked Steichen’s years at MoMA.

Now it might seem that Steichen—one of the founders of the Photo-Secession and, with Stieglitz, one of the first promoters of European modernist art in America—was uniquely fitted to fulfill Newhall’s efforts to consolidate a place for fine-art photography within the museum. But since the 1920s, Steichen’s ambitions had carried him far beyond the confines of art photography: his portrait and fashion photography for Vanity Fair and Vogue brought him personal celebrity and fortune, and during his service in the U.S. Navy in World War II he learned the enormous power of quasi-documentary reportage aimed at the home-front audience. It was with this knowledge that, in 1942, he first came to MoMA:

During the war I collected photographs and organized an exhibition called “Road to Victory,” and it was that exhibition which gave ideas to the board of directors of the Museum. Here was something new in photography to them. Here were photographs that were not simply placed there for their aesthetic values. Here were photographs used as a force and people flocked to see it. People who ordinarily never visited the museum came to see this. So they passed the proposition on to me that I keep on along those lines.39

The impact of “Road to Victory” depended largely on the ingenious installation devised for Steichen by Herbert Bayer, who had left Germany in 1938. Spectators were guided along a twisting path of enormous, free-

38. Herbert Bayer, “Fundamentals of Exhibition Design,” PM, December/January 1939/40, p. 17. PM (Production Manager) was the publication of New York’s Laboratory School of Industrial Design.
standing enlargements of documentary photographs—some as large as ten by forty feet. This arrangement was calculated to produce a visual narrative that combined the most dramatic devices of film and Life-style photojournalism. In PM, the photographer Ralph Steiner wrote, "The photographs are displayed by Bayer as photographs have never been displayed before. They don't sit quietly on the wall. They jut out from the walls and up from the floors to assault your vision..." The exhibition attracted immense crowds and critical plaudits, as did its 1945 successor, "Power in the Pacific."

It was in just this direction, and in this style, that Steichen was invited to continue at MoMA after the war: rather than contest the peripheral status of art photography, he was to capitalize on photography's demonstrably central role as a mass medium that dramatically "interpreted" the world for a national (and international) audience. That the museum harbored such an interest seems peculiar only if one ignores MoMA's extensive wartime program, in which the museum's prestige was directed towards the "education, inspiration, and strengthening of the hearts and wills of free men in defense of their own freedom." Later—as Eva Cockcroft has shown—after carrying out a number of wartime cultural missions for Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs, MoMA emerged as one of the principal actors in the cultural Cold War. In welcoming Steichen to MoMA in 1947, Rockefeller (then president of MoMA's board) served notice that the Department of Photography's concerns would no longer be confined to the aesthetic realm:

Steichen, the young man who was so instrumental in bringing modern art to America, joins with the Museum of Modern Art to bring to as wide an audience as possible the best work being done throughout the world, and to employ it creatively as a means of interpretation in major Museum exhibitions where photography is not the theme but the medium through which great achievements and great moments are graphically represented.

One can, with Allan Sekula, see productions like "The Family of Man" as

40. Ralph Steiner, in PM, May 31, 1942. The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA. A more complete account of the "Road to Victory" exhibition can be found in my "Steichen's Road to Victory," Exposure, vol. 18, no. 2 (Fall 1980).
43. "Edward Steichen Appointed Head of Photography at Museum of Modern Art," undated 1947 MoMA press release, The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA, italics added. Rockefeller notes, in conclusion, "I am particularly pleased that the enlarged program for the Department, headed by Mr. Steichen, has the endorsement and support of the photographic industry."
exercises in sheer manipulation; but one can also see in their enthusiastic reception that familiar mass-cultural phenomenon whereby very real social and political anxieties are initially conjured up, only to be quickly transformed and furnished with positive (imaginary) resolutions. From this standpoint, in “Korea: The Impact of War” (1951), doubts about dispatching American soldiers to distant regional battles are acknowledged (in a careful juxtaposition of the photographs of David Douglas Duncan), only to be neutralized in an exhibition setting that emphasized stirring images of American military might. In the same way, the global patriarchal family proposed as utopia in “The Family of Man” (1955) stands to gain considerably when set as the only opposing term to the nightmare image of atomic destruction. And “The Bitter Years” (1962)—coming at the height of the superpower war of nerves over Cuba and Berlin—consciously revived (for the first time in two decades) and reinterpreted the FSA’s Depression-era photographs as an inspirational demonstration of the “fierce pride and courage which turned the struggle through those long bitter years into an American epic.”

While one could profitably examine such exhibitions as Barthesian “mythologies,” ritual reenactments and carefully channeled resolutions of Cold War anxieties, I wish to call attention to the form in which they were conceived and circulated. For the underlying premise at work is that of the ultimate availability and duplicability of photographs—a notion believed to have revolutionary implications in the 1930s, but now reappropriated and domesticated in a later and very different set of circumstances. To prise photographs from their original contexts, to discard or alter their captions, to recrop their borders in the enforcement of a unitary meaning, to reprint them for dramatic impact, to redistribute them in new narrative chains consistent with a predetermined thesis—thus one might roughly summarize Steichen’s operating procedure. Furthermore, beginning as early as the 1942 “Road to Victory,” each of these thematic exhibitions was conceived not as a single presentation, but as a set of multiple “editions” of varying physical dimensions intended to circulate—in the manner of motion pictures or magazines—throughout the United States and the world. Thus, by the mid-1950s, MoMA’s initial press release anticipated that “The Family of Man” would open simultaneously in New York, London, Tokyo, and Paris.

46. In the 1942 “Road to Victory,” for example, the dramatic turning point of the exhibition hinges on the juxtaposition of a photograph of the Pearl Harbor explosions with a Dorothea Lange photograph of a grim-visaged “Texas farmer” who is made to say, in caption, “War—they asked for it—now, by the living God, they’ll get it!” Examining the original Lange photograph in the MoMA Archive, one finds this very different caption: “Industrialized agriculture. From Texas farmer to migratory worker in California. Kern County. November, 1938.” For similar instances involving recropping, see Ulrich Keller, “Photographs in Context,” Image, December 1976, pp. 1-12.
York, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, thereafter to travel globally for two years.\(^47\)

The successful application of such techniques entailed, of course, two major factors: the all-but-total disappearance of the individual photographer within the larger fabric, and a disregard of the supposed personal-expressive qualities of the "fine print."\(^48\) The photographers complied, for the most part, signing over to the museum the right to crop, print, and edit their images. In this way, the potential void left, at one level, by the abandonment of Newhall's main tenets—the photographer as autonomous artist, the original print as personal expression—was promptly filled at another by the museum's emergence as orchestrator of meaning. One would by no means be mistaken in seeing Steichen as MoMA's glorified picture editor, sifting through thousands of images from different sources and recombining them in forms reflecting the familiar mass-cultural mingling of popular entertainment and moral edification.\(^49\)

This slippage of the photographer from the status of autonomous artist to that of illustrator of (another's) ideas marked the entire range of Steichen's exhibitions at MoMA; and it was not confined to the giant thematic shows that constituted its most visible aspect. The young photographers, however, who came of age just after World War II and looked to the mass-circulation magazines for their livelihood, generally understood illustration as the condition of photography. The most renowned artist-photographers at this time could expect to sell their work for no more than fifteen to twenty-five dollars per print.\(^50\) Irving Penn was surely not alone in his insistence (at the 1950 MoMA symposium, "What Is Modern Photography?") that "for the modern photographer the end product of his efforts is the printed page, not the photo-

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48. This was the point of Ansel Adams's main complaint. "The quality of the prints—of all his exhibits of this gross character—was very poor. . . . If a great Museum represented photography in such a style and quality, why bother about the subtle qualities of the image and the fine print?" (Ansel Adams, correspondence with this writer, January 30, 1980).
49. "The Family of Man" can be seen to spring directly from the series of photo-essays supervised by picture editor John G. Morris for the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1947. "People Are People the World Over" used photojournalists like Robert Capa and Larry Burrows to present the everyday lives of families from twelve countries, on the premise that "the family is still the basic building block of society."
50. At the MoMA Christmas print sale of 1951, one could buy photographs by Weston, Ansel Adams, Frederick Sommer, Charles Sheeler, and Berenice Abbott, among others, for $10-$25. At this particular sale, Harry Callahan (7), outsold Weston (5). The virtual nonexistence of a market for original photographs underlay the continuing difficulties of Helen Gee's Limelight Gallery, from 1954-61 the only New York gallery to regularly feature photography; see Barbara Lobron, "Limelight Lives," *Photograph*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1977), 1-3. As late as 1962, at the time of Steichen's retirement, Harry Callahan could expect to receive five dollars for each print purchased by the museum.
The modern photographer does not think of photography as an art or of his photograph as an art object."

This view could only be reinforced by the presentation of photographs in the MoMA galleries. Under Steichen, the typical gallery installation resembled nothing so much as an oversized magazine layout, designed to reward rapid scanning rather than leisurely contemplation. Too frequently, the designer's hand appeared to greater advantage than the photographer's eye. Even in exhibitions of "creative" photography, the preciousness of the fine print was dramatically deemphasized. Prints were typically shown flush-mounted on thick (nonarchival) backing board, unmatted, and without benefit of protective glass. In addition, one could from time to time expect to encounter giant color transparencies, commercial press sheets, and inexpensive prints from color slides.

Quoted in "What Is Modern Photography," American Photography, March 1951, p. 148. The symposium included statements by Penn, Margaret Bourke-White, Gjon Mili, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, and Charles Sheeler, among others. Each participant, however, was limited to a five-minute statement, in order that the proceedings might be carried to a "Voice of America" radio audience.
It should not be thought that fine-art photography of the kind that Newhall had sponsored vanished entirely from the MoMA galleries—it did not. It was, however, acknowledged as a tiny band on the photographic spectrum, at a time when Steichen—an adept auto-publicist—encouraged a view of himself as the grandfatherly “dean” of all photography and MoMA as its institutional monitor. Soon after his arrival at the museum, for example, he let it be known that “he want[ed] to gather under his wing the 200,000 of America’s amateurs . . . and teach them something about making pictures. Later on he want[ed] them to send the pictures to him for sorting and cataloguing. . . .”\(^{52}\)

He subsequently organized large survey exhibitions treating diverse special topics like news photography (1949), color photography (1950), and abstraction in photography (1951)—this last juxtaposing “creative” work with analogous scientific work. Such exhibitions never raised the question of the artistic status of any branch of photography. Rather, they demonstrated that all photography, if properly packaged, could be efficiently channeled into the currents of the mass media. Indeed, during this period magazine inserts and syndicated newspaper interviews largely replaced exhibition catalogues.

Two irregular series of smaller exhibitions clearly showed the limitations of Steichen's approach when applied to the handling of historical and serious contemporary photography. Photography's past was acknowledged in a number of so-called "flashback" exhibitions interspersed between the larger shows. These surveyed the work of the Photo-Secession (1948), nineteenth-century French photography from the Cromer Collection of the George Eastman House (1949), and the work of Stieglitz and Atget, shown together in 1950. But in the absence of extensive magazine coverage, exhibition catalogues, or critical writing, these exhibitions attracted little attention and left virtually no trace.53

More significant were the many small exhibitions organized to illustrate various photographers' treatments of a given theme—the theme was defined, of course, by Steichen. The best-known were the five installments of "Diogenes with a Camera" (1952–61), in which a great many photographers presented the

53. According to Newhall's count of selected publications on the history of photography from 1900–70, the 1950s saw fewer than half as many publications in this area than had the 1930s. The 1960s, on the other hand, witnessed a dramatic increase, more than doubling the number of publications of the 1930s. Newhall's compilation was made available at the Photographic Collectors' Symposium, George Eastman House, October 1978.
results of their ostensible search for truth—the whole notion, one may suppose, a remnant of the claims previously made for art photography’s incorporation of transcendent values. Gradually these exhibitions fell prey to Steichen’s sentimental and moralizing tendencies; so much so that in 1962, when he wished to pair two of his favorites, Harry Callahan and Robert Frank, in a final “Diogenes,” Frank flatly refused to exhibit under that title.  

The photographic values that Steichen consistently encouraged remained those of the glossy picture magazines: emotional immediacy, graphic inventiveness, avoidance of difficulty. Photographers who chose to explore what were defined as peripheral areas—whether of a social or an aesthetic nature—quickly faced loss of access to what had become (thanks in part to Steichen’s proselytizing) a mass audience for photography. Callahan and Frank were typical of the ambitious younger photographers whose reputations benefited from their regular inclusion in MoMA exhibitions, but who nonetheless eventually chafed at the constraints of the mass-media model imposed on all of the work presented there. Callahan’s rigorous formalist side was never shown to advantage, nor was his extensive work in color; as he later remarked of his exhibitions at MoMA during those years, “It was always a Steichen show. Always.” In the same way, the poignant, romantic Robert Frank whose work appeared at MoMA resembled only slightly the photographer whose corrosive social vision informed The Americans—a book that defined itself in opposition to the reigning norms of Life magazine and professionally “committed” photojournalism. (“I do not like the adoration of grand old men,” was Frank’s later, testy dismissal.)

At a time, then, when most American art museums still considered photography well beyond the pale of the fine arts, a peculiar set of circumstances allowed Steichen effectively to establish MoMA as the ultimate institutional arbiter of the entire range of photographic practice. In dissolving the categories by means of which Newhall had sought to separate fine-art photography from the medium’s other applications, Steichen undermined the whole notion of the “cult value” of the fine print. In the process he attracted a wide popular following for photography as a medium, and won for it (and for himself) the regular

54. Frank agreed to show his work minus the “Diogenes” label. But “Modern Art Museum officials were dismayed over the number of beatniks—about 80 of them—who crowded in the swank, private opening of Robert Frank’s new photography exhibit. There wasn’t much the museum could do about it, though. The beats were Frank’s friends. . . .” New York Daily News, March 5, 1962. The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA.
attention of the mass press. The price exacted at MoMA was the eclipse of the individual photographer and the subordination of his or her work to the more or less overtly instrumental demands of illustration. This was the situation inherited by Steichen's successor in 1962.

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A survey of the installation views of MoMA's photographic exhibitions from the early 1960s to the present induces a dizzying realization of the speed of photography's cultural repackaging. Steichen's hyperactive, chock-a-block displays metamorphose before one's eyes into the cool white spaces of sparsely hung galleries. Mural-sized enlargements shrink to conventional proportions, and the eccentric clustering of photographs of wildly assorted dimensions gives way to an orderly march of prints of utterly uniform size. The fine-art accoutrements of the Newhall years—standard white mattes, wooden frames, and covering glass—quickly reappear. With no knowledge of the particulars of John Szarkowski's program as director of MoMA's Department of Photography, one could easily surmise that the museum's claims for photography's "cult value" had been dusted off and urgently revived. What one could not infer, of course, is the extent to which those claims resounded beyond the museum's walls to a rapidly proliferating network of galleries, collectors, critics, and arts administrators, all specializing, in one way or another, in photography.

The barbed title of his first exhibition, "Five Unrelated Photographers" (1962), announced that although Steichen had personally chosen him as his successor, Szarkowski was no acolyte. It gradually became apparent that Szarkowski, trained as an art historian, held no affection for Steichen's casting of photography in the role of social instrument and "universal language." Instead, he represented an aestheticizing reaction against Steichen's identification of photography with mass media. While deploring the "graphic gymnastics" of latter-day photojournalism, however, he showed equally little interest in the "artistic" alternatives at hand, in the photomysticism of Minor White or the expressive abstraction of Aaron Siskind. Szarkowski noted "incipient exhaustion" in the bulk of the photographs of the past decade, adding, "Their simplicity of meaning has—not to put too fine a point on it—often verged on vacuity."

What Szarkowski sought, rather than a repetition of Newhall's attempt to cordon off a "high" art photography more or less independent of the medium's

57. The MoMA Archive holds a full selection of installation views from the early 1930s to the present. These provide an invaluable record of the ways art has been presented to the public over the last half century.
everyday uses, was the theoretical salvaging of photography in its entirety from
the encroachments of mass culture. He wished, on this account, to redefine the
medium's aesthetic nature in such a way as to set it on an irrevocably autono-
mous course. At a time when most excursions into photography's history still
followed the narrow genetic-biographical path evidenced in Newhall's Masters of
Photography (1958) and shared its emphasis on "the unmistakable authority of
genius," Szarkowski turned to quick advantage the presumption (inherited from
Steichen) that the MoMA Department of Photography might address any of the
medium's multiple facets. From this institutional salient, he was able to set about
reconstructing a resolutely modernist aesthetic for photography and remapping a
"main tradition" in order to legitimize it.59

59. Andreas Huyssen distinguishes modernism from avant-garde by means of the relation of
each to artistic tradition, modernism, devising more and more hermetic strategies to preserve
art's realm of autonomy, avant-garde as the embodiment of postauratic antitradition. See "The
22 (Winter 1981), 23-40. In this light, see Hilton Kramer's uncomprehending "Anxiety about the
Museumization of Photography," New York Times, July 4, 1976, in which he castigates Szarkowski
for "providing a haven for the anti-art impulse."

Diogenes with a Camera (Harry Callahan). MoMA
installation. 1952.
Even before coming to MoMA Szarkowski had clearly indicated the direction his search for a usable tradition would take. In 1958, linking his own ambitions as a photographer to the precedents set in the previous century by Brady, O'Sullivan, and Jackson, he proclaimed, “I want to make pictures possessing the qualities of poise, clarity of purpose, and natural beauty, as these qualities were achieved in the work of the good wet-plate photographers.”

In 1967, five years after arriving at MoMA, he elaborated on the same theme. In the essay “Photography and Mass Media,” he sharply distinguished the work of these nineteenth-century photographers from the “flabbiness” of media-age photography and its ostensibly creative offshoots. These latter he faulted as “less and less interested in clear observation,” which was what he felt photography’s true vocation to be.


During photography's first century it was generally understood . . . that what photography did best was to describe things: their shapes and textures and situations and relationships. The highest virtues of such photographs were clarity of statement and density of information. They could be read as well as seen; their value was literary and intellectual as well as visceral and visual.61

With such an agenda—realistic description without overt prescription—Szarkowski could view with equanimity the impending collapse of photojournalism in the early 1970s. Assuming more and more the role of aesthetic guide, he recommended as models to younger photographers the works of Atget, Sander, and Frances Benjamin Johnston—all "deliberate and descriptive," and "constructed with the poise and stability which suggest Poussin or Piero." Such pictures, he advised, "are not only good to look at, they are good to contemplate."62

Szarkowski's ambitious program for establishing photography in its own aesthetic realm has been set forth explicitly in no single work, but arrived at piecemeal in a series of slender essays over the last twenty years. His project has followed, I think, three main lines. These include: (1) the introduction of a formalist vocabulary theoretically capable of comprehending the visual structure (the "carpentry") of any existing photograph; (2) the isolation of a modernist visual "poetics" supposedly inherent to the photographic image; and (3) the routing of photography's "main tradition" away from the (exhausted) Stieglitz/Weston line of high modernism and toward sources formerly seen as peripheral to art photography.

The formalist theme first appeared in The Photographer's Eye (1964), in which Szarkowski presented a selection of photographs—both celebrated and anonymous—that epitomized for him the visual characteristics intrinsic to photography. Reworking John Kouwenhoven's thesis (outlined in the 1948 Made

61. Szarkowski, "Photography and Mass Media."
62. Ibid. It seems worthwhile to note that of the two illustrations introduced to underline his point, only one (a carefully staged tableau by Frances Benjamin Johnston) is a photograph. The other—connecting Szarkowski's pictorial concerns to an older, more prestigious tradition—is Poussin's The Arcadian Shepherds. Using just this painting as his object of commentary, Louis Marin has recently provided a remarkable analysis of the contemplative process in question here, as well as a partial "history of reading" in the visual arts. What Marin calls the post-Renaissance classical system of representation, founded on one-point linear perspective and the assumed transparency of the picture plane, permits two simultaneous and contradictory readings: (1) as a duplication or immediate mirroring of objects or scenes; or (2) as (someone's) representation of those scenes or objects. As we will see, for Szarkowski the operation of these contradictory modes is a precondition for the emergence of what he calls the "narrative voice" in modernist art photography. See Marin, "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's The Arcadian Shepherds," in Suleiman and Crosman, eds., The Reader in the Text, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 293–324. Also see Craig Owens's valuable commentary in "Representation, Appropriation, and Power," in Art in America, May 1982, pp. 9–21.
in America) that the American artistic tradition could be conceived as the inter-
play of native ("vernacular") and European ("cultivated") strains, Szarkowski
offered a list of photography's basic formal elements that drew equally on
what Kouwenhoven had called the American "respect for optical reality" and
the essentially European concern for coherent, self-sufficient form. His five
characteristics—the detail, the thing itself, time, the frame, and the vantage
point—provided not only a checklist that could be held up to any photograph
for the cool appraisal of its organizing logic, but also a range of stylistic alter-
 natives that were explicitly regarded as "artist's choices."

Interestingly, Szarkowski's concern with locating photography's formal
properties signaled no incipient move toward abstraction. The formal char-
acteristics he acknowledged were all modes of photographic description: instead
of stressing (as had Clement Greenberg in his formalist essays on painting) the
necessary role of the material support in determining the essential nature of the
medium, Szarkowski wished to reserve unexamined for photography that
classical system of representation that depends on the assumed transparency of
the picture surface.63 Thus the delimitation of formal elements could prove no
end in itself, but only set the stage for a move to the iconographic level.

The central text in this regard is the curious From the Picture Press (1973), an
investigation of the formal and iconographic properties of the "millions of pro-
foundly radical pictures" that have filled the pages of the daily press. The en-
abling assumption here—one with important consequences for Szarkowski's
whole aesthetic enterprise—is that of the "narrative poverty" of the photograph, a
notion first broached in The Photographer's Eye. In essence, this entails the view
that, considered strictly in terms of the visual descriptions inscribed within the
picture frame, an individual photograph can, at best, give a "sense of the scene"
but can never convey a larger narrative meaning. For Szarkowski, it does not
follow that one ought to seek a supplement to the image beyond the frame.
(What is at stake, after all, is the self-sufficiency of the photograph.) He recom-
mends, instead, a particular mode of transformation of pictorial content: "If
photographs could not be read as stories, they could be read as symbols."64

63. See Victor Burgin's commentary in "Photography, Phantasy, Function," in Screen, vol. 21,
no. 1 (1980). As suggested by his emphasis on pure photographic description, Szarkowski has
shown little interest in work in which the photographer's "hand" figures prominently, or work that
explicitly calls photography's means of representation into question (as with Michael Snow or Jan
Dibbets). As curator of the Department of Photography in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Peter
Bunnell covered these areas to some extent in exhibitions like "Photography as Printmaking"
(1968) and "Photography into Sculpture" (1970). Bunnell directed considerably more attention
than Szarkowski to the connoisseurship of the "fine print," especially to the "subjective man-
nerisms, in part directed by techniques and materials, which render each print unique and
which, in the last analysis, place man as the actual medium of expression" ("Photography as
Selecting a number of press photographs from the files of the *Daily News* (with the help of Diane Arbus and Carole Kismaric), *From the Picture Press* provided an admittedly witty exercise in aesthetic reprocessing. Separated from their original contexts and their original captions, organized into iconographic categories (“ceremonies,” “disasters,” and the like), the images could now be savored for their surprising conjunctions of formal coherence and narrative ambiguity. They could be seen, in Szarkowski’s words, as “short visual poems—they describe a simple perception out of context.”\(^65\) It is significant that the vocabulary of indeterminacy used thus to characterize the poetics of imagery duplicates that already familiar throughout the range of modernist art and literature: “As images, the photographs are shockingly direct, and at the same time mysterious, elliptical, and fragmentary, reproducing the texture of experience without explaining its meaning.”\(^66\) Moreover (as becomes clear in a later essay), Szarkowski finds these the essential qualities built into the images produced by the photographic medium; in this way photography can be claimed to produce its own, inherently modernist “new pictorial vocabulary, based on the specific, the fragmentary, the elliptical, the ephemeral, and the provisional.”\(^67\)

Szarkowski’s distribution of emphases—falling, as I have indicated, on the transparency of photography’s representational apparatus, the formal/stylistic elements peculiar to its descriptive system, and its ready-made modernist pictorial syntax—finally prepares the ground for the emergence of an aestheticized authorial “voice” proper to photography. In the work of Gary Winogrand, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and William Eggleston, for example—Szarkowski’s “heirs of the documentary tradition”\(^68\)—the adoption of the unmanipulated “in-

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67. John Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, New York, MoMA, 1976, p. 6. Elsewhere Szarkowski links photography to the modern literary imagination. Writing of Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, he calls it a “profoundly photographic book,” and speculates that Crane had “surely known” the Brady photographs. As Szarkowski describes the “thousands of Civil War photographs that survive,” we see “only bits of machinery, records of destruction, a bit of a forest where a skirmish had occurred, and little knots of grey clad men, living or dead, waiting for a revelation of the larger meanings of the conflict.” He describes Crane’s book, similarly, as “the personal trial of one ignorant participant, seen from so close a perspective that large patterns are invisible” (Szarkowski, “American Photography and the Frontier Tradition”). Presumably Crane or Szarkowski might have found the same effect in Stendhal, writing well before the invention of photography.
68. “The heirs of the documentary tradition have redirected that idea in the light of their own fascination with the snapshot: the most personal, reticent, and ambiguous of documents. These photographers have attempted to preserve the persuasiveness and mystery of these humble, intuitive camera records, while adding a sense of intention and visual logic” (John Szarkowski, wall...
The Judgment Seat of Photography

visible" style of documentary initially links their work to that aspect of the classical system of representation that posits (in Louis Marin's words) that "nobody is speaking; it is reality itself that speaks." But the new critic/connoisseur is on hand to certify the presence of the artist, and to provide expert guidance to the formal strategies of concealment through which the artist-photographer (to quote Marin on the reverse face of the classical paradigm) "inscribes himself as the center of the world and transforms himself into things by transforming things into his representations." These "contradictory axioms" of the classical system operate with considerable force in photography and, in Szarkowski's scheme, ultimately to the advantage of the artist-photographer. Thus his insistence that even though at first Winogrand's pictures may seem the uninflected "mechanical utterance of a machine,"

As we study his photographs, we recognize that although in the conventional sense they may be impersonal, they are also consistently informed by what in a poem we would call a voice. This voice is, in turn, comic, harsh, ironic, delighted, and even cruel. But it is always active and distinct—always, in fact, a narrative voice.69

Admittedly, this postulation of a unitary authorial "voice" makes it possible to reckon critically with those contemporary artist-photographers who (proceeding along the familiar modernist route that Shklovsky called the "canonization of peripheral forms") have chosen to mimic the unperturbed stability of nineteenth-century topographic photographs, or to adopt the snapshot's seemingly unpremeditated jumbling of visual events as a metaphor for the fragmented, elusive quality of modern life. More subtly than Newhall's emphasis on "personal expression," it restores the presence of the artist through a reading method that makes it possible to see Eggleston's laconic photographs, for instance, primarily as "patterns of random fact in the service of an imagination—not the real world."70 But whatever its value as a critical procedure for valorizing the work of one privileged sector of today's art photography, it provides at the same time a powerful rationale for the systematic rereading, along precisely the same lines, of the photographs of the past. Unfortunately, since photography has never been simply, or even primarily, an art medium—since it has operated both within and at the intersections of a variety of institutional discourses—when one projects a present-day art-critical method across the entire range of the photography of the past, the consequences are not incon-

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siderable. Nor, given the prevailing winds of today’s art market, are they likely to be disinterested. Thus, for example, the critic Ben Lifson’s automatic reinterpretation of Robert Capa’s politically committed Spanish Civil War reportage as a self-conscious “experimenting with photographic syntax.” For Lifson, Capa’s redemption for an aestheticized photographic tradition can proceed only by means of his transformation into an artist/author whose photographs can be safely read as a “fiction of his own creation.”

Such selective and reductive readings are, however, sanctioned by Szarkowski’s conception of photography’s past and its “central tradition.” He writes: “Most of the meanings of any picture reside in its relationships to other and earlier pictures—to tradition.” But turning away from Newhall’s lineage of successive individual “masters,” he redirects attention to those photographers who “chose not to lead photography but to follow it, down those paths suggested by the medium’s own eccentric and original genius.” Although echoing Eliot’s insistence (in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) that the poet has not a personality but a medium to express, and that the medium’s “main cur-

71. Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene,” October, no. 16 (Spring 1981), 107. Describing the work of Robert Capa in the same language he might employ for that of, say, Gary Winogrand, Lifson brings to mind a 1970 MoMA exhibition called “Protest Photographs.” Staged just after the mass protests that greeted the American invasion of Cambodia, the exhibition presented a number of prints push-pinned to the wall, as if they had just been rushed over from the photographers’ darkrooms. One might have thought that here was a contemporary reflection of the concerns that animated photographers like Capa. On closer inspection, however, the photographs were revealed as exercises in virtuosity by Winogrand, Burk Uzzle, and Charles Harbutt—all using demonstration sites as an arena for what Szarkowski (writing elsewhere of Winogrand’s formal bent) called “the recognition of coherence in the confluence of forms and signs.”


phy: "Not only the great pictures by great photographers but photography— the great undifferentiated whole of it—has been teacher, library, and laboratory for those who have consciously used the camera as artist."\(^{74}\) It would seem, then, that for Szarkowski historical practice should consist of the sifting of fragments and shards, and their reordering as a privileged representation of moments in the unfolding of photography's main tradition. If, as Edward Said has suggested, the proper vehicle for the display of such fragments is the chrestomathy, we can see in *Looking at Photographs* (1973), Szarkowski's most widely read book, a connoisseur's collection of photographic fragments ordered by and encased in his own richly allusive prose.

One further consideration remains. Szarkowski's comparison of the bulk of the photographic production of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to an "untended garden"\(^{75}\) and a "genetic pool of possibilities"\(^{76}\) hints that, indeed, he regards the development of photography as "something pretty close to an organic issue."\(^{77}\) Reaching for a suitable analogy, he likens his search for photography's main tradition to "that line which makes the job of curator rather similar to the job of a taxonomist in a natural history museum."\(^{78}\) Can one say, then, that Szarkowski conceives of photography as endowed with an essential nature, determined by its origins and evident in what he calls an "evolutionary line of being"?\(^{79}\)

Such would appear to be the case, at least on the basis of MoMA curator Peter Galassi's 1981 exhibition "Before Photography," which sought to give substance to Szarkowski's conjecture that photography was "like an organ-


\(^{77}\) *Ibid*.


ism . . . born whole.”

80 Galassi’s slim but ambitious catalogue had two aims: to portray photography as the legitimate (albeit eccentric) offspring of the Western pictorial tradition and to demonstrate that it was born with an inherent “pictorial syntax” that forced originality (and modernism) upon it. In stressing photography’s claims as the heir to the system of one-point linear perspective, Galassi argued that the advent of photography in 1839 issued not from the juncture of multiple scientific, cultural, and economic determinations but from a minor tendency in late eighteenth-century painting. It was this tendency (evident primarily in hitherto-unremarked landscape sketches), notable for an embryonic pictorial syntax of “immediate synoptic perception and discontinuous forms,” that somehow “catalyzed” photography into being. The larger point of this peculiar argument is that while photography incorporated what has been called here the classical paradigm of representation, the new medium was incapable of taking over painting’s conventional pictorial language. For, according to Galassi, “the photographer was powerless to com-


pose his picture. He could only . . . take it.”\(^{81}\) By reason of this “unavoidable
condition,” originality was forced, not simply on the photographer, but on the
medium itself. In this way, what Szarkowski elsewhere referred to as the
“monstrous and nearly shapeless experiment” of photography’s first century can
be seen as the unbidden working out of the “special formal potentials” of pho-
tography’s inherent and singular syntax of the specific, the fragmentary, the
elliptical, and so on. Incarnated in the work of “primitives” (Szarkowski’s term)
like Brady and O’Sullivan, this “new pictorial language” awaited its recognition
and appropriation by self-conscious artist-photographers like Walker Evans,
Lee Friedlander, or Robert Adams.

Thus endowed with a privileged origin—in painting—and an inherent
nature that is modernist \textit{avant la lettre}, photography is removed to its own
aesthetic realm, free to get on with its vocation of producing “millions of pro-
foundly radical pictures.” As should be apparent, this version of photographic
history is, in truth, a flight from history, from history’s reversals, repudiations,
and multiple determinations. The dual sentence spelled out here—the formal
isolation and cultural legitimation of the “great undifferentiated whole” of
photography—is the disquieting message handed down from the museum’s
judgment seat.

reactions to Galassi’s argument are developed in S. Varnedoe’s “Of Surface Similarities, Deeper
Disparities, First Photographs, and the Function of Form: Photography and Painting after 1839,”
in \textit{Arts Magazine}, September 1981; Joel Snyder’s review in \textit{Studies in Visual Communications}, vol. 8,
12, no. 6 (January-February 1982). Only the last-cited attempted to establish the connection be-
tween Galassi’s effort and Szarkowski’s critical position.