THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE: NEW HIGH ART OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Art History Honors Thesis
Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia
May 7, 2001

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My concept for this thesis combines my personal interests within the art world with the questions that have always fascinated me about the study of art: what is art, and how do we determine what is the good and the bad art? How is "high" art defined by the written word for us to comprehend on a level other than that of the visual? How does a particular creative medium achieve status?

By tracing events, evolutions of styles in mainstream art, and critical writing in the twentieth century, I will attempt to demonstrate how the medium of photography came to be understood as a medium of "high" art in the late twentieth century.

INTRODUCTION

Since its arrival in 1839, photography has provided a medium for the image of reality to be copied and preserved eternally. The photograph was a man-made product that captured visual reality; its function as a new method of documentation initially took precedence over its potential as an artistic medium. It served its audience as a representation of fact. As the first director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, Beaumont Newhall, describes, the idea of photography's potential as art began to surface not long after the creation of the medium:

> In 1861 an English critic, in an article "On Art-Photography," wrote: "Hitherto photography has been principally content with representing Truth. Can its sphere not be enlarged? And may it not aspire to delineate Beauty, too?" He encouraged photographers to produce pictures "whose aim is not merely to amuse, but to instruct, purify and ennoble."[1]

In the nineteenth century, photography was defined by designated roles, as portrait, and as visual cultural and scientific documentation. The medium was controlled by the professional photographers, the only ones who had the ways and the means to create a photograph. As technology progressed, the camera became a tool that could be used by anyone, an instrument of creation as readily available as the paint brush. "With the perfection of the collodion process an increasing number of amateurs were attracted to photography, and they brought with them a broader view of artistic matters than the average professional possessed."[2]

Photography gave the artist the medium to create a composition of elements of reality, to use reality as a tool. By the early twentieth century, the photograph was familiar because it was now a

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[1] Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 73.

[2] Ibid., 73.

household item; the photographic image could be recognized and understood by anyone as defined reality. Just as the photograph was a tangible object, critical thinking and writing about photography in the twentieth century increasingly related the medium to the familiar subject of "art." Critics initially condemned the medium as a format discouraging creation, holding to the argument that the photograph copied reality and did nothing more. "Art critics did not accept photography as readily as artists. They often used the word in a negative way, to condemn painting and sculpture that, to their eyes, did not go beyond verisimilitude, but merely recorded the outward appearance of the world."[3] In his 1897 article "Is Photography Among the Fine Arts?" Joseph Pennell sarcastically addresses photography as a medium that has nothing to do with the individual's creativity:

> In a word, the photographer is the bold independent who has broken loose from tradition and asserted his individuality, not by the cultivation of his hand and his brain and his eye, that these three unruly members may work together to produce the harmony the artist almost despairs of; no, by sticking his head into a black box, and at the crucial moment letting a machine do everything for him.[4]

Photographers and advocates of photography were forced to rise to the challenge of skeptics and justify the medium. In 1929, photographer Bernice Abbott, perhaps tired of the debate, wrote: "it is not profitable to discuss whether or not photography may be an art. Results will speak in due time. Indeed the expression that this medium affords is so utterly new that some time must elapse before we conquer our surprise."[5] The photographic medium was already over half a century old;

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[3] Ibid., 83.

[4] Joseph Pennell, "Is Photography Among the Fine Arts?" in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1891), 212.

[5] Bernice Abbott, "Eugene Atget," in *Photography: Essays and Images, Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 235.

the process of creating a photograph was well understood, and the photograph itself was equally a popular household document and an outlet for creative experimentation. Through the course of the twentieth century, new theories about photography's potential as art, combined with the energy and support of the medium's early advocates, sparked the fire that was to burn steadily throughout the century as the results began to speak.

In observing and analyzing photography, writers in the twentieth century applied already established ideas about what art is understood to be. According to art critic Jerome Stolnitz, every individual has based his or her own preconceived notion of what is good and what is bad art on those preestablished ideas of what art *is*. Stolnitz explains:

> Our enjoyment of art – if we have any – depends upon our beliefs concerning its nature and value. . . it is safe to say you will find that you have not "come by" these beliefs as a result of prolonged and serious thinking about them. Rather, you have accepted them on the strength of some authority, i.e. some individual or institution which urged these beliefs upon you. . . . You have assimilated these beliefs from the "climate of opinion" in which you have developed. . . .We are *justified* in holding a belief only when it is supported by evidence and sound logic.[6]

Paired with an educated notion of art, Stolnitz presented three descriptive categories in which one must define elements of a work of "art": "they are 'art,' 'aesthetic' and 'beauty.' 'Art' refers to the production or creation of objects through some kind of human effort. . . .'Beauty' refers to the attractiveness or value of objects. 'Aesthetic'. . . refers to perceiving or looking at interesting objects. . . ." [7] These three words define very different aspects of the object, something that becomes clear when applying them to the photograph.

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[6] Jerome Stolnitz, *Photography Until Now* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 4-5.

[7] Ibid., 21.

The production of the photograph, by exposing the negative film to light through the aperture of the camera can be qualified as the "art" of photography; mastering the "art" has everything to do with the process of creation. The "beauty" of the photographic image is determined by the person looking at it and that individual's preconceived notions, based on established theories, of what is attractive and pleasing to the eye. Verifying the "aesthetic" quality of the photograph becomes more complicated, because to do so one must draw from the deeper beliefs of one's idea of art as an important aspect of life. Stolnitz says: "we should study aesthetics with a sense of *curiosity*. We should try to maintain an interest in 'finding out' – about art, about different theories of art and the sparks which they strike when they come into conflict with each other, about the relations of art to other areas of human experience. . . ."[8] Photography's tangible connection with "human experience" was realized by both critics and artists, and the idea of *what art was* was indeed challenged by the evolution of the medium in the twentieth century.

[8] Ibid., 21.

CHAPTER 1: PERCEPTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE EARLY CENTURY

At the turn of the century, photography's advocates were faced with reforming the accepted notion of what photography was at that time – how it was used to portray reality and how that portrayal could be possessed and manipulated to the point where the resulting image was truly the "original" and "artistic" creation of the photographer. The initial critical response to this idea was that photography could not be considered an art form, because the artist did not physically create the subject matter composing the image. The camera could not be as subjective in creating imagery as the human hand. Therefore, photography could not be in the same category as painting. Photographers sometimes agreed:

> [In January 1891] [Peter Henry] Emerson, in despair, concluded that photography was not art. In a black-bordered pamphlet, *The Death of Naturalistic Photography*, he explained that "the limitations of photography are so great that, though the results may and sometimes do give a certain aesthetic pleasure, the medium must always rank the lowest of all arts . . . ."[9]

At the same time, undaunted advocates thought that the limitations of photography could be used to the medium's advantage, as Charles H. Caffin asserted in 1901's "Photography as a Fine Art": ". . . the difficulties which photography presents are the measure of its possibilities. If anyone could succeed there would be no chance for the artist. It is in a realization of the difficulties and in the persistent endeavor to surmount them that picture photography is being gradually brought to the level of an art."[10]

In the early twentieth century, one group of photographers demonstrated that photographic images could be manipulated by the artist through the creation of the "pictorial" photography

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[9] Newhall, 145.

[10] Charles H. Caffin, "Photography as a Fine Art," Goldberg, 222.

movement. The pictorial photographer made use of light, shadow, and in some cases experimented with the camera's mechanisms, such as shutter speed, to create blurry, dreamlike images (figures 1 and 2). Pictorial photographers championed the aesthetics of impressionism and applied them to photography; there were even suggestions that impressionism used photography techniques, something that further connected the two media. The anonymous author of the *Camera Work* article "Unphotographic Paint: The Texture of Impressionism" argued:

> The impressionist painters adhere to a style of composition that is strictly photographic. It apparently ignores all previous laws. They depict life in scraps and fragments, as it appears haphazard in the finder or on the ground glass of the camera (viz Renoir's "On the Terrace"). The mechanism of the camera is essentially the one medium which renders every interpretation impressionistic, and every photographic exposure, whether sharp or blurred, really represents an impressionist composition.[11]

At the height of the pictorial movement, one photographer was elemental in confirming photography's arrival: Alfred Stieglitz (figure 3). A leader of the Photo-Secession, he opened an influential gallery, *291*, and encouraged photography criticism through the publication of *Camera Work*. Writer Marius De Zayas described Stieglitz's role in a 1916 article: "Stieglitz, at the head of a group which worked under the name of Photo-Secession, carried the Photography which we may call static to the highest degree of perfection. He worked in the American spirit. He married Man to Machinery and he obtained issue."[12] *Camera Work* provided a forum for the serious debate as to whether photography should be classified as art. Critic Sadakichi Hartmann, in his 1904 article "The Photo-Secession Exhibition at the Carnegie Art Galleries, Pittsburgh, Pa." summed up the feelings

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[11] "Unphotographic Paint: The Texture of Impressionism," in *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology*, ed., with introduction by Jonathan Green (New York: Aperture, 1973), 185-186.

[12] Marius de Zayas, "From *291* – July-August Number, 1915," Green, 324.

of members of the Photo-Secession and pictorial photographers struggling against opposition as he spoke to the outside observer: "They want to be artistic, that is all. They want to see their work classed as an art. . . . Why, then, all this mockery, noise, and opposition? Because it is a fight, after all. It is a fight of modern ideas against tradition, or, more modestly expressed, a fight for a new technique."[13] As Bernice Abbott would later say, photography's acceptance as part of the evolution into the modern era seemed to be only a matter of time. Critics could not ignore the fact that, despite its limitations, photography possessed the essential elements of "art." De Zayas said "Imagination, creative faculty, is the principal law of Art."[14]

Some critics failed to see this, as they relentlessly argued that the format of photography did not allow for artistic creativity to control the image, and therefore could not be the subjective expression of an artist. But, as both mediums fit into the impressionist movement, photography, in being compared to painting, was undeniably associated with the notion that it was art. In Caffin's 1907 article "Is Herzog also Among the Prophets?" the author reviewed F. Benedict Herzog's photography exhibition by equating it to the work of Herzog's painting colleagues, saying that both "invent an ideal composition."

> Herzog, the photographer, is using his art as a good many painters use theirs – actuated by similar motives, employing corresponding methods, and producing practically equivalent results. The *motive* is similar, for all set out to invent an ideal composition, in which the effects of nature shall be superseded by artifice. As to *method*, they start with some kind of preliminary sketch in which, as they would say they "hunt" the line; decide upon the general direction and character of

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[13] Sadakichi Hartmann, "The Photo-Secession Exhibition at the Carnegie Art Galleries, Pittsburgh, Pa." Green, 44.

[14] Marius de Zayas, "Photography *and* Photography and Artistic-Photography," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg with notes by Amy Weinstein Meyers (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 127.

> the lines and the distribution of the masses. . . So far we have been considering Herzog in company of his colleagues the academical painters. It remains to discuss him in relation to his own, particular art of photography. We recall that the latter is a new art, as electricity is a new science. Each has captured and harnessed an elemental force: the one to transmit speech, the other, sight. Each is endowed with motive power: electricity to move the body, photography, the spirit.[15]

Caffin asserts here that the photographer and the painter are "colleagues," with the only difference being in the medium of artistry the two use to express themselves. The element described by Caffin that unites the two mediums is the artist's ability to create a composition. As a result, both the painter and the photographer are truly creators of the image. *Camera Work*'s "Is Photography a New Art?" reiterates the point that composition is the vital element to a work of art, no matter how it is created.

> And what does creation by the brain, and bringing into existence by the hands, mean? It means only one thing – composing. Man cannot truly create; but he can stick things together in such a way as to illude [sic] into the belief that he has created; and it is this esthetic quality of composition which all of the fine arts must possess.[16]

Pictorial photography became popular, widely exhibited and received. The movement served a purpose that became indirectly evident when artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque exhibited their revolutionary cubist works at *291* in 1915.[17] In Caffin's review of the exhibition, published in *New York American*, he called the work "intellectualized sensations conveyed to you in so rarified an abstract form."[18] *291* was open to all mediums of art that portrayed progress in the early twentieth

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[15] Charles H. Caffin, "Is Herzog also Among the Prophets?" Green, 109-111.

[16] "Is Photography a New Art?" Green, 133.

[17] Sarah Greenough, *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and his New York Galleries: National Gallery of Art, Washington January 28-April 22, 2001* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2000), 2.

[18] "'291' Exhibitions: 1914-1916," Green, 301.

century. Cubism was the future of art at that time, and the fact that it was physically housed with photography gives a hint that the Photo-Secession was following a path to modernism. The show of the cubist work metaphorically revealed the way in which photography made possible the cubist, and thus the modern, art movement. Ultimately photography would always have to base itself in reality, but because it did, it gave painting a newfound freedom. Since the camera could record reality, the painter did not have to. The painters and sculptors could now venture into uncharted artistic territory and explore new ways of seeing. In effect, photography opened the door for the breakthrough to abstraction.

As the modern movement came to dominate the art world, the emphasis on form found expression in photography as well. Pure, or "straight," photography did away with the photographer's manipulation of the image in favor of concentrating on the product of the camera's mechanical process. In the 1913 article "Photography," De Zayas describes what should be the main objective of the photograph: for disclosure of a clear "picture" for the purpose of showing the viewer the importance of formal elements to the impact of the image.

> Art has abandoned its original purpose, the substantiation of religious conception, to devote itself to a representation of Form. It may be said that the soul of Art has disappeared, the body only remaining with us, and that therefore the unifying idea of Art does not exist. That body is disintegrating, and everything that disintegrates, tends to disappear. So long as Art only speculates with Form, it cannot produce a work which fully realizes the preconceived idea, because imagination always goes further than realization. In order fully and correctly to appreciate the reality of Form, it is necessary to get into a state of perfect consciousness. The reality of Form can only be transcribed through a mechanical process, in which the craftsmanship of man does not enter as a principal factor. There is no other process to accomplish this than photography. The photographer – the true photographer – is he who has become able, through a state of perfect consciousness, to possess such a clear view of things as to enable him to understand and feel the beauty of the reality of Form.[19]

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[19] Marius de Zayas, "Photography," Green, 263-266.

Here, the aesthetic merit of the image lies in its ability to convey reality directly – in that same directness initially used in the argument against photography as art. But, it is still being compared to art, and is arguably being considered as art. The movement marked an early acceptance of photography as possessing artistic merit by being *photographic*; the process of creating the photographic image fits into Stolnitz's idea of the "art" of creation, that an artful operation of machinery is applied in order to create this sort of image. De Zayas's statement reveals that, as a result of the straight photography movement, the photographer now was able to gain recognition for work that was a direct result of the function of the camera machine. Here, photography was not trying to be painting; it was clearly being acknowledged as a medium in and of itself, and possessing characteristics that were both distinctly photographic and capable of being considered artistic.

Straight photography reflected the new experimentation taking place in all art mediums. But there were critics who questioned whether straight photography could be considered art. Photographer Robert Demachy, for example, considered in 1907 that the same straight photograph could be taken by anyone.

> Pictorial photography owes its birth to the universal dissatisfaction of artist photographers in front of the photographic errors of the straight print. Its false values, its lack of accents, its equal delineation of things important and useless, were universally recognized and deplored by a host of malcontents. I consider that, from an art point of view, the straight print of today is not a whit better than the straight print of fifteen years ago. If it was faulty then it is still faulty now. If it was all that can be desired, pictorial photographers, the Links and the various secessionists of the new and the old world have been wasting their time, to say the least, during the last decade.[20]

In the pictorial movement, the photographer's manipulation of the mechanical medium created a desired effect; in straight photography, the photographer controlled nature through the

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[20] Robert Demachy, "On the Straight Print," Green, 121-122.

camera lens, by what was seen and chosen.

Paul Strand was one champion of the straight photograph, as opposed to the dreamlike pictorial imagery of Stieglitz and Steichen. Strand sought to create images that expressed, as he put it, the "interrelationship between social evolution and aesthetic forms;" his ultimate goal was to discover a "communicable aesthetic symbology expressive of the social significance of [the] world"; bringing photographic imagery out of the dream and into the real.[21]

Strand, along with other straight photographers in the late teens and early 1920s, used their medium both to document life and experiment with imagery using only what was in front of them. Contemporary critic Sarah Greenough explains that the post-Photo-Secession photographers needed to "invent form" in order to break the barrier separating both the critics and the general audience from qualifying photography as true art.

> By the time of the Armory show the artists and critics associated with 291 were convinced that art must be "anti-photographic," or abstract. Because photography could replicate reality so easily and with such precision, they believed it was useless "to go on doing merely what the camera does better," as Stieglitz declared in 1913. With the discovery of photography, they insisted, art should no longer simply seek to imitate form, but invent it. It should no longer merely replicate physical facts, but reveal mental and emotional states. However, as they formulated a new vocabulary for art, the 291 writers and theoreticians were also challenged to redefine photography, for if art was not photography, then photography, as Marius De Zayas concluded in 1913, was "not Art." Whereas art was the subjective deformation of form, photography revealed the "objective reality of forms." De Zayas concluded that the "pure" photographer must eliminate extraneous subject matter in order "to search for the pure expression of the object."[22]

Straight photography embodied "pure expression of object" with "subjective deformation of form" unlike any other artistic medium; the photograph was undeniably controlled by the

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[21] Sarah Greenough, *Paul Strand: An American Vision* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 32.

[22] Greenough, *Paul Strand*, 35-36.

dichotomy of the "untouched" real with the human hand. The photograph allowed the human hand to control the real, to frame it, and to freeze it in time.

The composition of the image itself – the distance from object, framing of object, light and shadow – was the photographer's created image. Although the photographer was in a way "copying" reality, the resulting image was a true creation because it allowed its audience to look at and to understand their reality differently – through the eyes of the photographer. Here, straight photography was more effective in conveying the idea of the artist because it was tangible to the audience, and the audience could recognize elements of the photographic image that existed in their reality.

By concentrating on formal elements, straight photography was the answer to modernism's call for abstraction. Photography here was no longer a follower (as was the case with pictorialism capturing the aesthetic of impressionist painting) but now a forerunner in the evolution of modern art. Greenough uses Strand's 1916 *The White Fence* (figure 4) to show how he produced imagery that explored the nature of the formal elements, while at the same time preserving a subject rooted in reality.

> In a photograph that is not constructed like the abstractions, but taken, extracted from the real world and still very much connected to it and representative of it, Strand demonstrated that he could call into question the same issues of space, dimensionality, and structure that the cubists addressed. By creating a strong formal design of lights and darks, Strand unified the surface of this photograph, making it read as a geometric pattern, negating any illusion of depth. Yet at the same time, because we innately know that this is a photograph of the real world, our expectations of three-dimensional illusion are repeatedly denied by this emphatically two-dimensional object. . . . These experiments in movement and abstraction were the visual proof of what Strand came to define as the

new art of photography in the age of modern painting.[23]

Images created by the straight photographer embodied a human selection and composition of familiar objects. The photograph became a metaphor for the modern day, as the machine coexisted with humanity, the machine became humanized by allowing for the creation of life images. As Greenough explains, "the camera was a machine that could be made expressive of the human spirit and submissive to the human will, it was capable of creating a fusion between art and technology."[24] It is this use of technology by an artist to merge art and life that made the photograph extraordinary at this time. Stieglitz published Strand's article "Photography" in the last edition of *Camera Work*, and in effect the great advocate of photography predicted the next movement of photography, and the fact that the medium would continue to evolve and merge into the classification of art.

Strand wrote: "Photography, which is the first and only important contribution thus far, of science to the arts, finds its *raison d'être*, like all media, in a complete uniqueness of means. This is an absolute unqualified objectivity."[25] The idea that the product of objectivity could in fact be art was revolutionary, and is the idea that fueled the birth of abstract art by placing the concentration on form. The observer knows the objects represented in the piece, does not have to focus on what the artist is trying to represent, and instead can study the rawness of shape and form of the objects. This is the goal that the cubist artists wanted: to have the observer concentrate on the formal characteristics without being distracted by being unable to identify that facet of the real the artist

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[23] Greenough, *Paul Strand*, 36-37.

[24] Ibid., 40.

[25] Paul Strand, "Photography," Green, 326.

attempts to deconstruct. The observer needs a base within the real in order to make observations.

Photographers began to take more risks, and experimentation became important to the progression of the medium. One painter-turned-photographer, Man Ray, helped to change forever the idea that the machine of the camera limited the range of what an artist could create. In a 1922 published letter to Man Ray, writer Jean Cocteau described the importance of the photographer's work to the evolution of modern art movements.

> Since Picasso I have followed with curiosity, and regret as well, the experiments which, denying painting, continued to make use of painting. I am already enchanted by Max Ernst's prints. But Max Ernst cheats, he cuts out and pastes together with taste. His work still depends on the play of the mind. Your prints, however, are the very objects themselves, not photographed through a lens but by your poet's hand directly interposed between the light and the sensitive paper. . . . In the past, Daguerre and then Nadar liberated painting. Thanks to them the copyists could hazard nobler undertakings. You have liberated painting once again. But backwards. Your mysterious groupings surpass all the still lifes that try so hard to conquer the flat canvas and the marvelous ooze of paint. . . . The painter will be able once again, without regrets, to study the human face in detail, and you, my dear Man Ray, will nourish our minds with those dangerous games it craves and thanks to which a Picasso, a Georges Braque, will one day, without doubt, rejoin Raphael."[26]

The "Rayograph," (figure 5) according to Cocteau, was more innovative than Max Ernst's Dada Collages. The Rayograph was the result of an innovative use of light-sensitive photographic paper: objects were placed on the photographic paper and exposed to light, revealing a collage of the objects' outlines in the image. His experiments with solarization and printing the negative (opposed to the usual positive print) broke new barriers for the photographic image, further proclaiming the notion that the abstract movement had arrived. Man Ray's experimental photography inspired others

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[26] Jean Cocteau, "An Open Letter to M. Man Ray, American Photographer," in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed., with an introduction by Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989), 2-3.

to manipulate reality through the camera lens.

The photographic medium in the first decades of the twentieth century successfully produced images that could be categorized in terms of art; the medium's photographers were able to create images that were realistic and those that were abstract, thus proving the artistic medium as having the same capacity to produce these different styles as the paint brush could. Writer Pierre Mac Orlan summed up this point in "The Literary Art of Imagination and Photography," in 1928.

> The photographic art, at the point where it is now, can be divided into two classes that are more or less the poles of all human artistic creation. There is plastic photography and documentary photography. This second category is literary without knowing it, because it is no more than a document of contemporary life captured at the right moment by an author capable of grasping that moment. The artist sometimes has to search for six hours to find the unique second when life, in some way, is "caught in the act." For those who look for the often subtle details of modern society, photography is an incomparable revelation. People like Man Ray, Kertesz, Bernice Abbott, and others, in their portraits, give a totally new meaning to the interpretation of the lens. At this moment, photography is the most accomplished art, capable of realizing the fantastic and all that is curiously in the atmosphere that surrounds us, and even in man's very personality. Man Ray searches for the abstract lines of a fantastic plasticity such as one finds in the paintings of De Chirico, for example.[27]

Mac Orlan not only praises the work of the modern photographer, but compares the work of the photographers to the work of a painter as if he were comparing the work of two painters. Photography at this point is considered, at least by this particular writer, to be a medium producing art, and it contributed to the redefinition of what is considered to be art.

On the eve of the century's third decade, the art world was about to take a turn even further into the style of the abstract, creating a path into the new modern expression as anything but realist.

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[27] Pierre Mac Orlan, "The Literary Art of Imagination and Photography," Christopher Phillips, 28-29.

Photography had arrived, and was clearly influential in allowing other mediums of art to evolve. This environment created the perfect scenario for photography to find a new esteem within the art world; the medium was viewed as elemental to artistic progress, and should be categorized accordingly. In 1929's "The Future of the Photographic Process," photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy said that this environment should do away with any doubt as to photography's place within the art world: "The creative utilization of new perceptions and principles will eleminate [sic] the idea that photography is not an 'art.' The human spirit always produces for itself fields of activity, wherever it can become creatively expressive. Thus we shall soon see a big impetus in the domain of photography."[28] Photography was a unique medium, and, as Strand wrote in 1923, ". . . it is being demonstrated today that a photograph cannot be imitated or encroached upon in any way by painter or etcher. It is as much a thing with its own unalienable character, with its own special quality of expressiveness. . . ."[29]

This idea was still not the general interpretation of the impact of photography on art. In the same year as Strand proclaimed photography's uniqueness and importance, Philippe Soupault wrote in "The Present State of Photography,"

> After being scorned, neglected, and slandered, around 1923 photography suddenly began to enjoy a vogue still difficult to characterize. As always when any sort of new fashion is involved, all sense of proportion was quickly lost. The craze knew no bounds. Photography simply had to be considered an art, at whatever cost. What was really serious was that the photographers began to believe themselves artists, and everyone rushed to confirm them in that conviction. Let's not exaggerate. . . photographers tried to turn out paintings; that is, with very different materials they set out to follow in the wake of the painters. . . . What needs especially to be stressed

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[28] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "The Future of the Photographic Process," Beaumont Newhall, *Essays and Images*, 239.

[29] Paul Strand, "The Art Motive in Photography," Goldberg, 281-282.

> is that a photograph is above all a *document*, and that it should from the start be considered as such. . . . It is obvious that the beauty of a photograph is totally different from the beauty of a painting; one could even say it is at the farthest extreme.[30]

It is interesting here that Soupault, while condemning the artistic merit of the photograph, mentions the "beauty of a photograph;" "beauty" was a significant factor, according to Stolnitz, in classifying art. Soupault associates photograph with art in his attempt to refute it.

Photography was still understood to be a document, but its status as art was the subject of much debate. At issue was whether the photograph had those characteristics necessary to a work of art. Increasingly, this argument developed: if the photograph does indeed possess those characteristics that qualify it as being art, should a photograph be called "art," or should it remain a "photograph" – a term still regarded as something of lesser esteem than other artistic mediums? In an article in the March 6, 1923 edition of *The New York Times*, photographer Edward Steichen was quoted as saying: "I don't care about making photography an art. . . . I want to make good photographs. . . . Take good photographs and the art will take care of itself."[31] Steichen urged photographers to make good work, and the results would speak for themselves.

With or without the participation of the photographers themselves, the debate concerning photography's relevancy as art would continue, as the photograph increasingly became a part of everyday life in the next decades of the twentieth century. While the photograph will further establish itself as document, the idea of photography as art will be emphasized by the medium's arrival in the museum and classroom.

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[30] Philippe Soupault, "The Present State of Photography," Christopher Phillips, 50-51.

[31] "The New York Times: March 6, 1923," Goldberg, 294.

CHAPTER 2: MID-CENTURY AND PHOTOGRAPHY'S PLACE IN MODERN ART

In the 1930s and following decades, the medium of photography became extremely important to popular culture as a document. With war, the depression, industrialization, social Marxism, and commercialization, photography became the "seeing eye" to all of these things. Photography was accepted by almost everyone as a document – as the visual "story" was now a mainstay in newspapers and magazines. The universal acceptance of "photography-as-document" presented a challenge to the photographer to prove that the medium could do much more than just "tell" the audience what is in front of the lens.

The photograph had the capacity to present more than simply an objective reality. It could be a medium of both abstract and realist imagery. The modern era would see an even greater interchange between painting and photography than in the past; both influenced each other and together shaped the evolution of modern art.

The photographic medium was relatively young in the 1930s in comparison to painting and sculpture, and according to photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in 1936's "From Pigment to Light," this youth hampered its ability to be seen as something other than that which copied the aesthetic of paintings, when being perceived as art: "individual pioneers invent new instruments, new methods of work, revolutionizing the traditional forms of production. . . . The creative potentialities of the new may be clearly felt, but for a certain time it will appear clothed in traditional forms that are rendered obsolete by its emergence."[32] As Moholy-Nagy explains, the realization that other forms are "rendered obsolete" is gradual, as photography is still placed in the shadow of painting when

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[32] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," Goldberg, 343.

being considered as art:

> All interpretations of photography have hitherto been influenced by the aesthetic-philosophic concepts that circumscribed painting. These were for long held to be equally applicable to photographic practice. Up to now, photography has remained in rather rigid dependence on the traditional forms of painting; and like painting it has passed through the successive stages of all the various art "isms"; though in no sense to its advantage.[33]

A major breakthrough came with the establishment of the medium in the Museum of Modern Art, signaling the relationship between modern art and photography. Christopher Phillips, in his article "The Judgement Seat of Photography," asserts this notion: "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."[34] Barr seemed to understand the future of modern art and the collision of what used to be separate media of artistic expression. In Europe, abstract artists embraced photography as a medium encompassing the ideal of modernity by merging reality with the idea of the artist. Surrealist painter Salvador Dali wrote "Photographic Testimony" to convey his sentiment on the photographic medium: "photography can put together the most complete, scrupulous, and emotionally stirring catalogue mankind has ever been able to imagine."[35] The acceptance by the painter further conveys the notion that the photograph truly had "exhibition value" and should share museum space with paintings.

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[33] Ibid., 347.

[34] Christopher Phillips,"The Judgement Seat of Photography," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989), 17.

[35] Salvador Dali, "Photographic Testimony," Christopher Phillips, *Modern Era*, 35.

Phillips noted that, upon the appointment of MoMA librarian Beaumont Newhall in 1935, a new era dawned, as "Newhall's exhibition *Photography 1839-1937* is usually cited as a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as a full-fledged museum art. . . it also emerges as an important link in the series of four great didactic exhibitions staged at MoMA during 1936-38."[36] Also at this time, the exhibitions *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (1936), and *Bauhaus: 1919-1928* (1938) took place, marking the installation of the idea of the Modern Art Museum as "a treasure house of 'eternal' monuments of art, the guarantor of art's continuous tradition."[37] The photography exhibition, which showed the evolution of the artistic medium from its conception to its current role in the art world, showed photography's progression and its place in the history of art.

> 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 Photographers–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.[38]

Newhall's goal upon his promotion to MoMA's curator of photography was to shine a spotlight on the creative nature of the photographic image.[39] While his was the first position of its

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[36] Bolton, "Judgement Seat," 17.

[37] Ibid., 17-18.

[38] Ibid., 23.

[39] Ibid., 20.

kind in an art museum, his work set the precedent for what would become standard for modern collections.

Newhall's establishment of the photograph as art in the art museum unfortunately did not meet with the popular and commercial success that the MoMA trustees had hoped it would; "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. . . ."[40] Despite the disappointment in the exhibit's commercial success, Newhall's efforts set the precedent for photography's designated place in the modern art museum, an effort that inspired photographers to create images that would fuel art movements worthy of historical documentation in the museum.

Newhall's work at MoMA, as Phillips suggested, was before its time. The work of the artists in the photography exhibitions also proved to be revolutionary in photography's quest for high art status. The work of photographers during this period embraced a sentiment that became increasingly detectable in the evolution of all mediums of art: that of art's ability to be a social commentary while at the same time being aesthetically moving to its audience. The undercurrent of social context was given even greater impact when this element was analyzed along with the formal elements of a work: the result was a perfect blend of that which grounded the work in reality and also allowed it to transcend reality.

The first major photography movement to affect social change was the work done with the Farm Security Administration project, part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal program. FSA photographers, such as Dorothea Lange (figures 6 and 7) and Walker Evans (figure

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[40] Ibid., 23.

8), created images that were both memorable as images of reality and as images reflective of the artist's mastery to compose an effective image. The fact that the photographers were artists who could not fully remove themselves from artistic sensibilities made their works more than a simple document. "The contradiction between the will to represent 'truth' and the fact that no representation can be entirely value-free poses the central ideological problem of the Farm Security Administration's eight-year effort to document rural poverty in Depression-era America."[41] Head of the movement Roy Emerson Stryker "developed a 'camera team' that he felt would help to 'connect one generation's image of itself with the reality of its own time in history.' This 'reality,' in Stryker's mind, accepted the emergence of photography itself as a dominant medium."[42] Stryker wanted the FSA photograph to portray an objective reality, which would serve the purpose of document, not art. In an effort to make the FSA photograph relevant to the artist's struggle, John Szarkowski, soon to be curator of photography at MoMA, said that the reality portrayed by the FSA project photograph could be classified as having a "documentary *style* – an approach and an ideal that sought pictures that would look ingenuous and free of guile: that would seem not merely honest but artless. This was of course an aesthetic choice and an artistic strategy."[43]

Stryker's goal was to portray America accurately by the most talented champions of the medium, who could achieve the "documentary style" at the height of the documentary photograph's

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[41] Maurice Berger, "FSA: The Illiterate Eye," in *How Art Becomes History: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture in Post-New Deal America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 2.

[42] Ibid., 3.

[43] John Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 215.

popularity in America. During the FSA's mission, the first photography magazines – *Life* (1936) and *Look* (1937) were devoted to proving that images were their own language, and that the story of America could be told visually.[44] The photograph established its vital role to the documentation of history, but, as Stryker realized to his own disdain, the movement to document (especially when already established photographers are involved) did not escape the photographer's artistic vision. The photograph was regarded by the public as a document, but the aesthetic significance of a photograph to both stop time and encompass a visually stunning image made the photographs of the documentary style memorable and tangible. The photographers of the FSA incorporated personal style in the depiction of their subject matter, exposing America to a photographic style that contributed to the evolution of the artistic medium.

Inspired by the work of Paul Strand in the straight aesthetic, Walker Evans's style was described by Szarkowski as "severe, understated, and impersonal,"[45] and was regarded by the writer as definitive of a new era in photographic art:

> Photographers born at the turn of the century reached their majority at a time when it was still generally thought that a photograph of the everyday, midday world that was clear and sharp all over was not to be judged as art; it was simply a record. The photographer of the generation who changed that, more than any other, was Walker Evans.[46]

Evans's images, such as *Church Organ* of 1936 (figure 8), display reality as seen through the eyes of the artist, without giving the audience the idea that this is a social commentary. This photograph of a vacant church/school room is a visual commentary of the poverty displayed by the

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[44] Berger, "FSA," 3.

[45] Szarkowski, 215.

[46] Ibid., 215.

image: a town cannot build two separate buildings, so they serve two purposes. The blackboard, with chalk marks on it, and the music on top of the organ give evidence that at one time people were in the building, but at the frozen moment, it seems to the viewer that no one, including the photographer, is present. The lone chair in the right corner of the image conveys the most poignant sense of isolation, as an element distant from the rest of the visual elements. From a purely formalist perspective, the elements of shape, along with light, shadow, and texture, combine to form a powerful and memorable image. The image is severe, but there is also an element of tranquility in the silence of the still room.

The work of both Evans and Lange stood apart from the rest of the FSA photographers for their characteristic artistic styles; according to Szarkowski, "their minds and their photographic ideas were formed before they came to the FSA, and both carefully attended their own agendas."[47] The popularization of the medium as a result of the FSA project gave the artists the opportunity to establish a recognizable style to their individual work.

Historian Peter Bunnell said of Evans: "His pictures were too abstract to be illustration which, as we all know, shows us only what is already known. They were not considerations of facts as facts, but realistic statements of literary symbolism."[48] This could be said of all the successful documentary photographers whose work would eventually have its place in the permanent collections of modern art. The work went beyond recording history by revealing the artistic abilities of the photographer. Evans's work revealed a cold isolated harshness of objects, while Lange's work

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[47] Ibid., 216.

[48] Peter C. Bunnell, *Degrees of Guidance: Essays on Twentieth-Century American Photography* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 64.

focused on people, but both evoke an emotional response from the viewer. The photographer manipulates the way in which the audience sees the image. In effect, the photographer has control over the image of reality, and the result is an image of the photographer's creation.

In the 1940s, the popularity of the documentary photograph and the establishment of the first photography exhibitions in modern art museums exemplified the loyal following that photography had begun to amass. The next credit to the medium was the developing of art photography education, sparked by the success of the Bauhaus school. Experimentation with subject matter for the sake of creating uninhibited expression became a reality for photographers of the nearing mid-century.

The work of Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky (figure 9), and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (figure 10) was elemental to the establishment of the formalist photography style. The photomontage and the photogram were the products of these artists's experiments with the camera's ability to produce an image. Their work seemed to be the product of a machine: the images consisted of shapes and shadows without necessarily evoking in the audience a sense of familiarity with the subject. The value in the image was found in the pattern of shape and color; thus, the formal qualities of a photograph determined its value as a work of art. Moholy-Nagy was responsible for bringing the formalist aesthetic of photography to America with the establishment of the Chicago Institute of Design, commonly referred to as the I.D.; he also brought, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau describes, "his conviction that the machine age demanded machine-age art: functional, impersonal, rational."[49] The arrival of formalism combined with the establishment of an educational curriculum for art

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[49] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," Bolton, 95.

photographers marked a new advocacy of photography as a valid art form. Formalism, first taught by Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus in Germany, would carry over to the American school, and the result would be photography that combined its social function with a careful attention to the formal elements.[50] Solomon-Godeau explains the way in which the photography "worlds" collided with the I.D.:

> In a general way, formalism had become a stylistic notion rather than an instrumental one, an archive of picture-making strategies that intersected with a widely dispersed, heroicized concept of camera vision. In the work of Bauhaus and Bauhaus-influenced photographers, one of the most durable legacies of Russian photography was the continued emphasis placed on experimentation. It was this latter characteristic that made I.D. photography rather different from American art photography of the 1950s and 1960s. . . . By the early 1950s, as the I.D. became more firmly established and as the photography program gradually took pride of place in the curriculum – becoming, in fact, its principle attraction – the native circumstances and conditions of American photography were themselves acting on the I.D. For Moholy, the pedagogical system of the I.D. was conceived literally as a training program, a vocational system that would prepare designers, architects, and photographers to go into the world and in some vague, utopian sense transform it.[51]

The author describes the goal of the photography education as having the photography student "transform" the world. The blending of formalism with what was then the popular style in America – the documentary photograph – resulted in an abstract image with a solid base in reality. American photographers took the idea of formalism and applied it to the documentation of subject matter, blending the two styles to create an image that had definite artistic merit reflective of the style of the avant-garde abstract painters, but here the subject could be identified by its audience. Solomon-Godeau echoes this point: "Indeed, it is precisely this intense engagement with the larger

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[50] Goldberg, "Pigment to Light," 339.

[51] Bolton, "Armed Vision," 97.

society at hand, as well as the belief that the artist must function as an active, sociopolitical being, that contrasted so dramatically with the almost ritualistically alienated stance of the expressionist artist."[52]

In the 1950s, Aaron Siskind (figure 11) and Harry Callahan (figure 12) headed the photography department of the I.D., incorporating the formalist ideals of Moholy-Nagy with reality imagery. The result was work that truly became the signatures of the artists; Solomon-Godeau describes Siskind's work as "miniature monochrome reproductions of Klines or Motherwells."[53] Siskind himself described his realization as to the way in which he created photographs in his 1963 article "In 1943 and 1944 A Great Change Took Place":

> I noticed that I was photographing objects in a setting. I noticed that in all the pictures I did that the total effect of the picture was such that it was a picture on a flat plane – I wiped out deep space and had objects which were organic in a geometrical setting. I was getting away from naturalistic space. The objects themselves no longer functioned as objects; instead of a piece of wood I felt the wood as a shape. It became transformed from object to force. The setting was no longer naturalistic. I was operating on a plane of ideas. The shift was from description to idea and meaning. . . . Something was going on. The important thing was that although these were pictures about objects, these were pictures with terrific emotional involvement.[54]

Siskind concentrated on the shapes rather than on the object, thereby creating a purely subjective expression, using shapes in reality for the same "artistic" purposes as the painter uses paint. The tools of the art photographer existed in reality, and, as Solomon-Godeau explains, "Art photography, at its highest level, represented the expression of a privileged subjectivity, and the use

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[52] Bolton, "Armed Vision," 86.

[53] Ibid., 102.

[54] Aaron Siskind, "In 1943 and 1944 a Great Change Took Place," Newhall, *Essays and Images*, 305.

of the formal and material properties of the medium to express that subjectivity."[55]

Another photographer of the 1950s, Minor White (figure 13), created images that seemed to bridge the gap perfectly between the objective and subjective nature of the photographic image. White used the image of nature to project a personal and emotional message. His photographs were not merely expressive of his own emotion, but truly creative in the way the artist used imagery to connect with the sensibilities of his entire audience. Peter Bunnell elaborates:

> Minor White was an artist of authentic sensibility. His ingenuity in demonstrating how to reach out to others with the expression of specific and deeply felt personal emotions was one of his contributions to modern photography. Like the work of his predecessor Alfred Stieglitz, it is the intensity of a primordial essence that emanates from White's pictures, that attracts us to them, and that maintains their presence. Pivotal in this achievement as an artist was his firm understanding of the difference between what he called "expressive" and "creative" photographs. The distinction had to do with universalizing and offering up personal experience outside of its solely private realm to a wide audience. White understood this notion of public and private imagery.[56]

Photography of the first half of the century maintained this characteristic: it was always the vision of the artist that revealed itself in the image. At mid-century, the critic could not deny the fact that the photograph had its place in the modern art museum, the medium was praised by the most innovative of painters for its artistic merits, and the photograph served as a document that defined that era of history. The publication *Aperture*, with White as editor, began to spotlight art photography in 1952, and the fact that this publication continues to spotlight the work of photographers confirms the medium's impact on popular culture.[57]

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[55] Bolton, "Armed Vision," 103.

[56] Peter C. Bunnell, *Minor White: The Eye That Shapes* (Princeton, NJ: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1989), 17.

[57] Bolton, "Armed Vision," 102.

Photographers in this era had many styles of photography to study and inspire their work. With the popularity of the documentary photograph, some photographers felt forced to adopt the "norm" to achieve commercial success. The idea of photographer as individual artist was further hindered by Newhall's replacement as MoMA photography curator, Edward Steichen, who used his position to glorify photography as illustration rather than as artistic expression. The 1955 MoMA exhibition *The Family of Man* capitalized on the popularity of the documentary photograph by showing 503 photographs along with quotations from the Bible and Shakespeare rather than dividing the photographs by artist.[58] Szarkowski explained the mounting frustration of the photographers who worked to assert their individualism as artists.

> It was inherent in the conception of the exhibition that the individual photographs in it were not seen as discrete statements but as threads for a tapestry woven by a master designer. In this sense it ran counter to the emerging ambitions of advanced photographers, who were getting tired of supplying component parts for someone else's story.[59]

Photographers Robert Frank (figure 14) and William Klein wanted to win back photography as a medium for the individual artist, as Szarkowski describes, by "adapting advanced photojournalistic style to the needs of their own anger."[60] This advanced style encompassed the formalist aesthetic with the documentary, with the idea of the photographer being the main concept behind the image. Frank's 1958 book, *The Americans*, showcased a series of works that was a pure expression of the artist's concept, untainted by an editor, curator, or by the popular voice of what was the "acceptable" photograph. Frank's images were different for what Szarkowski described as

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[58] Szarkowski, 254.

[59] Ibid., 254.

[60] Ibid., 254.

"their equivocating indirection, their reluctance to state clearly and simply either their subject or their moral."[61] The photographs gave evidence that the abstract and formalist styles had finally and perfectly merged with the documentary style, proving that the mix of styles was that of the rebellious artist and of the avant-garde photography movement. Szarowski credited *The Americans* for proving that "the meaning of a photograph was a function of its aspect."[62] The meaning behind Frank's photograph could not be perfectly understood by the audience, and that was the point: it seemed as if the artist wanted the audience to be frustrated enough by trying to figure out the meaning, to look at other aspects of the work's aesthetic significance. The contrast and pattern of black and white, the shapes and the textures of the visual elements were appreciated by the audience when the focus was placed on these elements; there was no distraction of meaning. The document was now appreciated for its formal elements without being overwhelmingly abstract.

Photography was recognized as being significant on multiple levels, and it would serve as one of the primary mediums of art in the 1960s. At this time, modernism was giving way to pluralism as mediums of art began to mix and merge. In Douglas Crimp's article, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," the writer defines photography's vital role in the evolution of postmodern art.

> For at a certain moment photography enters the practice of art in such a way that it contaminates the purity of modernism's separate categories, the categories of painting and sculpture. These categories are subsequently divested of their fictive autonomy, their idealism, and thus their power. The first positive instances of this contamination occurred in the early 1960s, when Rauschenberg and Warhol began to silkscreen photographic images onto their canvases. From that moment forward, the guarded autonomy of modernist art was under constant threat from the incursions

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[61] Ibid., 259.

[62] Ibid., 262.

of the real world that photography has readmitted to the purview of art.[63]

Crimp sees photography as the ideal postmodern medium, because it is dependent on objects existing in reality for imagery, and it is becoming increasingly integrated with other mediums of art. Because artists saw the future of art as the convergence of mediums with each other and with popular culture more so than ever before, they acted on instinct and thus created their product in a way different from the "entirely conventionalized" method of modern art.[64] Crimp noted that, because photography is not autonomous, it should not have been considered a medium of modern art; but, as revealed by the success of the work of Robert Rauschenberg (figure 15) and Andy Warhol (figure 16) in the 1960s, modern art became "corrupted" to the point where no medium was purely autonomous.

The pop art movement of the 1960s was heavily reliant on popular culture to spark the creative process. Taking a new direction from the abstract expressionism of the 1950s, painters and sculptors were creating imagery that seemed to be more reality-based than that of the preceding movement. Using the famous example of Andy Warhol and the Campbell's Soup can, pop artists found inspiration, and perhaps sensed a social commentary on society's consumerism, in commercial art. Commercial art, like television, played a major role in popular culture at the time, and both were based on the photographic image. While television's imagery was a series of photographs, commercial art showed a likeness of the product it was trying to make recognizable and sell. The photographic image was vital to popular culture, and therefore it became just as important to the pop artist.

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[63] Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," Bolton, 9.

[64] Bolton, "Museum's Old," 8.

As photography continued to establish itself as its own medium, artists were using the visual concept of the "photographic image." Photorealism is one example of this: artists painted images that appeared to be camera-made (figures 17 and 18). Painters created images that seemed to mimic the work of a camera so accurately that the viewer would have to be careful not to be fooled. As the medium that seemed to be at the forefront of every art movement, painting was finally taking from photography's example.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his 1965 article "The Social Definition of Photography," proclaimed that the apparent support of other art mediums was the necessary element to propel photography even further as art; he goes so far as to hint at the idea that it is the fault of the audience if they cannot appreciate photography as art.

> It is always the relationship to a legitimate group and an audience that defines the modality and pregnancy of the questions which virtuosos ask themselves, and that determines their awareness of the specific characteristics of photography. For example, if photography never has the value of uniqueness because it is considered repeatable, it is also because the audience is not prepared to look for differences and is in any case incapable of discerning the subtle variations which would distinguish comparable photographs and which define the original style of a photograph. The absence of style and originality is primarily the absence of an audience capable of perceiving what constitutes style and originality. The concern for legitimacy and the issue of aesthetic freedom therefore originate in and through the relationship to a group. . . . The admiration of one's peers constitutes a partial legitimacy which is at least enough to establish the photographer as an artist.[65]

It is at this stage that the more important question for the photography critic was not "Is Photography Art?" but rather, "What is photography's role in postmodern art?" Photography was unquestionably an art medium, but the way in which it functioned as art in the postmodern era was

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[65] Pierre-Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 145, 147.

a more complicated question to answer.

CHAPTER 3: POSTMODERNISM AND CONTEMPORARY ART

In the decade of the 1960s, the postmodern movement emerged, and with it the idea of what art *was* changed. The complexities of art's meaning and function was subject to critical analysis, and experimentation with combining media became popular. Art was an expression of or commentary on popular culture, and the photograph served as the perfect postmodern art because the image itself was able to embody visually what was going on in the world, but it also allowed for the photographer to respond to it. Writer Andy Grundberg asserted that the photograph embodied popular culture's exploitation of the constant image.

> Beginning in the 1960s, thanks to artists like Andy Warhol, popular culture became a subject of considerable currency in contemporary art. Not surprisingly, photography has come to play an increasing role in this arena, since it is both symptomatic and symbolic of the superabundance of images in our mass-media, mass-produced, mass-reproduced culture.[66]

After the Pop Art movement and Photorealism, the "accepted" high art of painting was clearly imitating the photographic image. Chuck Close (figure 17) is one example of a painter using the photograph as the main source of inspiration for his painting; he imitates not only the image preserved within the photograph itself, but also the two-dimensionality of the captured photographic image. Close's work is so characteristic of a photographic image that it is difficult to tell that his work is actually a painting.

The work of painters such as Andy Warhol (figure 16) and Richard Estes (figure 18) are easier to identify as being paintings, but it is obvious that they are directly imitating the photographic image. If the painter, accustomed to letting photography capture reality and having the freedom to

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[66] Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), 101.

portray abstract interpretations of the real is now imitating the photographic image, what is the photographic image, but in fact an "abstract" reality as well? In the postmodern era, the photographic image was understood to be the image of a subjective reality, controlled by the idea of its creator. The image is now understood as revealing a unique reality. Now photographers, raised on the images of a created reality in movies, television sitcoms, and commercial advertising, among others, used their medium to explore the idea of a unique reality within the photograph. Writer Lisa Phillips expands on this point:

> Perhaps the most important contribution to photography in the 1970s, and into the 1980s, was made by artists engaged in a critical dialogue about the nature of photographic representation. Many of these artists. . . felt that images rather than real life experience had come to define the world. . . . These artists, raised on television, understood the power of pictures. Yet, as witnesses to the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, they also envinced a healthy skepticism about the truth of received images and considered the issue of representation to be a crucial problem. To artists and theorists alike, the photograph had lost its status as a paradigm of veracity. . . . Photographic work of this generation often emphasized "making" a photograph rather than "taking" one, which subverted the conventional desire to capture the perfect composition in a single frame.[67]

As Phillips explained, now the photograph could no longer be regarded as a precise reflection of reality; as an art of postmodernism, photography "deconstructed and reconstructed the very nature of representation."[68] Instead of being the bearer of the truth, as the photograph was once clearly understood to be, the viewer could no longer be so gullible. The photograph could easily deceive its audience into believing the image showed an objective depiction of reality.

While the viewer can never fully understand the idea of the photographer, the viewer can

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[67] Lisa Phillips, *The American Century, Art and Culture 1950-2000* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999), 274-275.

[68] Ibid., 287.

make his or her own interpretation of what the artist is trying to "say" with the image. The purpose or idea behind the construction of the image was more complicated; photography's message was clouded by "codes" that the audience had to decipher. It is this aspect of postmodernist photography that categorizes the art as "Poststructural," as Lisa Phillips defines:

> Poststructuralism perceived all forms of art, visual or verbal, as a set of social signs or cultural codes. This theoretical proposition became the framework for an intellectually rigorous art criticism that focused – as the artists were doing – on the political and sexual nature of representation and on the systems of power that shaped it. Although this critical theory eventually became rigid and self-limiting, failing to take into account the visual pleasures and psychological content that enriched the art, it did succeed in giving photography a privileged position in the postmodernist project. Artists and theorists both understood that the supposed truthfulness and naturalism of photography made it the principal agent of ideology.[69]

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (figures 19 and 20), which will be discussed later in more detail, exemplify the poststructural idea. The photographer herself becomes the object in the image, and in effect she becomes both the "object" of male desires and a stereotyped female movie character. The photograph's signs can be deciphered as connoting sexual and cultural messages within the context of a contrived representation of a realistic image.

The photograph was the medium that could truly convey an artist's commentary on "social signs or cultural codes" in a way in which the viewer could make sense of the commentary. These photographers were using images to translate and distort their senses of reality, while at the same time keeping a visual base in reality.

Photography critic Roland Barthes asserts that there are certain characteristics of the photographic image that keep it from being anything but subjective. In Barthes's view, the signifiers

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[69] Ibid., 287.

subject to analysis in a photograph serve to distance the photograph from falling into the category of realism (portraying an objective reality in the image).[70] Signifiers are those elements that illustrate an allusion to a social or cultural theme; those tangible objects that point to the signifieds, a deeper meaning. In addition to the signifiers, Barthes claims that even the way the photograph is created makes it less "real." Those elements that do make the photographic image tangible as part of reality are, as Barthes claims, not real; therefore it is the "photographic paradox" that "makes an inert object into a language and which transforms the non-culture of a 'mechanical' art into the most social of institutions. "[71] The "language" that Barthes discusses is comprised of what he defines as being the "myth" revealed in the photographic image, which elaborates on the poststructural idea of signs. Writer Nancy Shawcross explains Barthes's myth:

> Structurally a myth (which is a system of communication, according to Barthes) comprises interdependent layers of signs and meanings: the relation between signifier and signified creates an entity that he calls sign, which then becomes signifier in the next link of the structural chain relating to myth. Myth, therefore, eliminates or supersedes variety among the media that initiate its structural chain and transforms the physical differences inherent in the raw materials into the same functional essence as sign or meaning in the next link.[72]

The myth is something that is recognized and understood by the audience, a theme that can be detected in various art mediums; therefore the myth presents a decipherable language that keeps any creative medium "grounded" in reality. Barthes asserts that the photographic medium best

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[70] Nancy Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography:The Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 25-26.

[71] Ibid., 26.

[72] Ibid., 2.

creates within its imagery a sign that can be decoded.[73] The medium of photography encompasses the concepts of structuralism and deconstruction as a form of art with detectible meaning that is made available to the audience. The signifers of the photograph become the anchors that keep the image meaning within the viewer's grasp.

As photography became a staple of the postmodernist movement, the question still arose as to the "ranking" of the medium when compared to painting and sculpture. Barthes contends that the medium maintains a "separate but equal" status as "high" art, but the major mark of separation is that photography contains "codes" that in fact do not have to be "decoded" in order for the viewer to understand the message, as he describes in 1977's "The Photographic Message":

> What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its image there is of course a reduction – in proportion, perspective, colour – but at no time is this reduction a *transformation* (in the mathematical sense of the term). In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image. Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: *it is a message without a code*; from which proposition an important corollary must immediately be drawn: the photographic message is a continuous message. [74]

In Barthes's view, the element that kept photography from being considered an art form, is what establishes it as vital to today's art: the fact that the meaning is presented to the viewer. Barthes compares the meaning of the photograph with the written word; both translate thought through a form of "language," either written or visual, a set standard of symbols that fit together to represent a

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[73] Ibid., 3.

[74] Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," Goldberg, 523.

meaning that exists in reality; there is a written and a visual language exerted here that is not bound by barriers. Photography has no code in that the visual "language" is the most universal.

Photography calls the audience to search for the message it is trying to convey. As Barthes explains, the message becomes a sort of "language" of the visual image by asserting the subjectivity of authorship: "To call photography a language is both true and false. . . but the statement is true insofar as the composition and style of a photo function as a secondary message that tells us about the reality depicted and the photographer himself: this is *connotation*, which is language."[75] With this statement, Barthes's analysis raises the question of authorship as something elemental to the connotation and thus the message conveyed by the photograph. This idea poses a problem when discussing the major objectives of postmodernist art.

With the structural analysis of art vital to the postmodernist movement, the concept of the author is eliminated, and the work is observed for the visual signs and their meanings isolated from the person who painted them. Structuralism goes along with the idea that there are universal messages in a photograph that can be understood by any viewer, but in order for that to happen, the viewer takes the art as his or her own image to understand individually and independent of preconceived meanings. Therefore, the author's intent is disregarded in favor of what the individual chooses the photographic message to mean.

Tony Godfrey, in reference to the "New Image" of painting in the 1980s, said that a necessary element of postmodernist art must also be the death of the subject:

> Post-modernism focuses on two problems: firstly, on the death of the subject – the coherent and complete individual, dominating and directing his world; secondly, on the

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[75] Shawcross, 7.

> way the world exists only in representations – that we know reality only through those media (TV, language, pictures) that endlessly produce or *re*produce it for us.[76]

Postmodernism reflects the idea that has confronted critics since the birth of the medium: that the photograph is forever in the past, and it will always be considered as a moment frozen in time and indicative of a moment that will never exist again. Barthes claims that the photographic image cannot be understood as something existing in the present reality: "its unreality is that of the *here-now*. . . its reality that of the *having-been-there*, for in every photograph there is the always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered."[77] Philosopher Allen S. Weiss, in "Lucid Intervals: Postmodernism and Photography," notes that the death of the subject is something that, like the idea that the image is of a past reality, is inherently considered by the audience without applying the postmodernist theories; "the portrait is a sign of the inevitable death of the subject, thus the portrait is in fact a sort of *nature morte* which might well pass into eternity, while the sitter never will. For photography. . . is the universalization of *vanitas*, where only the sophistry of criticism will discover Utopia."[78]

Weiss's reference to "nature morte" suggests another aspect of the postmodern photograph that must also "die" in the audience's analysis: the idea that the composition is based on elements that exist in nature. As writer Geoffrey Batchen asserts, the postmodern photograph is based on the culture in which it was produced, and should only be observed within the context of culture.

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[76] Tony Godfrey, *The New Image: Painting in the 1980s* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 14.

[77] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," Trachtenberg, 278.

[78] Allen S. Weiss, "Lucid Intervals: Postmodernism and Photography," in *Postmodernism – Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1990), 156-157.

> While postmodernism successfully reverses the nature/culture opposition erected by a modernist formalism, it neglects to displace the system of oppositions itself. By insisting that photography is not nature but culture, the postmodern view reproduces at every level the same logocentric economy that sustains both formalist analysis and broader formations of oppression such as phallocentrism and ethnocentrism.[79]

Postmodernist theory rests on the notion that the individual viewer interprets the image, that there is not one "correct" interpretation; that it is truly Barthes's "message without a code." The context of the objects in reality should be disregarded in favor of the message the photograph is trying to convey about culture. The only thing not "dead" to the audience is what each individual knows from his or her own experience, and what they can use from this body of knowledge to decipher the message of the photograph. This experience is defined by culture, and it is this twist that the audience brings to the analysis. The "truth" of the photographic image is no longer recognized, for the postmodern art photograph is not a document of a universal reality, but it is the individual's "reality" that ultimately determines the photograph's meaning. As Szarkowski describes, deciphering the postmodern photograph is the work of the individual alone.

> Diane Arbus said that a photograph of two people in one bed is shocking because a photograph is private, whereas a movie showing two people in bed is not shocking because a movie is public. A photograph may also be private in the sense that there is no designated public access to its meaning, no catalog of its constituent parts, its iconographic and formal resources. Each viewer, including the photographer who made it, must devise for the new picture a personal and provisional place among the other pictures and facts that the viewer knows. It is of course true that all good pictures contain unfinished meanings; only perfect cliches are perfectly complete. Nevertheless, good photographs are often more richly unfinished than other pictures, are *wilder*, in the sense that they have in them more elements that are not fully understood and domesticated.[80]

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[79] Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1997), 200.

[80] Szarkowski, 286-287.

The individual viewer is left to figure out the meaning of the photograph for him or herself. Szarkowski's mention of Diane Arbus sparks a particular interest when dealing with postmodern photography. Arbus's work presents a strange collection of images, within each image is a person or persons that defy what popular culture would define as "normal." The viewer can take the postmodern perspective when analyzing one of her photographs, such as "Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, New York City" (figure 21). The viewer forgets the photographer, as well as the identity of the young boy subject. The viewer is taken by the bizarre expression on the boy's face, and from the viewer's own experience, determines whether or not it is an expression of fear, anger, frustration, mockery, happiness, or none of these. Then, without trying to determine the intent of the author, the viewer must decipher the message of the photograph: perhaps the boy is using the toy grenade as a scare tactic; by carrying the grenade, people will take him more seriously, which may not be easy if he makes that facial expression. This deciphering of the message is based on what the viewer knows of his or her own culture: that weapons pose a threat.

The signs that the viewer must detect in order to decipher the message of the photograph can be divided into categories, as Weiss describes:

> Contemporary theory of the photographic sign (even within the context of postmodernism) relies heavily on C.S. Peirce's tripartate categorization of signs as *icon*, *symbol*, and *index*. In relation to the aesthetic (photographic) modification of reality, these modes of signification correspond respectively to the *mirror* of the real, the *transformation* of the real, and the *trace* of the real.[81]

Although Weiss published his writing on photography in 1990, as he states, it can be applied to the earlier postmodern theory. The sign that Barthes previously addressed can now be divided into

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[81] Silverman, "Lucid Intervals," 164.

specific categories based on what the viewer knows about his or her reality, and how the viewer can define the meaning of the photograph based on what he or she knows. Weiss refers to the "modification" of reality by the photograph, asserting the postmodern idea that the photograph should not be analyzed as a copy of reality, but instead as an interpretation of it. The presence of icon, symbol, or index allows the viewer to make his or her own interpretation of the image.

Weiss uses the example of Cindy Sherman's work to explain the icon. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (figures 19 and 20) revealed the photographer dressed in a variety of costumes, striking a pose in a distinct setting. The photographs have been interpreted as their name suggests; they seem to be still frames taken from a famous movie, with the leading actress striking a character-defining pose. The film character "mirrors" the real in that it can be identified as a "film still" by the viewer, but within the context of the postmodern, the photograph represents a false reality. There is nothing real about the photograph; the character, the environment, the "situation" are all completely fictitious. The viewer must be careful to remember that there is no part of reality that is involved with the photograph, even though the idea of a movie star may exist in the viewer's reality. It is the viewer's cultural experience that allows him or her to identify the icon; in this case, that the subject mirrors a film star.

Sherman's work, as a simulated movie scene, confronts the notion of postmodern art as a deconstruction of the real through the distorted "reality" of the culturally produced image. As Godfrey was quoted earlier, one of the major components of postmodernist art is that the "world exists only in representations – that we know reality only through those media (TV, language,

pictures) that endlessly produce or *re*produce it for us."[82] Sherman's photograph becomes an "image" of the real, distorted by the convention of the look of a still movie frame. The woman, the subject of the photograph, is a character that exists only within the image. Writer Rosalind Krauss draws the connection between the culturally stereotypical woman-as-object, a concept that Krauss contends is made obvious in the way women are presented in film.

> Stereotype – itself rebaptized now as "masquerade," and here understood as a psychoanalytic term – is thought of as the phenomenon to which all women are submitted both inside and outside representation, so that as far as femininity goes, there is nothing *but* costume. Representation itself – films, advertisements, novels, etc.– would thus be part of a far more absolute set of mechanisms by which characters are constructed: constructed equally in life as in film, or rather, equally in film because as in life. And in this logic woman is nothing but masquerade, nothing but image.[83]

The *Untitled Film Stills* place the spotlight on the female subject as being viewed without her knowing; the viewer steps into the role of voyeur. Krauss later makes reference to the perspective of the photograph as the "male gaze," as if the voyeur looks with desire on his helpless prey, at the time when she is most vulnerable. But, as Weiss stated: "if the self is a fiction structured by the desire of the Other, and if the cinematic (Hollywood) image of woman is structured by male desire, then Sherman's images are the parody, or deconstruction, of such desire."[84] By bringing back the author as a factor affecting the photographic image, Sherman negates the "male gaze" because she knowingly puts herself, and the character she portrays, in the middle of it. Unlike the female movie character who is caught at a point where she is vulnerable, Sherman's character remains defiant, because the

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[82] Godfrey, 14.

[83] Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman: 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 44.

[84] Silverman, "Lucid Intervals," 166.

"costume" of fantasy keeps her from revealing the truth to the audience. Sherman in effect defies the voyeuristic eye, while at the same time creating an image of distorted reality that is distinctly postmodern.

The symbolic sign is that which "transforms" the reality of a certain visual image into another visual image that is still understood. Weiss uses the example of the work of Barbara Kruger (figure 22) as an example; Kruger's interplay of words and visual imagery combine the symbolic and the literal.[85] It is the job of the viewer to determine the meaning of the symbolic as something representative of an element of the viewer's reality.

The indexical sign of the photograph is that which is present at the time the image was taken and is present in the image. Weiss sees index as the photograph's inherent sign, for "its indexical nature (due to the chemical action of light on film) is its essential characteristic."[86] It is the photographic image at the split-second in which it is created, when the light reacts to the film. Weiss contends that the index, or "trace of the real" is pure only at this split-second, before anyone can apply sociological analysis to the photograph. In this sense, Weiss states that Barthes's idea of the photograph as a "message without a code" is inaccurate, and that the only time Barthes's idea applies is at the split-second, "before the photograph exists as a visual entity."[87]

The three categories of sign define what the viewer will discover within a photograph, and how he or she can interpret the discovery based on the individual's understanding of the real. Weiss explains: "The photographic image will always consist of a subtle interplay of its iconic, symbolic,

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[85] Ibid., 167.

[86] Ibid., 164.

[87] Ibid., 164.

and indexical functions, just as the subject will always consist of the intertwining of the imaginary, symbolic, and real."[88]

The postmodern era was elemental to the success of the photographic image as art. The art of the period was revolutionary, because it was no longer based on the categorization of art into medium, and the stifling of the mediums through the conventionalization of art. The postmodern era broke through the conventions of art's past, and as a result, the "high" art that defined the era would have to embody a new aesthetic. As Grundberg describes:

> All postmodernist photography, and all postmodernist art, has an adversarial relationship to conventional notions of aesthetic value. For many, it is irritating; for others, it is obscure. Postmodernist uses of photography also stand outside of, and in opposition to, the conventions of fine-art photography. The traditions of art photography elaborated by Alfred Stieglitz, Minor White, and John Szarkowski mean little to artists interested in photographic images as cultural representations. Instead, they take their cues from Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Jean Baudrillard. The marked theatricality, artificiality, and conceptual density of 1980s art photography are merely symptoms of a deeper difference: photographs are no longer seen as transparent windows on the world, but as intricate webs spun by culture.[89]

With postmodernism, photography had achieved a deeper significance to "high" art. The medium was no longer defined solely by its ability to create an image of reality, because the photographic image was now valued as something more than surface; the meaning of the photograph was now the subject of major philosophical and critical analysis for its artistic merits. With the acceptance of a variety of media as valid forms of high art, photography benefitted from pluralism in both the acceptance of new art media, and in the acceptance of new ways of thinking about art.

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[88] Ibid., 168.

[89] Grundberg, 101.

CONCLUSION

The significance of the photographic medium to the evolution of art has undeniably increased within the past hundred years. Photography is art, and is clearly accepted as such by the end of the twentieth century. This has been made evident by the establishment of educational curriculums in photography, successful photography publications, and even the auction prices of the photograph today. Photographer Andreas Gursky's *Prada II* (figures 23 and 24) sold for $270,000 at Christie's in 1997.[90] Gursky's large-photographs can only be described as being photographic in the nature of their imagery. The high selling price of the photograph reveals both the monetary and cultural value of the work, proving the point again that the photograph is now generally understood to be a medium of high art. The photograph now shares prominent space in art museums all over the world, placed alongside other media as a testament to the medium's role within the history of art.

The critical analysis of photography in recent decades has further established the idea that photography has achieved the status of high art. Most art critics cannot deny the fact that the photography medium has proven itself to serve a variety of functions, uniquely contributing to the way the art world and contemporary culture understand the visual representation of reality.

The photograph alone can create an image based within reality. The photograph can present the image of "found" objects as they truly exist, or the photograph can defy the real and take the viewer into another universe controlled by the artistic manipulation of the image – an image the viewer once "trusted" to be that of the real. The photographic image also achieves the same variations of style and content that other art media are able to achieve.

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[90] Calvin Tomkins, "The Big Picture: What do Andreas Gursky's monumental photographs say about art?" *The New Yorker* January 22, 2001, 62.

The medium of photography has truly helped to shape the idea of art in the previous century, as a vessel of visual communication: that art could be understood and reflective of the time in which it was created. The medium itself was a technological advancement, and the technology involved with the creation of "reality" imagery continues to evolve in the digital age of the twenty-first century. The darkroom process is becoming obsolete, and the digital camera is quickly becoming an affordable household item. With the digital photographic image, the act of creating a print from a negative is no longer part of the process, the photographer is becoming less involved with the physical creation of the print. The photographer now uses the computer to manipulate the photograph, and the mastery of this skill can be understood today as a new way to create art.

The digital image is now in a place where photography was over one hundred years ago, as the new kind of image, itself slowly moving towards acceptance as a high art. The digital image, like the traditionally-made photograph, is acceptable because it can achieve the results society recognizes as being "photographic," but it also can become a manipulated-reality image made possible only through the effects of the computer. Creative expression has been mastered through the most advanced technological media, and the photograph paved the road for this acceptance of technology's hand in the creative production of art. The future of art has its base in the realm of the photographic.

The photograph, as an image of the real, will continue to inspire evolution and succeed in its current form because it will always be understood as a "visual language." No other medium achieves the same level of understanding by its audience, and as an art form, the photographer's expression can be more clearly understood within the context of the photographic image. This notion of the "visual language" was detected early in photography's history by poet and writer Paul Valery, who thought that the photograph could replace writing as a language more easily "read" by the audience:

> This marvelous invention might – or so it would seem at first – ultimately restrict the importance of the art of writing and act as its substitute rather than help enlarge its scope to enrich it with valuable insights. It is a very largely illusory claim that languages can convey the idea of a visual object with any degree of precision. The writer who depicts a landscape or a face, no matter how skillful he may be at his craft, will suggest as many different visions as he has readers. Open a passport for proof of this: the description scrawled there does not bear comparison with the snapshot stapled alongside it.[91]

This idea is what truly set photography apart as an art form early in the century: its ability to convey a message clearly and unmistakably to us, even if the message is as simple as showing us an image of our own sense of reality, as in a snapshot.

Nan Goldin is one well-known contemporary photographer who captures this idea of the visual language. Many of her photographs resemble snapshots, were probably not contrived, and the viewer can understand their spontaneous nature easily. The viewer understands that these snapshots comprise pieces of Goldin's life as it happened. Her life becomes real to the viewer, as she photographs herself in every extreme: happy, crying, in the confines of a drug rehabilitation center, and after being beaten by an abusive boyfriend.

The photographer clearly reveals her sense of reality to us, and we are able to respond to it in a way that does not compare to reading her diary. We see her, her relationships with other people and her environment, and we relate ourselves to her reality. We cannot identify in the same way with words. Goldin's photograph series of her friend Cookie (figures 25 and 26) show the photographer's relationship with her friend from the time they met until Cookie's death as a result of AIDS.[92] The photograph of a sickly Cookie, sitting with her son on the black-and-white striped couch, followed

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[91] Paul Valery, "The Centenary of Photography," Trachtenberg, 192.

[92] *Nan Goldin: I'll Be Your Mirror*, ed. Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Hans Werner Holzwarth (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1996), 256-275.

by a photograph of the couch alone, with photographs of Cookie hanging on the wall, undeniably evoke an emotional response within the viewer, more so than reading Goldin's introduction to the series. Goldin captured the concept of the reality of death in her imagery, so it becomes real to the viewer. This is not a description of life; this is how it appears to Goldin, how she is living it. Through her visual language, the audience sees how she saw. Only the photographic image has this power, to allow the viewer to step into the place of the photographer, to look into the viewfinder and see and understand a new reality.

Contemporary photographers, such as Goldin, visually communicate with their audiences in a way only a photographer can. We see images that we undeniably understand as being photographs; we recognize those signs and visual messages that make the reality inside of the image tangible to us. And now the work of these photographers hangs on the walls of recognized galleries and museums, the names of their creators are now famous.

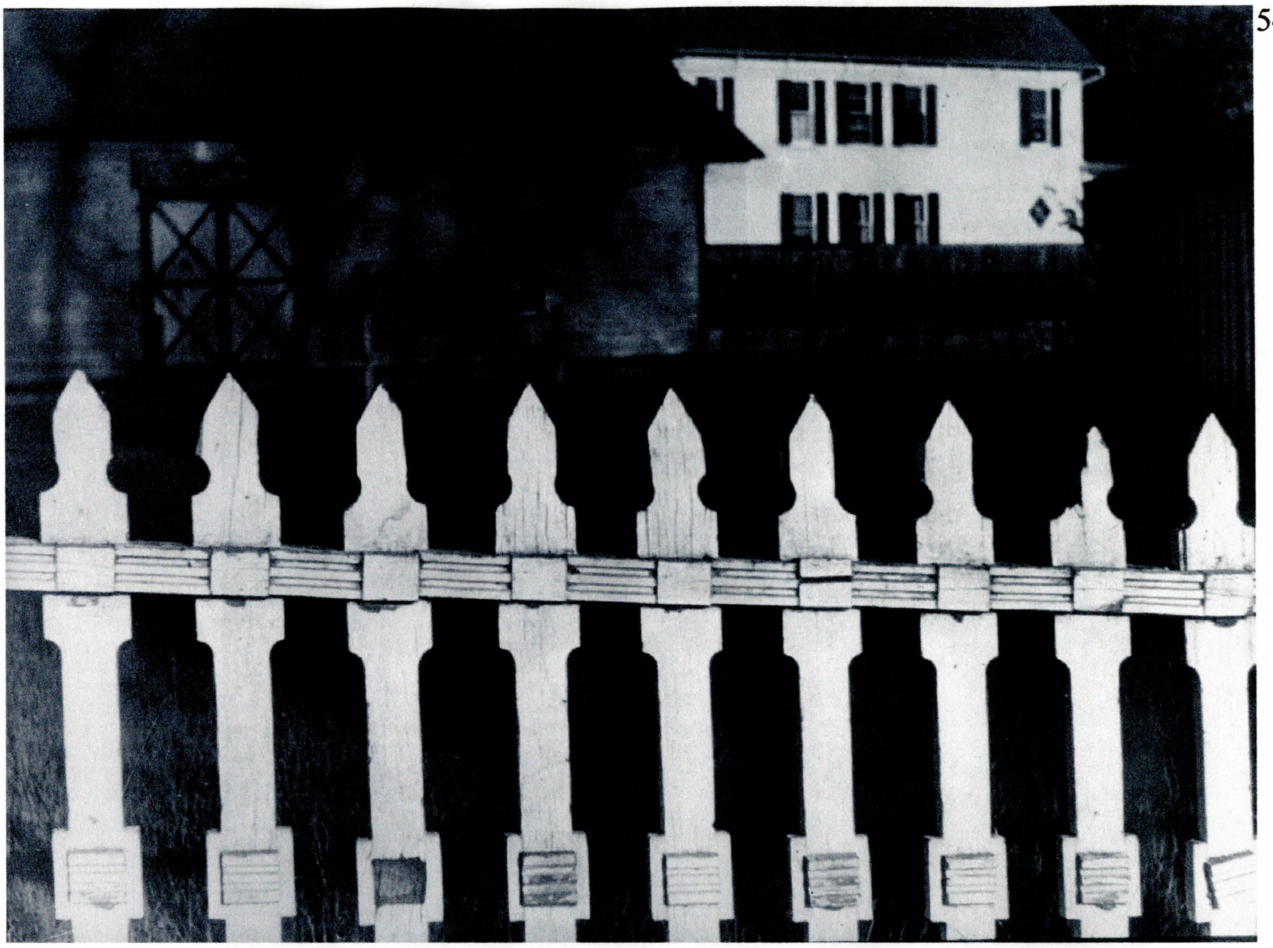
Photography remains a truly innovative medium, and its rich history demands that it be recognized as an entity unique among other art media. The issue that faces contemporary photographers today is that, since photography has been accepted as art, has this acceptance denied them their roots as photographers? By referring to the work as "art," and exhibiting it in an "art" gallery, is the photographer sacrificing his or her loyalties to the medium of photography?

Photography has been accepted as high art, but as a relatively new addition, it remains to be seen whether or not the medium can remain true to itself as something unique within the broad characterization of high art.

1. Edward Steichen, *Midnight -- Rodin's Balzac*, 1908.

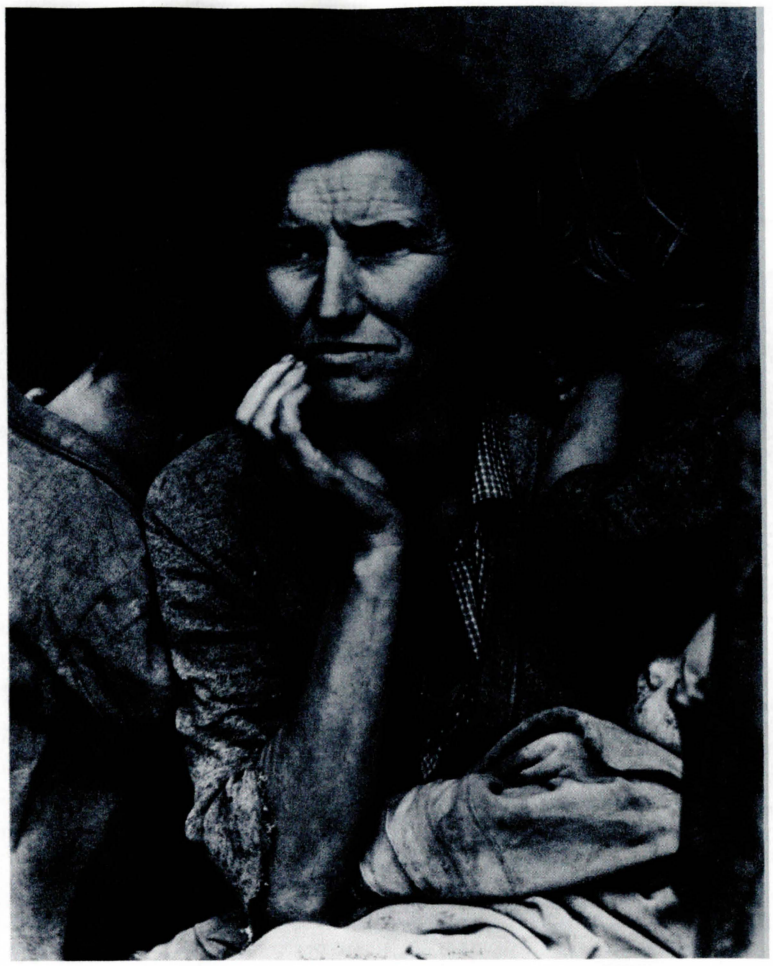
2. Edward Steichen, *Pillars of the Parthenon*, 1921.

3. Alfred Stieglitz, *Hands and Thimble --Georgia O'Keefe*, 1920.



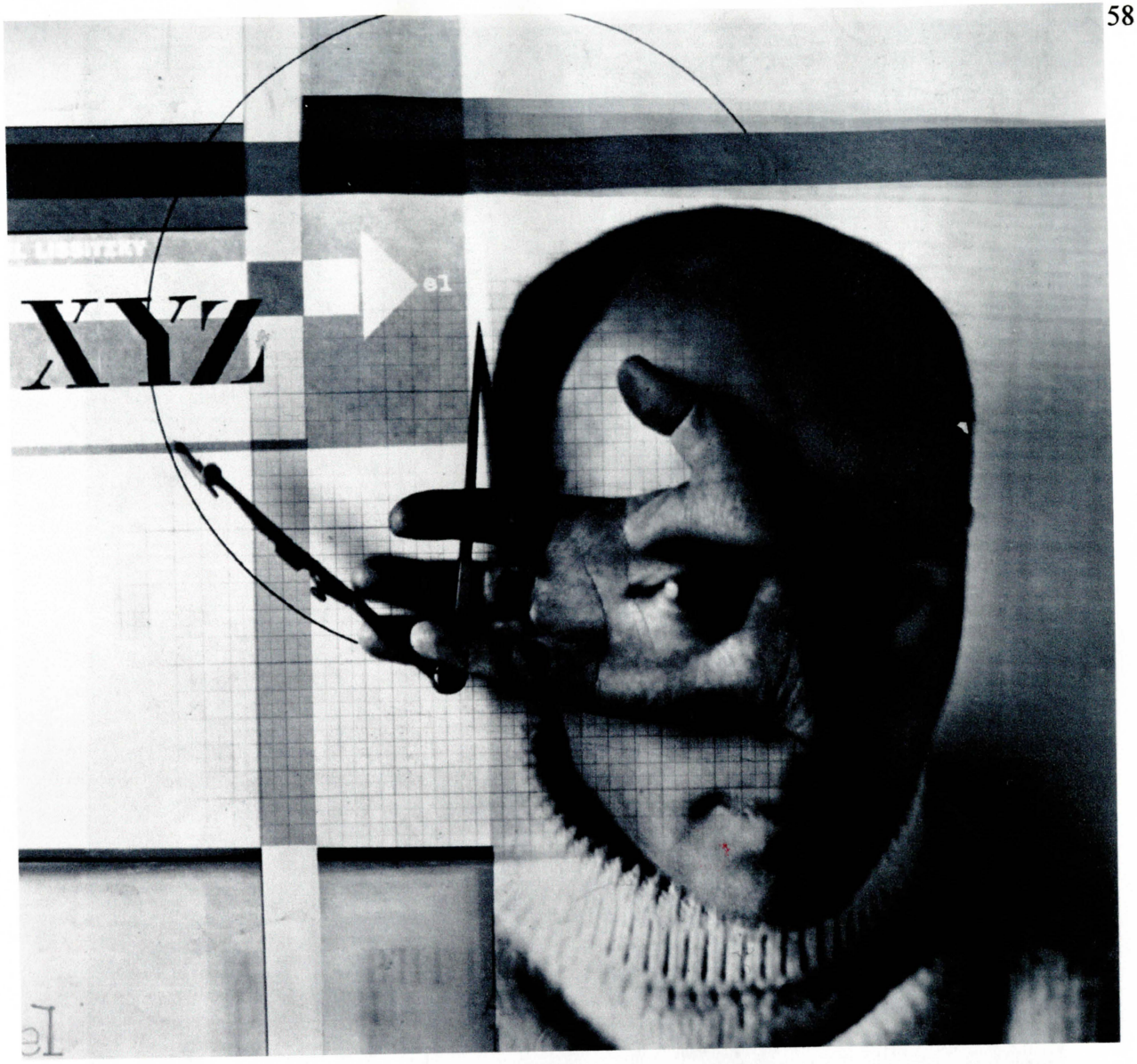
4. Paul Strand, *The White Fence, Port Kent, New York*, 1916.

5. Man Ray, *Rayogram*, 1923.

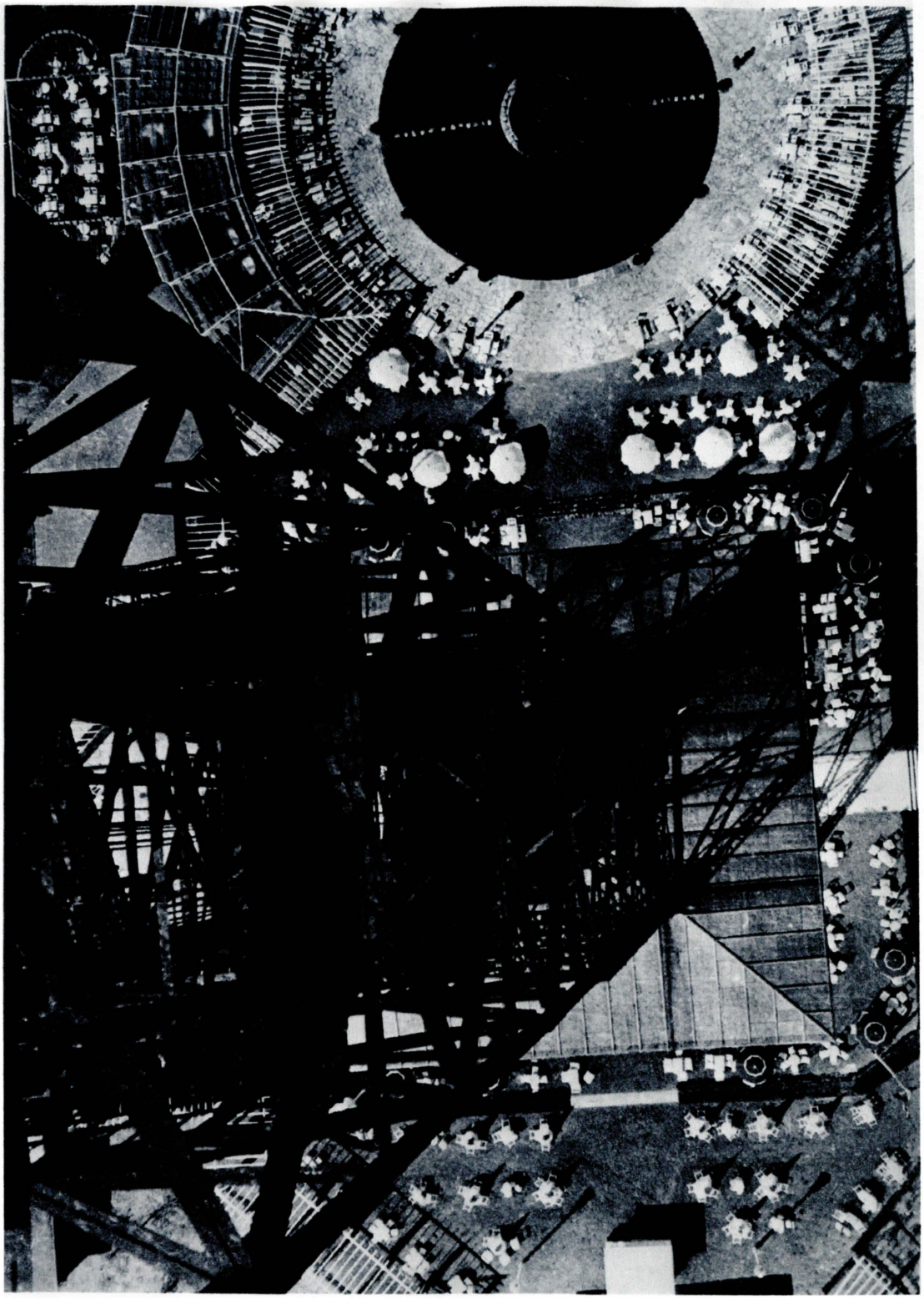


6. and 7. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936; *Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas*, 1938.

8. Walker Evans, *Church Organ, Alabama*, 1936.



9. El Lissitzky, *The Constructor -Self-Portrait*, 1924.

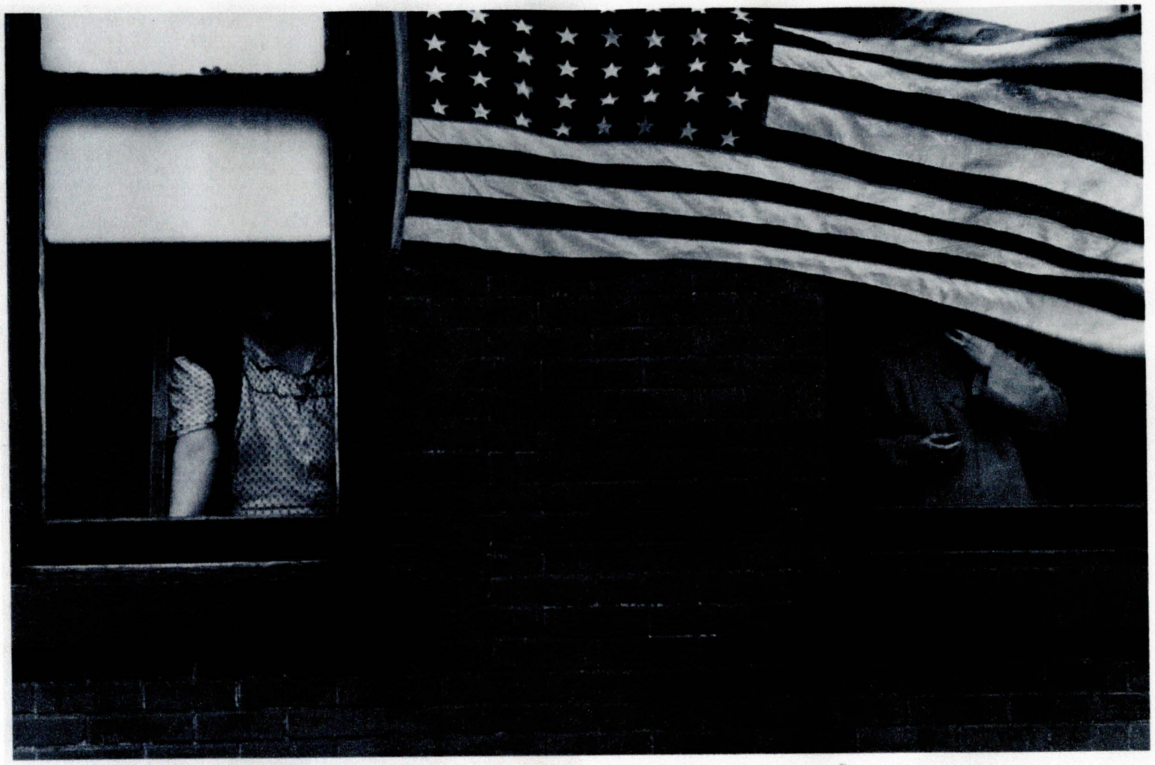


10. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *From the Radio Tower, Berlin*, 1928.

11. Aaron Siskind, *Chicago*, 1949.

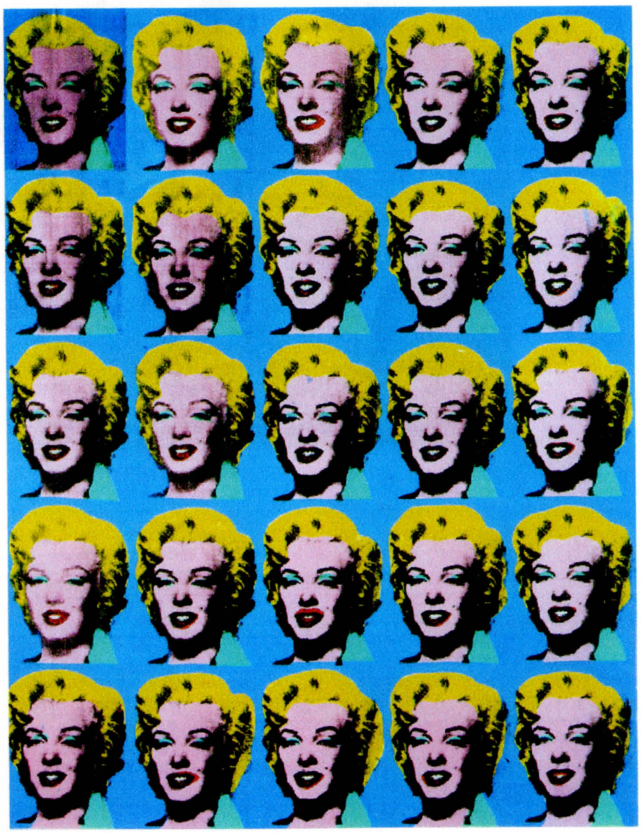
12. Harry Callahan, *Multiple Exposure*, Chicago, 1956.

13. Minor White, *The Three Thirds*, 1957.



14. Robert Frank, *Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey*, 1955.

15. Robert Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, 1964.



16. Andy Warhol, *Twenty-five Colored Marilyns*, 1962.

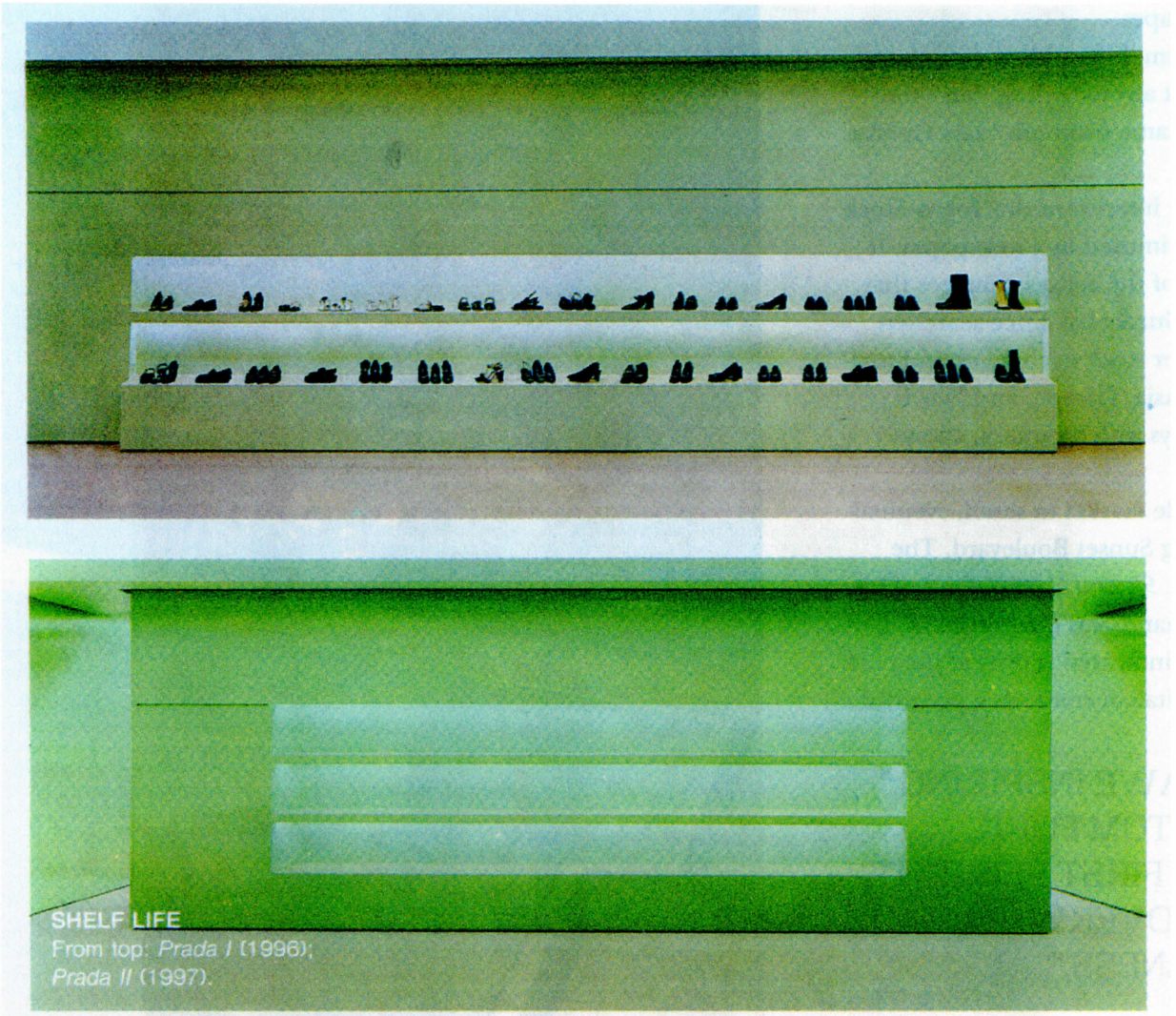
17. Chuck Close, *Phil*, 1969.

18. Richard Estes, *The Candy Store*, 1969.

19 and 20. (left to right) Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #6, Untitled Film Still #16*, 1978.

21. Diane Arbus, *Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, New York City*, 1962.

22. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, 1989.



SHELF LIFE
From top: *Prada I* (1996); *Prada II* (1997).

23. and 24. Andreas Gursky, *Prada I* and *Prada II*, (1996-7).

25. and 26. Nan Goldin, Untitled, from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, 1976-92.*

FIGURE ENDNOTES

1. Peter Galassi, *American Photography, 1890-1965: From the Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 85.
2. Ibid., 104.
3. Ibid., 105.
4. Newhall, *History*, 174.
5. Szarkowski, 209.
6. Newhall, *History*, 234.
7. Ibid., 242.
8. Szarkowski, 214.
9. Ibid., 176.
10. Newhall, *History*, 198.
11. Galassi, 191.
12. Newhall *History*, 285.
13. Newhall, *History*, 283.
14. Galassi, 215.
15. Lisa Phillips, 115.
16. Ibid., 122.
17. Ibid., 150.
18. Ibid., 274.
19. Ibid., 279.
20. Ibid.
21. Galassi, 243.
22. Lisa Phillips, 281.
23. Alice Rawsthorn, "Seeing Things"(*Harper's Bazaar* February, 2001, pages 230-235, 259), 233.
24. Ibid.
25. Goldin, 269.
26. Goldin, 273.

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