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Winter 1984

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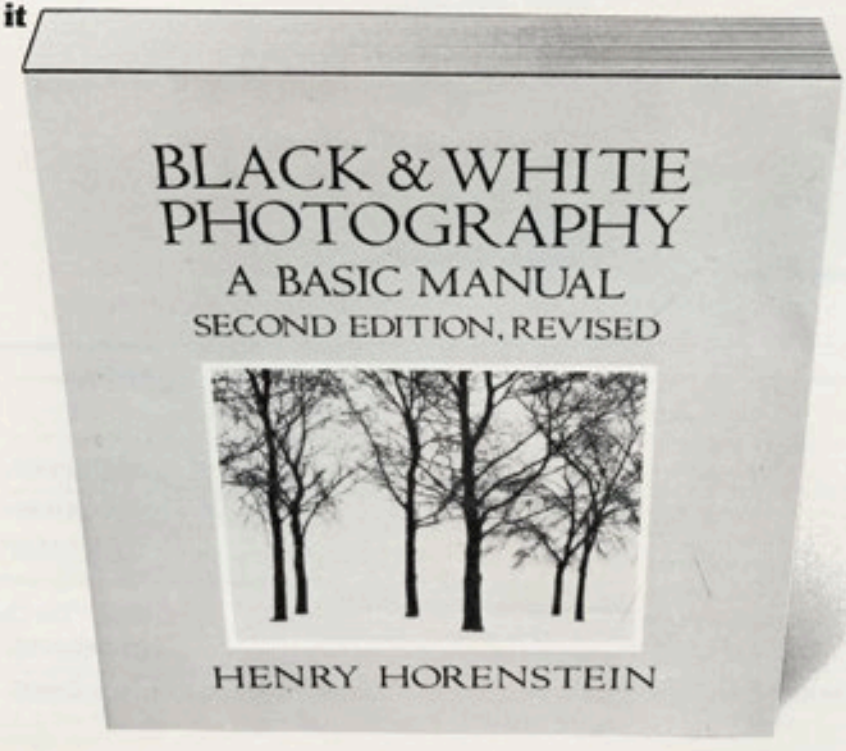


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**Erratum**

In *Exposure* 22:1, the title of Diane Neumaier's article was inadvertently switched with that of her forthcoming book. The article should properly have been titled, "The Changing Picture of Docklands: the Docklands Community Poster Project."

**Cover**
James Welling, *The Waterfall*, 1981

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# Dialectical Criticism and Photography

Linda Andre

Marx's dialectical method was for him first and foremost a way of looking, a framework for investigation. He chose to look at economic and social relations, but his dialectical framework as an epistemology has possibilities for far wider use. A non-Marxist can object to Marx's economic theories and his ideas about the reorganization of society but still appreciate the soundness of his dialectics. As a critical method it has long been used to examine social problems, but it has a special validity when the way of looking is in itself the subject examined; that is, in the examination of criticism itself. This is one area where no work can be done until the question of method is settled.

The concept of dialectics existed as a philosophical category long before Hegel and Marx made it the philosophical center of their respective world-views. The word itself derives from the Greek expression for "conversation", and the term has consistently implied a conflict or contradiction, either between two parties in a conversation or within a logical or philosophical position. The Greek philosopher Zeno originated the argumentative technique whereby a proposition is refuted by exposing an unacceptable logical consequence that can be drawn from it; that is, by proving that at some level a hypothesis contradicts itself or contradicts some higher philosophical principle.

Plato and Aristotle had their own ideas about the meaning of the dialectic. Plato saw dialectic as a dual process of analysis and synthesis. A general concept would be analysed by exhaustively laying out all of its specific instances. The specific instances would then be reassembled to yield an exhaustive definition of the general concept. Aristotle generally used the same definition of dialectic as Zeno, but he pointed out the limitations of this kind of reasoning. He saw the dialectic as a tool inferior to science, which is a form of reasoning which starts out from self-evident principles.

All of the ancient philosophers and their medieval followers saw the dialectic as a means of argument or as a means of arriving at the truth. This conception of dialectic is shared by Kant. Kant had one particular use for the dialectic in his system: he used it as a means for dispelling the "transcendental illusion", which, according to Kant, is the type of false reasoning that makes statements about the world derived directly from the pure concepts of reason. Pure concepts contain contradictions that can be exposed by a dialectical mode of reasoning. Kant's dialectic is a negative technique meant to expose the limits of reasoning from first principles and to emphasize the need for a working, practical method that yields nothing absolutely certain but is the best that we can do.

Hegel's philosophy represents a transitional stage between the concept of dialectic as something occurring between ideas, as in classical philosophy, and the concept of dialectic as something happening in the real world, as in Marx. Hegel remained true to the unity of mind and reality; contradictions within mind, between notions, were at the same time contradictions within reality. Marx departs from this conception while retaining Hegel's critical thrust and his distrust of the given.

Like Hegel, Marx recognizes the need to see the object within the context of its totality. The difference between Marx's dialectical system and that of Hegel may be seen in the way that the totality is conceptualized. Hegel's totality is the totality of Reason, of the Idea. The object, which Hegel refers to as the *Noton*, can be understood only within the whole trajectory of the universal Idea. For Marx, both the object and the totality

are *material* in nature. Ideas, of course, exist, but can be understood only within the context of the material totality.

The material totality in Marx is not some ahistorical abstraction such as "society" or "humanity", but a concrete constellation of human beings in different relations to the material world both as provided by nature and as transformed by human activity. This constellation Marx calls a "mode of production". The mode of production is not only a specific collection of technologies but also a relationship between groups of people who produce and consume in different ways. It is a relationship between *classes*, and an individual human being must be seen within the context of his or her class to be fully understood. A social institution may only be seen within the context of its mode of production.

Within the context of its totality, a given social institution experiences contradictions, which are not merely contradictions between ideas but real conflicts within societies, pressures that build up because people have differing interests. These pressures cause historical situations to be inherently unstable and transient.

There is a fundamental difference between Marx and Hegel on the nature of change. Hegel's contradictions take place at the level of the Idea, and their resolution, the synthesis in which both thesis and antithesis are negated, is rational. Marx's contradictions are material rather than ideal, and there is no particular reason for them to be resolved rationally. The common threads that bind Hegel and Marx are thus the criticism of the object in terms of the totality and the notion of contradiction as the source of instability and change.

For Marx, dialectics is a way of being, a way of knowing, a way of questioning, and a way of explaining that rejects positivist and reductionist assumptions about the world. It looks beyond appearances: in a temporal sense, by taking into account that there are no things, only processes; and in a spatial sense, by understanding not parts in isolation but the whole, and how the parts are related to and shaped by the whole. Dialectics rejects the idea of a static reality and emphasizes the importance of conflict and contradiction in the process of change.

The dialectical mind is self-conscious. It is aware of its process of making abstractions and of how it chooses an angle from which to view a subject, as well as the implications those choices have for the results of its inquiry. It also attempts to integrate its findings back into the context of the world and to present them in a way that takes into account their audience.

I want to suggest that dialectics has great relevance in developing a way of looking at photographs. I'm concerned here with someone who is not just a casual viewer of photographs, as we all are to some extent, but with someone who looks at photographs critically in order to be able to say something about them to others: the photography critic, including teachers of photography who critique the work of their students. Photocriticism is a relatively new field and no other area of art criticism is so badly in need of a workable method. The proliferation of approaches, bordering on Babel, is evident to a reader of any journal attempting to publish serious writing about photography.

The notion of dialectical criticism is, of course, not new; there have been many who saw applications of Marx's method to literary criticism, from Plekhanov and Trotsky to Lukacs, Benjamin, and present-day writers. As the most extensive body of Marxist criticism, literary criticism has done much to stimulate Marxist criticism of the other arts. Walter Benjamin wrote groundbreaking essays on both literature and photography. More recently, John Berger, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes have dealt provocatively with the issue of how we interpret photographs. Although none of these three is self-consciously Marxist, Berger and Barthes, at least, incorporate elements of dialectics in their work. Significantly, all of these writers have extended themselves beyond the aesthetics of the image to deal with context and function as well. They are not so much photography critics as cultural critics who deal with photography in general. What I will examine here is how dialectics can be applied to the problem of writing a piece of criticism about a particular work or body of work.

•

There are a few photography critics working today whose work is genuinely dialectical, but they are greatly outnumbered by those who use other approaches. Why this should be so seems puzzling when we consider all of the aspects of photography that make it so amenable to dialectical criticism.

More so than any other form of expression, photography always has a foothold in the real, living, material world. Its very existence is dependent on

some kind of pre-existing reality. By definition, a photograph is only a re-presentation of what is already there.[1] It cannot be anything else. No matter how abstract it is, it can never achieve the dissociation of painting, for it can only be a record of what was once in front of the camera, even when that subject is rendered unrecognizable. (A photogram, too, is only a record of what was once set before the printing paper.)

Photography's link to the world is something all photographers must deal with, even if they spend much of their time fighting against it. Paradoxically, a number of photographers choose to ignore this unique characteristic of their medium and try to obliterate or obscure the photograph's inseverable relation to reality. There are also those who go to the other extreme and use their cameras to depict in the greatest possible detail social conditions and relations they would like to see changed.

These photographers are faced with the paradox of their own impotence in the battle for social change. They may see their gritty photos hung on the walls of pristine white galleries, offered for sale to wealthy collectors whose only interest is whether the photographs are likely to increase in value, or they may see them published in a book or a magazine that will never reach more than a few thousand people. In any of these cases, the "message" they felt so passionately and strived so hard to bring across is lost.

These are examples of those who find photography's relation to reality problematical. There are also those who attempt to deny this relation by saying that a static, two-dimensional representation of a moving, three-dimensional world cannot be real; nor can a fragmented vision, or one that reduces the colors of the spectrum to tones of gray or dyes that never accurately represent the true colors.

We can see conflicts and contradictions, connections and interactions in all stages of the photographic project. The dialectical process at work, both in making the photograph and looking at it, can provide strategies for thinking and writing about it.

On the ontological level, every photograph presupposes both a photographer and a thing photographed. Photographers interact with their subject matter, an interaction mediated by their equipment and by the physical and chemical laws that govern the process of photography. How they photograph will depend on their own intentions and on their culturally-determined notions of what is worth being photographed, what photography is or should be, and what it should be used for. If their subjects are people, they must deal with their subjects' own similarly determined notions and feelings about the photographer and about being photographed.

For example, photographers who choose to photograph people from outside their own economic and cultural milieu[2] are faced with subjects whose conception of what a photograph should be is often in direct opposition to their own. The subjects may think that a photograph is necessarily an idealization of life; in that case, when they see a camera pointed at them, their immediate reaction is to smile and pose. If the photographer sees this as a falsification, photographing becomes a game of keeping the subjects unaware of the camera so that they will not alter their behavior according to their notion of what a "good" photograph is. They may also have opposing notions of what photography should be used for. They may only have seen photographs in family albums or in newspapers and may be unable to conceive of a photograph not made for a specific purpose. The idea of taking photographs because the process is in itself fascinating and enjoyable may be foreign to those who have never had enough leisure time or economic means to devote some of it to creative activities instead of necessary ones.

On the epistemological level, the attempt to make sense of a photograph is always a dialogue between the viewer and the photograph. The meaning of a photograph is never fixed; it depends on a great many variables. It is totally different for different people and in different contexts. This is why we can never label a photograph "good" without asking "Good for what?", "according to whom?" or "by which criteria?", although this is precisely what undialectical thinkers try to do. They don't ask "Who is doing the looking?" Or, "What is the context in which the photograph is being seen?" They drop photographs into handy little boxes called "art", "journalism", "advertising", or "family album", without considering that the categories overlap, and that only the assumptions of their users have placed them in one specific category.[3]

Often the meaning of a photograph lies behind or beyond surface appearances, and only a caption can communicate it to us. Newspaper photos are a good example of this. In order to make sense of them, we must ask "What? Where? When?" The fuzzy patches of black and white that recently appeared on the front page of

*The* New York *Times* are of little interest until we read that this is a picture of the sinking of the *General Belgrano*.

Sometimes the meaning of a photograph lies completely outside its physical presence, in the sense that the photograph is simply the residue of the idea that produced it, which is its real subject. A critic looking for traditional, purely visual pleasure within such a photograph will be confused, for many of these pictures deny visual pleasure and meaning. Instead, they provide extra-pictorial meaning — "emphasis on the photograph as bearer of cultural mythologies," as one observer put it. The image is evaluated not for compositional niceties, but for what Barthes called the "polysemic" aspect of the photographic image. Later we will see how a work of this sort was interpreted both dialectically and undialectically.

Faced with this difficulty of meaning, how is a critic to begin to understand a work? What is a viable strategy of inquiry? Faced with the apparent impossibility of understanding the work as a thing-in-itself (or the superficiality of this way of looking, which is sufficient for undialectical critics), how does a critic situate a photograph in context as part of a larger whole?

The critic has a choice of a great many angles from which to view the work. The choice of angle, or starting point, will depend on where the questioner wants to end up; and this in turn will depend on which focus is most appropriate for the particular work the writer is looking at. Decisions must be made about what is most significant about the work and what is the most important to say about it. Many unimportant aspects must always be left out.

The placement of a photograph in history is crucial for a dialectical critique. There are several different histories in which a photograph exists. (I will be speaking from here on about photographs done by artists and seen in galleries — for practical reasons, since these are the only ones critics will usually have occasion to write about in the common critical outlets, and it is pointless to speak of criticism in a void.) Besides the personal histories of both the image-maker and the viewer, these are art history, photography history, and social history, the last a category undialectical critics find it useful to avoid.

These categories are not fixed, because they overlap and relate to each other. There is at least one body of work that cannot be contained in one of these categories, because it conflates all three: the photographs done in the 1930s and early 1940s by FSA photographers. These photographs cannot be separated from the social conditions that they document and that at the same time made them possible. The government not only provided the funds for these photographers but told them what to photograph. These instructions were often very specific and were aimed at creating an impression of an upbeat America in the face of economic disaster. Values to be stressed included the endurance of the traditional American family; activities to be depicted included old-fashioned pastimes that included lots of human contact and very little money. Even working within such limits, the best of the FSA photographers were able to transcend propaganda and earn for their photographs a lasting place in both art history and the history of photography.

The FSA work is an example of work that might be perceived as part of a synchronic social reality; that is, in terms of how it fits into the larger social reality of which it is a part. This means seeing the photos as manifestations of concurrent developments in society, although not *only* that.

We might look at the enormous popularity of Richard Avedon's photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as attributable as much to the public's hunger for pictures of the rich, famous and stylish — a hunger usually sated not by museums but by the daily tabloids — as to his photographic virtuosity. To broaden the focus even more, we might ask what kind of society creates such a need — obviously only one where enormous class inequalities exist and where there is little hope of entering a different class — and what role Avedon's pictures might play in the maintenance of this system. On the other hand, a recent show of "New Wave" photographs had nothing to recommend it photographically, but was of interest as a manifestation of a sensibility more frequently expressed in rock music and fashion.

There are a number of ways of placing a body of work in context that contribute to a dialectical posture, even if they do not in themselves comprise one. A series of photographs might be seen as part of the whole that is all of the photographer's past and future. Then the critic might evaluate the work according to whether it represents progress or regression, given the photographer's apparent aim and interests. When a photographer who has been working in one format changes to another, the different technical limitations imposed by the new format must be taken into account so that the critic avoids the dangers of unfair comparison. Working with a 45-pound view camera

is not the same as working with a 35-millimeter camera. To use the FSA example again, a critic evaluating the newly-discovered color work must use the much better-known black-and-white work as a point of reference. This can give us insight into why a photographer might have chosen to work in color and how this choice affected treatment of subjects.

A photographer's work might be considered as part of the whole that includes the work of contemporaries, especially when a group of artists is doing similar work that seems to indicate a new direction. An example of this is the group of young photographers working today who borrow from "pop" or "low" culture (TV, movies, comic books) for their subjects and formats. A critic might ask why these people share a common consciousness and what this says about the homogeneity of middle-class American cultural life in the 1950s, the period that most influenced these artists.

Even if not working within the restrictions of a specific genre, a photographer can be compared to others, past or present, who have treated the same subject matter. This is especially apt when there is a widely-known body of work on the subject. Robert Frank's book *The Americans*, done in the '50s, remains the definitive treatment of American *anomie*. Similarly, any photographer who attempts to do subway portraits has to be willing to face comparison with Walker Evans.

With all of the techniques I have described at their disposal, critics make their inquiries. But their job is not finished until they have reconstituted their findings for themselves and found a method of exposition. Here again the process is a dialectical one, for what the writer has to say must necessarily take into account a particular audience. They must consider whether it is an artworld audience *(Artforum)*, an amateur photographer audience *(Modern Photography)*, or a general audience *(The* New York *Times)*, and consequently how much the reader may be assumed to know or care about any aspect of the work. They must also realize that they are usually writing for people of a particular class and that readers come to their work with their own world-views and biases. If they write for The New York *Post*, they may presuppose a working-class audience; if they write for *Artforum*, which costs $5 a copy, they can be sure of an audience of the upper, if not capitalist, class.

Critics must also take into account their own class interests. Marxist criticism usually states its agenda implicitly or explicitly from the outset and doesn't pretend to be ideologically neutral. In the case of undialectical critics, their unacknowledged class biases can become apparent. In a recent review of photographs that appeared in The New York *Times*, Gene Thornton expressed an elitist's skeptical amazement at seeing photographs that gave evidence that "despite all the laws passed and reforms effected, American factory and farm workers are *still* not safe in their places of work." (Emphasis mine.) In the same review he suggested that one might take a sanguine view of the work by seeing factories and industrialization as "a liberating force in American life."[5]

Given the immensity of the task, it's clear that the ideal photography critic needs much more than a love of photography. S/he needs to know the technical side of photography, but that's not enough either. S/he needs a broad background in the social sciences and a working knowledge of aesthetics, art history, literature, and the other arts. S/he should be aware of the exciting possibilities offered by semiotics for photographic theory, practice, and criticism. A knowledge of dialectics even on an intuitive level is invaluable.

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Why specifically dialectical criticism? To answer this, we need to look at the nature of the criticism prevailing in the American media today, as well as in the books and catalogues published by art professionals and academics.

Much of today's photography criticism uses the vocabulary of formalist art criticism. In its insistence that the only standards for judgment of a work are the formal rules of a game called Art, formalist criticism ignores the uniqueness of photography and disregards the constraints the real material world places on the photographer. It speaks of photography as if photographers had as much control over the process as painters have over theirs. It imagines the photographer arranging each tiny detail of the photograph to suit formal compositional needs, lifting a horizon here, moving a tree there. It even speaks of a photographer's sense of drawing, as if the photograph was something created with all the freedom of a hand holding a pencil to paper.

Here is an example from the catalogue of "The New Color Photography", the large and, by any standards, important show that attempts to define and

categorize the color photography of the 1970s. This is what curator Sally Eauclaire writes about one of William Eggleston's photographs:

> **It attains its equilibrium through careful rationing of contrasting values, simple and complex textures, complementary shapes, and intense color. Asymmetrical sections of discrete color, value, and shape divide the rectangle into zones of dark and light, neutral and saturated hues. Reflecting metal surfaces, dappled sunlight patterns, flames, and selected instances of chromatic intensity obscure many of the contours that help define individual objects, creating sparkling repetitions and correspondence. The crimson hand, orange fire, and red reflections on the car surface describe a constellation that spans the image's full width. The bleaching swatches of sunlight further subvert the intelligibility of many of the subjects' actual planes and volumes.**
>
> **Such phenomena transform the three dimensions of the actual scene into crazy quilt fragments and effects. Eggleston achieves pictorial cohesion and emphases through contiguous visual relationships that are more specific to the photograph then to the scene itself.**[6]

In other words, the thing photographed loses all importance and specificity in favor of the photograph. Eauclaire describes the photograph's appearance, but she is not very successful even at this, so intent is she on ignoring the referent. Can you tell that there is a bicycle in this picture? If not, it's because to Eauclaire it's not a bicycle, but only a "zone of dark and light," a "reflecting metal surface". Any other object that fits this description would have served equally well.

The photo is William Eggleston's "Memphis", a photograph of a suburban sidewalk. On the left we see the fender of a black 1950s automobile; next to it, a child's bicycle. In the center an intense orange flame blazes in a small outdoor barbecue. On the right we see part of a woman's body — a clenched fist, part of an arm, part of a hip.

There is a sense in which this photograph, like many contemporary photographs, invites criticism of this sort. Eggleston is, after all, the premier color photographic formalist. But formalist criticism does not restrict itself to works by those whose sensibilities seem to invite it. As a way of looking at photographs, it imposes a formalist interpretation on work that otherwise would not be seen as formalist.

Eggleston's photograph could have been analyzed differently. There is even a clumsy attempt by Eauclaire later in her book to do this, in order to make Eggleston fit into another of her categories. But she is clearly at a loss as to how to look at the work dialectically; instead, she mystifies the picture with a symbolist interpretation of "an allegory about the failure and renewal of life, or about good and evil, or the corruption of innocence."[7]

Here is another example of the impotence of this type of criticism. This review by Colin Westerbeck appeared in the May 1982 issue of *Artforum:*

> **On entering James Welling's show, I came to a photograph that seemed a little obscure. The top three fourths of it were absolutely black, so nothing could be made of that part of it at all. And across the bottom there was a broken pattern of whiteness. It occurred to me that it might just be some game Welling was up to in the darkroom... but then I rejected that thought. There was unquestionably something there, but what thing? I must try to be accurate... I must be true to the ideas and feelings I had at the time. What I saw seemed to me, basically, a bunch of**

**white *schmutz*.**

**Moving on to the next photograph, I took hope. It turned out that I was looking at a series; whatever was in the first picture, it was also in the second. Now I was getting somewhere, except that this photograph seemed to be identical to the original one. I studied it more closely. Basically, it was just the same *schmutz*. I moved on to the third picture.**

**It was the same, too. And the fourth. The same. The fifth. Same. The sixth. Same. There were ten photographs in the series, all identical. I walked across the gallery to look at something else for a while, and what I found there was a second series. The whiteness had definitely been rearranged. You couldn't fool me. But outside of that, the series was the same unvarying repetition of the same indecipherable subject. Then suddenly, just when I least expected it, the light dawned. In the middle of the series was a single photograph printed light enough so that all of the detail had not been suppressed. What I had been looking at was a loosely folded drape in whose folds some plaster chips or scraps of paper had been thrown. I left the gallery filled with self-satisfaction, I was a great critic. I had been able to recognize *schmutz* when I saw it.**[8]

In regarding only "the ideas and feelings I had at the time," Westerbeck is undialectically refusing to look outside the photographs for their meaning. He does not attempt to place the photos in any context that might reveal something about them. Again, this work could have been interpreted dialectically. There is nothing in the work itself to prohibit such an interpretation. We want to know why Eauclaire's and Westerbeck's way-of-looking was chosen, and why so many others choose it as well. Since criticism parallels developments in art, which in turn reflect developments in society as a whole, we need to look at these interactions. We want to know what this criticism might tell us about the nature of our society.

What are the characteristics of formalist criticism, and what assumptions are inherent in it? First, it refuses to look outside the work of art for its meaning. It sees the work as a self-contained, autonomous whole, divorced from any relation to any sphere of existence beyond Art. Moreover, it refuses to look beyond appearances. Formalism would insist that appearance *is* essence. Therefore, criticism is reduced to the description of appearances. We get Westerbeck's review. The second tendency of formalist criticism is to ignore content. It reduces all subject matter to insignificance with the deft vocabulary of art criticism; it speaks only of shape, line, tone, color, balance, form, composition. We get Eauclaire's analysis.

Underlying these traits are two basic assumptions: that art is an isolated realm of experience, a game pursued for its own sake; and that form and content are polar opposites which will never meet. There is a focus on form to the exclusion of content; an inability to see form *and* content or content *as* form. The problem lies in the totalizing quality of these assumptions. It's not that formalist criticism cannot tell us anything about a photograph, but that it claims to tell us everything we need to know.

These ideas are closely associated with modernism, which arose at a particular time in history in dialectical interaction with other developments in society. The most important of these was the flowering of late capitalism. Modernism did not exist without capitalism and probably could not exist without it. To assume that capitalism could have had no impact on the arts while at the same time revolutionizing the rest of society is to fall into the art-for-art's-sake, anti-materialist trap capitalism has set up in its own defense.

The relationship between form and content has been debated since Aristotle, and at times form has been considered more important than content; but only

in the 20th century has the phenomenon of "formalism" in art and criticism arisen, wherein the significance of content has been totally denied. The idea of art-for-art's-sake, as Ernest Fischer points out in his historical survey of art, "arose from the artist's determination not to produce commodities in a world where everything becomes a saleable commodity."[9] The notion of art-for-art's-sake arises as naturally as the bourgeois economist's concept of production-for-production's-sake.

How does capitalism create the context for modernist practice and criticism? One answer is that it creates a distance between art and life experience, a distance so great that even Marx treated art only marginally and did not make a specific study of the art that was arising out of and in reaction to capitalist society. That is our task.

Marxist criticism is deeply concerned with how "art" and "the artist" are integrated into capitalist society. Marxist critics examine the ideologies that support the process of art-making under capitalism, and how these ideologies function to maintain the status quo of society. Fredric Jameson put it this way in his essay, "Toward a Dialectical Criticism":

> **What characterizes the new modernism is that it is popular. That can only mean that there has to be something socially useful about such art from the point of view of the existing socio-economic structure, or something deeply suspect about it, if your view is a revolutionary one.**[10]

Some of the best work in this direction has been done by photographer and critic Allan Sekula. His essay, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary", is both an insightful analysis of the dialectical interaction of modernism and capitalism and an attempt to define an alternative and oppositional praxis:

> **In capitalist society artists are represented as possessing a privileged subjectivity, gifted with an uncommon unity of self and labor. Artists are the bearers of an uncommon autonomy that is systematically and coverty denied the economically objectified mass spectator, the wage earner, and the woman who works without wages in the home.**[11]

We have to subvert this dichotomy, suggests Sekula, not by denying the positive aspects of art-making, but by investigating the other functions of this fundamental human activity:

> **I'm not suggesting that we ignore or suppress the creative, affective and expressive aspects of cultural activity. To do so would be to play into the ongoing technocratic obliteration of human creativity. What I am arguing is that we understand the extent to which art *redeems* a repressive social order by offering a wholly imaginary transcendence, a false harmony, to docile and isolated spectators. The cult of private experience, of the entirely affective relation to culture demanded by a consumerist economy, serves to obliterate momentarily, on weekends, knowledge of the fragmentation, boredom, and routinization of labor, knowledge of the self as commodity.**[12]

Of course, not all art is equally well-suited to this purpose. Art that bears too close a relation to the reality it wants to obliterate would not be acceptable. We might be tempted to think of photography as such an art. So we need a way of looking at photographs — at all art — so uniquely suited to capitalism that capitalism might have done well to invent it. This is the formalist way-of-looking. "Formalism neutralizes and renders equivalent; it is a universalizing system of reading. Only formalism can unite all the photographs in the world in one room, mount them behind glass, and *sell* them."[13]

Sekula sees a situation with far wider-ranging implications than for the sphere of art.

> **The problem of modernist closure is larger than any one**

**intellectual discipline, yet affects them all... In political-economic terms, modernism stems from the fundamental division of 'mental' and 'manual' labor under advanced capitalism. The former is further specialized and accorded certain privileges, as well as a managerial relation to the latter, which is fragmented and degraded.**[14]

The division and stratification of work and life which occurs under capitalism may help account for the modern artist's and critic's perception of form as divisible from content. They are unable to see a unity that appears different when viewed from different angles.

What does Sekula suggest artists do? As a beginning point, "Suppose we regard art as a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystical, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expressionism and experience..."[15] The group of artists who are beginning to work from this premise is very small. Until there are more, critics who are required to look at work that fits the modernist mold can work dialectically by judging how well the work succeeds on its own terms while at the same time showing how these terms have been conditioned and are unnecessarily circumscribed by society.

These are steps in the right direction. Perhaps it's all we can do for now, for as long as capitalism continues to produce alienated people, so will alienated people continue to produce alienated art and use it as a therapeutic respite from the social world. In capitalist society, making art is one of the few ways of feeling your individuality. Joel Meyerowitz had this to say about why he makes art:

**You feel your self in relation to its otherness... whether you're making images, poetry, painting, or love, you should be totally enraptured by the experience [a wholeness of experience only the privileged can experience under capitalism]. That's what it's about — the location of the subject, it's about passage of the experience itself, in it wholeness, through you, back into the world, selected out by your native instincts. That's what artists do. They select their experiences from the totality of raw experience, and it's the quality of their experience that makes them visible to the world.**[16]

Plakhanov put it another way in his *Art and Social Life*:

**The tendency of artists, and of those who have a lively interest in art, toward art for art's sake, arises when they are in hopeless disaccord with the social environment in which they live... The so called utilitarian view of art, that is to say, the inclination to attribute to works of art the significance of judgment of the phenomena of life, and its constant accompaniment of glad readiness to participate in social struggles, arises and becomes stronger whenever a mutual sympathy exists between individuals more or less actively interested in artistic creation and some considerable part of society.**[17]

If, in our society, "hopeless disaccord" is unavoidable, how do we avoid both the "art-for-art's-sake" escapism and the dead-end trap of formalist art and criticism? And how can dialectics help us?

Marxist dialectics renders a strictly formalist approach meaningless by rejecting its essential assumption of the split between form and content. For a Marxist, form and content cannot be separated because each depends on the other for its existence. In his essay on dialectical criticism, Jameson says:

**Dialectical thought in this respect can be seen as a**

**reversal of the form-dominated, artisanally-derived model developed by Aristotle. Here form is regarded not as the initial pattern or mold, as that from which we start, but rather as that with which we end up, as but the final articulation of the deeper logic on the content itself.**[18]

To speak of form without content or content without form would be like speaking of production without consumption or consumption without production, something Marx was so completely unable to conceive of that he could not define either term without including its opposite.

**Not only is production immediately consumption and consumption immediately production, not only is production a means for consumption and consumption the aim of production... each supplies the other with its object... but also, each of them, apart from being immediately the other, in addition to this creates the other in completing itself, and creates itself as the other.**[19]

Marx's writings provide the very models for the dialectical thinking that cannot separate form and content. For Marxism, the "form" of capitalism cannot be separated from the "content" of life, even when that content is ostensibly not directly an economic function — social relations, literature, art.

**For Marxism the adequation of object to subject, or of form to content, can exist as an imaginative possibility only where in some way or another it has been concretely realized in social life itself, so that formal relationships, as well as formal defects, are taken as the sign of some deeper configuration which it is the task of criticism to explore.**[20]

Here we see also why Marxist dialectics cannot accept formalism's second assumption, that of the division between art and life. Art is not a phenomenon arising spontaneously from a void; its limits and possibilities are conditioned by social life and economic relations. To accept art as untainted by life is to willfully blind oneself to these connections, an act which serves to uphold the interests of the capitalist system.

Therefore art cannot be meaningfully criticized without expanding the critical focus to include larger social and historical realities. To those who would object that the criticism of an art-object-in-itself is harmless, we reply with Jameson that this "is itself an ideological act, to the extent that it encourages belief in some ahistorical essence of art and of cultural activity in general.[21]

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We have seen where undialectical criticism leads us. It remains to look at what dialectical criticism is like in practice. In looking at two examples of dialectical criticism, we should keep in mind that in any dialectical review the critic must choose between dialectical strategies in order to find the most appropriate one for a given work.

Here is a review of the James Welling work that was criticized by Colin Westerbeck in the example given earlier. It appeared in an article by Abigail Solomon-Godeau that linked Welling's work to work by other contemporary photographers, Vikky Alexander and Barbara Kruger:

**In these pictures, shards and particles of some white substance (frozen phyllo dough, as it happens, but this is of no account) are scattered on a dark ground. In the high-contrast black-and-white prints, the fragments and particles cluster at the base of the image, suggesting anything from glacial fragments on an inky sea to some strange species of mineralogical phenomena. The**

James Welling, *The Waterfall*, 1981

**variation from image to image is at once minimal and absolute; a different distribution of black, white, and gray tones is, after all, what distinguishes any photograph from another. In the Cibachrome photographs, however, the undifferentiated black ground is revealed as a swath of velvet, the conventional background for the display — the presentation — of luxury objects. The luxury object is, of course, disturbingly, conspicuously absent... Were a Cartier bracelet to have been planted in those velvet folds, no such bafflement would have ensued. But in Welling's work the absence of the object is synonymous with the absence of the subject, not as a strategy of ersatz photographic formalism, but as a way of playing off what we expect the photograph to be setting up: a stable meaning, a "naturalized" content.**

**Welling is endeavoring to**

**produce what I can only describe as meta-art photography: simultaneously heightening and recapitulating the canonical conventions of a certain type of conventional art photography (abstracted form, exquisite printing and hence, assumed depth of meaning) that are then revealed as operative codes... Welling's photographic work is a model of precision, rigor, and seriousness. That much of it is also hauntingly beautiful is a byproduct of his enterprise, another type of play-off — in this case, the very codes of the aestheticization of the photograph. In common with the work of these other photographic pasticheurs [Kruger and Alexander], his works derive their authority from the consciousness of the structural and institutional determinants of all photographic uses, function, readings.**[22]

While the first reviewer looked only at surfaces and found nothing to write about, Solomon-Godeau was able to place this work in the context of work done by other contemporary photographers whose work is on the surface very different but who share a common *modus operandi*. She was also able to see the work in its relation to the history of art photography, an angle of looking that yielded suggestive insights.

Ben Lifson's review of one of Nicholas Nixon's recent shows at Light Gallery was accompanied by a reproduction of one of the photographs in the show. The caption pointed out the fundamental contradiction of Nixon's method: "using aristocratic methods to photograph the poor". The photo was "Brixton, London, 1981", a picture of a group of mostly black children on the street taken with an 8 x 10 view camera. The text of the review dealt with the contradiction between Nixon's way of working and his chosen subject matter. Another critic would have ignored the technical side of the work, objecting that it could not be positively deduced from the photos themselves and was extraneous "inside" information which should not enter into a discussion of the work. A dialectical critic understands that the material conditions of the creative process — its "mode of production", to use an economic term — play a large role in determining the character of the finished work and cannot be separated from it. Nowhere is this more true than in photography.

In Nixon's case, Lifson sees the photographer as wanting the technical virtuosity of the 8 x 10-inch camera but also wanting "the small camera's vocabulary of spontaneous human gestures, ephemeral constellations of figures, and fleeting emotions."[23] After a discussion of the laborious process of working with the enormous, stationary camera, Lifson goes on to describe how the camera works to structure the photographs. He also relates Nixon's work to that of Lewis Hine, who dealt with similar subject matter using a similar camera, but in the context of documentary rather than art photography:

**With each exhibition Nixon's characters grow poorer. Because of this his unresolved use of his camera is distressing. For his descriptive idiom is also that of documentary photography; now that he puts his camera more consistently at a child's eye level, it alludes more consistently to Lewis Hine... But it is impossible to separate Hine's forms from the conditions they describe; so, in fact, with Nixon's. Torn shirts, cheap shingles, dirty rooms locate these pictures in terms of class as surely as the fashions he describes locate them in terms of the time. But to work inside the conventions creates a conflict that Nixon's still unresolved idiom can't resolve. His drift toward the grotesque is disturbing. So is his choice of moments when, from the camera's point of view, otherwise serious, comical, or**

**even hostile faces become masks of dullness, hysteria, or even idiocy. These two ungoverned stylistic traits create a vision of the poor as somehow deserving of their poverty because of physical and emotional defects, which Nixon appears to document as he actually documents their milieu. This cannot be what he intends.**[24]

Here, finally, the question arises: what is the political function of dialectical criticism? It is easy to see political significance when photographers deal with explosive subject matter such as Nixon's, but less easy to see it in the case of some other work. When a photographer deals with human subjects and the question of class sympathies comes up, we are in the realm of the overtly political. But even a dialectical critic must look at a wide range of work. S/he may have no choice of what to cover and what to ignore; no matter how interesting or important s/he may find some work, reviewing it may not be possible if it is being shown outside the gallery system or at a non-commercial or unprestigious gallery.

One of the facts of capitalist life is that art is a commodity. Like other commodities, its price depends to some extent on the demands of the market (in the case of art, the collectors). Unlike other commodities, its price is not determined by its value, aesthetic or utilitarian, although its aesthetic value may be seen to be determined by its price. The galleries whose photographers get reviews are likely to be those which attract wealthy collectors, where the work can command high prices simply by virtue of having been shown at these galleries. Most shows — even the dullest space-fillers — at these galleries must be reviewed in the major critical outlets. This often doesn't leave much time or space for reviewing other shows.

Critics may take their reviews to small independent newspapers or magazines only at the cost of reaching a fraction of the audience they would otherwise command, and only if they can afford to work for next-to-nothing. But if they choose to work within the larger system, they can be effective even while subtly working to undermine it.

Given the political climate of our time — the general conservatism apparent in all social realms, the cut-backs in funding for artists in favor of spending for weapons — dialectical critics may have a hard time finding a mouthpiece. These political conditions will also work to ensure that most of the work they will be called on to review will be safe, bland, and popular. The task of critics is to use sound dialectical thinking to review the work so that readers come away with the feeling that not only have they learned something about a particular artwork, but that they have been led to look at it in a way they never would have been able to see on their own. This, in turn, leads them to question their own outlook. Once begun, this questioning will not be confined to the aesthetic domain. This is the base without which any kind of political consciousness is impossible.

To those who would reply that it is not the task of criticism to change the world, I would reply by asking whether or not it is the task of criticism to tell us anything interesting or important about it, and if so, whether existing critical methods are capable of doing so. I feel that the conditions of our times make dialectical criticism absolutely essential; they make anything else irrelevant, if not downright dangerous.

**Endnotes**

1 Or a re-presentation of a re-presentation, as in the work of Sherrie Levine, who rephotographs pictures already made by the likes of Edward Weston and presents them as her own. Her work is discussed in Douglas Crimp's "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism", *October* 15, Winter 1980: "When she showed her photographs [of Weston's male torsos] to a friend, he remarked that they only made him want to see the originals. 'Of course,' she replied, 'and the originals make you want to see the little boy, but when you see the little boy, the art is gone' " (p. 98).

2 The history of photography provides many examples of the fascination of white upper-class photographers with those who have never known privilege. In the case of Diane Arbus, this is her entire reason for photographing, as Susan Sontag points out in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), pp. 42-45.

3 The paradox of the work of those who attempt to override categories by borrowing conventions and appropriating images from advertising, fashion, and journalism (Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman in her early film stills, etc.) is that their reconstructed pictures are so self-consciously created for the galleries, where they are extremely popular. By virtue of being produced for, seen, and sold in galleries, they designate themselves "art".

[4] This may be slowly changing; see Carol Squiers' article on news photographs of the Middle East, *The Village Voice*, August 24, 1982.

[5] Gene Thornton, "Once Again: Does the Camera Lie?" The New York *Times*, May 9, 1981.

[6] Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), p. 24.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

[8] Colin Westerbeck, review of James Welling at Metro Pictures, *Artforum*, May 1982, p. 82.

[9] Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 68.

[10] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 413.

[11] Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)", in *Photography: Current Perspectives* (Rochester, N.Y.: Light Impressions, 1978), pp. 231-235.

[12] *Loc. cit.*

[13] *Loc. cit.*

[14] *Loc. cit.*

[15] *Loc. cit.*

[16] Quoted in Eauclaire, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[17] Quoted in Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

[18] Jameson, *loc. cit.*,

[19] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker, ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 231.

[20] Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

[21] *Loc. cit.*

[22] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Playing in the Fields of the Image," *Afterimage*, Summer 1982, pp. 10-13.

[23] Ben Lifson, "Every Picture Tells a Storyville," *The Village Voice*, December 2-9, 1981.

[24] *Ibid.*

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# Art & School & Dialogue: Masters In Photography (A Script)

**Jno Cook**

Last Critique of John ----

School of Rhetoric and Art

Date ----, Time ----

Jno Cook, *Simulated Graduate Review*

**Dave:** O.K. Are we ready to start? This is John ----. O.K., John, would you tell us who your advisors were, and how many credit hours you took?

**Student:** Josh and Julia; and I took 12 hours.

**Dave:** Well, John, is there anything you want to say about this work? Can you tell us something about it? This is your last critique, is it not?

**Student:** Well no, I don't really have anything to say. But I do have this prepared transcript, which I would like to pass out.

*(A transcript is distributed to the members of the Review Committee.)*

**Bob:** Well, you know, about this work (*he points to the wall*), not this (*the transcript*), I haven't seen this yet, I think, well, it's pretty dumb, common I mean. I mean it's nice to see, the color and all that, but it's not new, pretty disappointing. After last semester, you know, you look at this and you get it, and I feel that the images — I mean, some of the pictures I've seen before — they would hold up by themselves, you don't need the color. And inconsistent, also, the coloring.

**Albert:** I would just like to say, I agree with.., it's just dumb. And to see this work, I mean, we're back to snapshots, to see them redone in this form adds nothing, and it goes only to prove again that as images

they don't stand up by themselves. I mean, I know, some are interesting, and some are cute ones, and there is a striking use of, you know, color, or distortion, or something. But we can't be satisfied with that, can we? What's the point of this manipulation? I mean, even as a statement of the utter middle-class environment we all find ourselves in, it does nothing except to reiterate the fact that, you know, we're all pretty much middle class. It's just vapid, and artless. And, it's like, as art, just this cant. It begs, I mean, I don't agree with...,it's not just the color, I mean it's the presentation, when you see this in terms of the responsibility of the..., or, I suppose, seen in terms of the art world, it, I think, it becomes this nihilistic whining, meaningless and insincere, which in itself is now, I suppose, just habituated convention. But, so, I mean...,I just wanted to say that (*looking at the transcript*). What is this?

**Dave:** *(addressed to student)* John?

*(An explanation of the transcript is made to Albert)*

**Dave:** Well, I don't know about you, but for me some of these are starting to work. It's not the images, although some of them are interesting — and I think it needs a lot more work, this is obviously just a start. I'd be willing to look at it again in about two years. But some of them work, in a way, although some others are just jarring, although, you know, it's his choice to be jarring, and even at that they are interesting.

**Albert:** But David, it's a question of sincerity. Where does all this work come from? It's this off-the-wall suddenness that is bothersome, I mean, I've never seen any of this before, and I think in that it reflects a total lack of content, or, on the other hand this mild... this just touching content here, and there, but never with any intensity..., it's that..., it's the reduction to a color pastiche, like embroidery... In fact, I think that best represents it, just an embroidery on images that are at any rate pretty commonplace and basically uninteresting. Do you... I... That's all. I just...

**Josh:** What bothers me is that John just refuses to settle down. It's been, you know, how many semesters now? And he is still not settled down to a single form, or the exploration of a single issue. I can see humour in the work, that's the one thing it has in common, but I think that's John's humour, and I'm willing to bet a lot of these (pointing at the wall) are personal jokes, things we will never understand. But that's allright, he should be allowed to do that. And the images, too, I see a continuity certainly to other work of his I've seen. But it is the form. Not just the changes every semester, but there seems to be no relationship between what we have been seeing each time. And there is always these words, I mean, here we are again, here we are with another document in our hands.

**Alexander:** I think, perhaps, that we should not neglect that very aspect of this presentation. After all, here we are, engaged in a wide-ranging dialogue, afloat on talk, but with the very script of this critique in hand.

**Bob:** But that's a joke...

**Tim:** Not just a joke, I mean, I think it is, but I think we are at the butt end of it, and in a way I find it insulting, I mean, not just to have this stuff foisted on us, that's one thing, but there's not even an attempt at doing art, producing art, that is, and for another thing, except that they're pretty colorful, I think it's more like an exercise in graphics, and I would want to ask, where is the photography? And, what I mean is, where are the decisions about images? I mean, is this what you want to do? That's what I would like to know, is, just what were the decisions that were made? After last semester I would expect John to settle down to some serious work, but I don't think he's been pinned down on that, I don't know what this is, how it relates.

**Julia:** I agree, I mean it's just not funky enough if it's about presentation, it fails because that process, the sabattier, or whatever it is, it just doesn't go beyond that, but I know, cause I've been told, and I don't know if it's fair to let this out, but it's about not doing content, but then it should deal with presentation, but the consistent size and that graphic-arts process take it back, I mean, reduce it again to being about that. I would have liked to see this transcript... seen *this* used as a script, and everyone just read their part from it, and leave no time for discussion. I think that says something, or would have said something.

**Albert:** Well, yes, if that's what it's about, the political atmosphere, and the power relationships in..., and the general depravity of graduate school, but on the other..., but also, you see, I think, then having work up..., but then only in having this script..., it's sort of like the work of that neoexpressionist performance artist..., or like the concept of a play within a play, but you see, in not being able to read it you're dealing again with the clammy boredom of critiques..., the endless....Well, I don't know, you know, there's the potential of realizing the type of

work that alludes to the contextual ambiguity of..., like Brown's writings, or that book by Barth[*sic*]. I'm not much for that sort of, you know, cooled-out rhetoric, it just brings it all down to that quasi-scientific approach of, you know, let's look at what we have at the base level of things, it's..., it's sort of an ontological relativism that just totally fails in looking at..., a hermeneutic retreat, and..., and what I really wanted to say, is, that if, you know, if that was the purpose it would have been better accomplished, it seems to me, by just blank paper on the wall....

**Alexander:** Well, that's what we have here, but it's *us* as the *tabula rasa;* we are the blank paper upon which this critique is being written. Perhaps we should check with the transcript. Perhaps we have there an exact record of what is here presently shifting into the past before our eyes and ears. It might suggest that all critiques are interchangeable.

**Albert:** But Alex, that just isn't true, I mean, not about what you said, but being handed a document which can't be read, it's like dealing with things that aren't here. I mean, I think, what's the point of it? Why the obtuseness, why provide a prop that can't be used? And, you see, there is absolutely no hint of that as intent in these pictures..., I..., where is the least suggestion of any relationship between these and this? I just don't think.... Oh well.

**Alexander:** Precisely, Al.

**Julia:** That's what I meant, if we would have been able to read it, but all we have really is... this.

**Bob:** Right. I think that's just dumb, if, you know, this were a performance, if, you know, we were to read this out loud, then we should have been told, it should have been made clear, but it wasn't, and we should concentrate on the images, rather than discuss a transcript which, you know, is for all practiacal purposes non-existent.

**Dave:** Well, I for one would like to return to the images. I think if words were that important they should have been incorporated in the images, but they are not here.

**Peter:** In a way this work reminds me of an L.A. artist, he's..., he showed work once that was very similar to this, and it was about the facility some of us have with photographic images, I mean creating them, it takes you to another place, once you realize that, and I see this work in similar terms. It is also about that self-imposed creative boredom, where one changes the rules, the rules of applying color, here, in an effort to break through, to come to some point beyond tradition, where new things are happening, sort of.

**Dave:** Are these to be seen in a certain order? *(addressed to student)* Is that why they are marked first, second, and so on?

**Student:** No.

**Peter:** As I understand it — right? — they were done in this order, but that has nothing to do with seeing them in the same order, it only established a rule for going from one to the next.

**Bob:** But what is the rule, you know? I don't see it. How, for that matter, do you select the next one?

**Peter:** Well, I don't know either, but I think it doesn't matter, it's the results that count, and they don't always happen, but look here.... *(points out certain work)*

**Bob:** Yes. Well. Of course this is his last semester, you know, and, of course, we are going easy on him. But if this work would have been shown earlier..., I mean it just doesn't stand up as being about nothing. If it's about nothing it's about something, and not really interesting. I mean, you know, I've seen much more exciting things done by him — in the past, I mean — and the point is, if it isn't about content, then it's about form, and *that* is its content. Another point, you know, that it fails on.

**Josh:** I think what bothers me most is the implication that John doesn't, can't, won't take art seriously. Each semester now the work has been about John, about what he thinks, I think, but has not been directed outward. I think John's come to an end, that this is about getting stuck, and the work, the marks, are just about attempting to make art in the face of... as a reaction to the faculty. Maybe about being in art school. And what is he going to do for art after he's out of school?

**Dave:** Is it? There's something to be said, though, for just keeping going. I mean, I know, we all come to these points where you just have to force yourself to continue.

**Bob:** I think if it's that, then his children should have filled in the colors, you know, to really look like scrawls...

**Alexander:** Maybe they did.

**Bob:** ...but they're too tentative, too unsure to pass, you know, for that. There's no depth to

them, inconsistent, nothing really breaks with tradition...

**Dave:** Are you satisfied with this work? *(addressed to student)* Which do you think are most successful? Have you looked at Ittens, or Albers?

**Bob:** Maybe we should ask, did he ever take a color course? Fundamentals, I mean.

**Josh:** But does he really need to? Granted that they are about coloring, I think the inconsistent formal concerns are more like a spoof of formalism....

**Alex:** Post-rationalism?

**Josh:** ... No, not like that. In a way I see John's work more as just being primitive, in the style, sort of, of the primitive, but the problem as I see it is not in the work per se, but in the attitude, John's concern with telling us something about how he thinks, and you have to ask, what is the pressing need for that? Why didn't you do a slide show *(addressed to student)*? But this, here, it's so elusive, that, you know, I don't get it....

**Alexander:** Relative to that comment, there is something Berger mentions, namely that the unwillingness of the primitive to compromise his style, even in the face of full awareness of the style of the Academy, is lodged in the conviction rising out of a lived reality which has already set him apart from the mainstream of society. Additionally, and to expand on something that was mentioned earlier, we could ask, how do you break with tradition when the sum total of the last fifty years has been a continuous series of breaks with tradition? At this point in time in order to break with tradition one simply remains within it. As an example we could point to much of the work coming out of L.A. currently, which is precisely about that, that is, it is about looking as if it is about something, whereas it turns out *not* to be about what it looks to be about. But.. that's not what we have here. What we have here, if our gauging of the intent has been correct, is an attempt to embody nothingness with... with what? How do you enclose emptiness, emptiness, that is, in terms of the banality of this work, except, at the extreme, to use the presentation as a form for the whole?

**Albert:** But Alexander... How can you say that? It presumes that vagueness is subtlety, and that it is our task to construct significant meaning from missing evidence. This text is inadmissible... I mean, I think you could make the point of the ineffectiveness of the artist in accomplishing political change, but not in terms of meaningless content. I mean, I just don't see it. And to suggest that we are puppets in a schema that encompasses the whole of this, with Mr. ----'s work at the center of it, is just stretching it. It's like, you know: everyone is famous for ten minutes, and all this private indulgence brought to public display through our grace and favor! I think you have to ask, Who's holding the strings? And especially I want to point out again that I think it's all pretty limited anyway. How important is it — to go after critiques? You see? But what I really wanted to say was, I think that if you understand the Modernist tenet of change for change's sake as an attempt to define art as radical, then you cannot just suggest that this work is radical because it now does not participate in any change, that in not being about anything it is radical by not being radical. I mean, that's just futile. We've left the minimalist solution behind long ago, or the just-seeing-how-it-looks type of photography. And if the tradition today is one of change, then you have to admit that this work falls completely within the limits of the tradition, because, after all, its... they are... they're these obscure colored drawing-like... you know, they are certainly not traditional photographs, I mean traditional in the sense of just being a photograph — you know: with zones in them, and all that Ansel Adams stuff — since they are *not* that, but are different just like everything else we see here is different — you know, all-the-same-different — it isn't radical because it's the same. I mean, I think, perhaps there's some confusion about the word "radical" and... I think, today you have to be reactionary to be radical. But that then becomes such a fascist concept that... But, you know, you have that: an incipient fascism at the root of all you believe in. But what I wanted to say is that illustration, you know, isn't art — even if it's interesting. And I don't find these very interesting.

**Tim:** I think — I know John — I think that just in terms of the images, however, it's about the city, the landscape, about friends and family. For one thing, I'm not at all impressed about this so-called script, and if it really were part of this work, he's smart enough to have pointed this out, and for another thing, I think it's just disruptive, I think it says, if it says anything, that John doesn't want another critique. That's what I think.

**Bob:** Well, I know, we all know that, it's always about his family, you know. Snapshots.

**Julia:** I think we ought to read from the script; I wanted to walk out, I mean I requested it.

**Alexander:** You said it.

**Albert:** Said what?

**Bob:** I think the script, though, has nothing to do with this work, you know. I only see it as a cover for the failure in producing, you know, anything of note.

**Dave:** I would like to put this transcript aside and just go to a discussion of the work, including this transcript we've been reading from; it's getting a little boring, you know, and I think it's useless to go on. Is that agreeable to you *(addressed to student)*?

**Student:** All right.

**Albert:** Yes, it does seem sort of silly for us to be reading a script which deals with not reading it, it is sort of... I don't really see the point of it, you know. I think it is sort of wasting my time, all our time, and I can't say I agree with what I'm supposed to have said, either. I think, in fact, that the characterization was a little overdone, that, you know, it was a little too cliquish, there's a certain smugness that comes through, it's that, you know, sort of, like we are the photo audience, and isn't it cute how well I know all these professors and their insipid remarks, and look how predictable they are. I think that, you know, this might have been much more effective if it were the sort of general comments, sort of tossed together, maybe of 3 x 5 cards, and we would just pick a card and read from it, and then look stupid, and then everyone could have a good laugh, and you know, well, that's all.

**Bob:** I agree, you know, as a critique of critiques it's sort of low-key, not very effective, it just doesn't get the issues across, and, you know, I really objected to how many times you had me say "you know."

**Tim:** And there's people here that never got to say anything, from Art History, if I have that correct, and Ceramics, that's one thing, and for them this is got to be like watching an in-joke from the outside, and I don't think that's fair, I mean, if this is got to be for a general audience, I mean, if it is like a performance, you know, they don't get anything out of it, that's another thing. And I don't really agree with what I said, you know, I don't even say that much at critiques.

**Josh:** Well, John and I talked about this, and that point came up, about satire, and I feel that he ought to be able to extend it beyond the faculty, to a broader audience. I also disagree with the words he put in my mouth, I don't think I really view his work in that light, although I agree with some of it, I mean, there is a real problem of what John is going to do when he no longer has an audience. And I think it's just meaningless to have a dialogue for people who aren't even here, like Alexander, for one.

**Alexander:** Well, going back a little bit, first of all, it's not satire, and secondly, I think the point of effectiveness is not at issue here. Maybe wasting time, but that's another issue altogether. I think what *is* at issue here, and I faintly recall having said something like this in the script, or maybe someone else said it, is the question of what all *these* words have to do with *those* images. *That* is what I think needs to be addressed, because *that* is what I see as the failure in this work.

**Peter:** I think it is speculative, they're both speculative I mean, both experimental, and that's what ties them together. It may in fact be about the fact that they don't go together.

**Dave:** Well, I for one don't see that, I mean, all these words just leave me cold, it's confusing, it detracts from the images. You know, if all this work is supposed to be about his family, where does this script fit in?

**Peter:** I think it may be that we are the audience, which, in a way, is limiting, and that the manipulation of us as an audience is the goal, in a way.

**Dave:** Well, there is nothing wrong with that. Just because we usually assume a gallery audience, you know. A professional artist career. But I suppose when you're in school you do work for your teachers. You could look at it that way.

**Tim:** Maybe the script is about just sitting in the kitchen, writing this script and grinning...

**Albert:** Yes, that's..., I'd just like to say, that's such a compulsive image, like a self-obsessed Vasari, you know, the third-rate artist writing about himself and taking it all so seriously. But, you know, I think: it's not like that, unless, of course, you think of it like that.

**Alexander:** What?

**Albert:** Well, you know, imagine the..., but I don't think it really comes through, and I think perhaps it should, but it makes you think of the artist as this self-centered fool, complacently blind to his own ineffectiveness, but overawed by this feeling of unique creativity, and then our reading from this script becomes, you know, sort of the thing you put on everyone else, or the..., or how you see the over-aged matrons picking away at their paintings on Saturdays at the School, and sort of like you see them and you say to yourself, just let them be, let them fool themselves, and anyway, they're happy in their struggle — for expression — and they'll work it all

out, and a lot of students too, you say, why nip them in the bud with intimidation, just let them all be irrelevant, there's no room for genius anymore anyway. And, but I think, you know, it's all so slippery that, that if this script continues any further it's suggesting, sort of begging, for that treatment, and Mr. ----, you know, wasting our time, and insulting us, we should just cut it short, walk out. The whole point of this script, carrying on with it any more, is just this histrionic argument against critiques, and you know, I get it, you see, that's all, that's all I wanted to say.

**Alexander:** Oh.

**Tim:** I think you just have to make a decision.

**Bob:** I think we should stop here.

**Peter:** No, not yet. What I wanted to say before was, when I mentioned that it was experimental, which I think it is, is that if it is experimental it is also inconclusive, it's..., you don't know what is going to happen when you start something like this, you don't know where it is going to end up, and maybe nothing will come of it, and maybe something will.

**Bob:** Well, what bothers me, you know, is that this just isn't, you know, genuine, that this script is just trying to, you know, to cover all the bases, and to suggest more than there is. I mean, the fact is, we're not talking about the work, the images, you know. I think we should stop here.

**Dave:** Okay, let's stop here and discuss this. Anyone? Has anyone seen this before?

**Bob:** Well, I think, you know, it was just too much, too extended I mean, and what was difficult, you know, was to try and follow what everyone else was saying, because, you know, you were always looking at that script to see where your own part was, so it's kind of like, you know, I don't know what was said by anyone else, I mean.

**Julia:** But that happens at real critiques too...

**Alexander:** This isn't real?

**Julia:** ... that you spend all your time trying to think of something clever to say, and you just don't hear what everyone else is saying. And another thing that I noticed, was the total lack of helpful suggestions, I mean, no one said, why don't you try this, or try that, or have you looked at it this way or that?

**Alexander:** Well, he never listens, you know. But, now that we are unleashed from this script, I would like to remark on the interesting analogue that this piece develops between author and artist. Let me clarify this. The spoofish quality of this script, which certainly questions the deadly seriousness with which we invest these proceedings, and which you might also see in these images, is, I would hope, not offered with malice, or just to be contentious, but as a sort of interactive criticism. If anything, a little *more* spoofing might have been in order. Looking back over previous critiques — John's, that is — you might have noticed similar projects, all of which involved questions of epistemology.

**Dave:** Is that it?

**Alexander:** That's what it says here.

**Dave:** No, I mean, is that it? My script just ends here.

**John:** Mine too.

**Albert:** Is it over?

**Tim:** Okay, is it over? Okay, I would like to ask, ask John, okay, so what is the purpose of this? Why this extended dialogue which leads nowhere, and just seems to try to cover all the possibilities. That's one thing, and God, I'm starting to sound like that script...

*(End of Transcript)*

**Jno Cook** is a Chicago cinematographer and photographer, currently working on the complete history of the universe.

# Book Reviews

**Silver Lining**

**Anne Noggle**

**Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984**

**$65.00 HB**

"Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks."

*— Roland Barthes*

Anne Noggle's photography is subversive, for it thinks and makes us think about things we probably don't want to confront: aging and mortality. But, as difficult as these issues are to contemplate, time and again I have come away from the work energized, for while Noggle is a realist and a pragmatist, she is at the same time a lover of life, a seer of truth, and a reviver and maker of myths.

Noggle's work, first and foremost, is consummately personal. One senses a determined unwillingness to separate biography from art and art from life. Her visual language is not that of academe — it is of the real world and real life, of empirical concerns rather than intellectualized academic posturing. Noggle faces the issues of her life head on, and it is difficult if not impossible to read the images in any manner other than that which she intended.

Noggle's self-portraits are a visual journal of introspection, passage, and change, their power residing in their relentless auto-surveillance. In the most self-obsessed and disarmingly ironic of these images, she permits the world a voyeuristic inspection of an extremely private and humbling experience in her life — her face lift. She scrutinizes her own vanity, acknowledges its superficiality, but accepts the fact that she will enjoy having a more youthful face, and allows herself the gift. The contradiction of the pride that motivated her desire for the operation is completely neutralized by the strong ego which makes the act public. It is the ultimate purging of pretension and vanity and the only conceit Noggle allows herself.

*Face Lift No. 3* is a particularly significant image to the body of Noggle's work because it persuades the viewer to trust her implicitly. Unlike Frank, Avedon, Winogrand, and Arbus, here there is never a sense that a judgment is being made or that a lie is being told. Her portraits don't flatter, but neither are they unkind. Noggle loves and respects the people she photographs: they are not curiosities, but rather they are herself, she is them, and ultimately they are us. Anne, Agnes, Yolanda, Shelley, Ruth Leakey, Dorothy Mattox, N.B., and J.E. are co-conspirators in the truth-saying, each a triumphant eccentric.

These qualities reveal Noggle's skill as a maker and reviver of myths. Levi-Strauss has observed that "myths are crucial cultural means of resolving or mediating critical binary oppositions such as life-death, nature-culture, matrilineal-patrilineal." Noggle deals very directly with death in the person of Agnes, her mother. Within a period of 10 years, she chronicles Agnes' gradual physical decline. There is sadness in these images, but at the same time there is courageous acceptance of the inevitable for both Anne and Agnes. This group, perhaps more than any other, affirms life by accepting death and in doing so makes the latter less threatening and the former more valuable. This treasure Noggle finds in life is emphasized again and again in her self-portraits. *Stonehenge Decoded*, a 1977 image of the artist's nude torso, is an unrestrained celebration of a strong female presence, an equal part of culture as well as nature. Her body is a monolith incised with runic imprints, firmly planted in the vast New Mexico landscape, an aging but ageless earth mother, a guardian figure keeping watch over the primal Southwest.

Interspersed throughout the book are images of Noggle driving. A symbol of freedom and mobility, her car now replaces the planes she once flew as a pilot in the 40's and 50's. Reminiscences of that time and that freedom are also reflected in the cover photograph, which pictures Noggle ascending into the sky, her arms (which in reality held her camera) extending to the edges of the image as if they were wings. The tail of the plane is behind her head and the Southwest landscape her backdrop. There is a strange sense of urgency in most of these photographs that seems to be mirrored in what Noggle identifies as a credo: "I am filled with dread that I will wake up and find I have become a completely rational being, with a finite set of values, within whose framework I must mind my manners and dream my dreams."

The most uncomfortable images for me are a group entitled "Silver Lining," portraits of married couples who have been together for many years. These images reveal things which most us would rather not know. They are startlingly frank images of couples who share the same space but who are

nonetheless detached from one another. The women's faces and bodies expose their stories, while the men mask their emotions as they recede, both physically and psychologically, into the images. The "Silver Lining" images are best understood when put beside a poem by Noggle which mourns the loss of a lover whose plane went down in the North Sea:

*Where are you tonight while the sky reflects my solitary presence.*
*Where are you now, those of you who might whisper I love you,*
*are you in a watery grave down under the sea with a picture of me smiling in your hip pocket.*
*Where did all the promise go where did all the friends go. Have we dissolved into the past,*
*are we granny or auntie or that old lady down the street. I have lost my way and my face reminds me of that.*
*Every stop and start, love and loss legible.*
*A whole individual story and who will read it. Who will look at my face and find me there?*

The "Silver Lining" images and this piece of poetry are inextricably connected. The title of the series is obviously a reference to the phrase, "Every dark cloud has a silver lining." Or does every silver lining have a dark cloud? Perhaps the memory of love, what it could have been, and what replaces it, is more substantial than the actual union.

Noggle's intense scrutiny of herself and her intimate friends empower the viewer with superhuman sight. By all rights, we should not be able to see and know as much as these photographs tell us. But we *can* go beneath the surface; in fact, we can become deeply submerged in the complexities of these lives and are given privileged information in order to do so. The images are like x-rays into the psyche. We participate in the pain, vicariously experience the aging, and come to understand that the self-consciousness of youth gives way to self-knowledge, acceptance, and wisdom. The images make us believe that the later part of one's life is a state of higher grace, a realm in which the trivial and insignificant are seen for what they are, and a time during which the "built-in crap detector" of which Hemingway spoke is finally in full operation.

A book is the perfect vehicle for Noggle's work. Beyond the obvious intimacy which the form allows, it provides a context in which all of her images can exist on three intertwined but distinct levels. The photographs are seen first in their manifest form of surface appearance. This reading is quite immediate, for all of the images are extremely direct on the surface, visually uncomplicated.

The internal complexity, richness of the images, and brilliance of Noggle's vision become most apparent at the next level. The viewer becomes a silent interlocutor in a conversation with Noggle. Personal stories begin to be unveiled through use of cultural codes. Combined with the manner in which Noggle unfolds her narrative, this subvocal discourse approaches epic proportions. Noggle is a consummate storyteller who fuses her knowledge and personal experience into an impassioned sub-structure of connotation.

Noggle then sutures her images together to create a group of internal sequences that orchestrate yet another level of meaning. Unlike an exhibition that can be viewed arbitrarily in any direction, the sequencing in book form is controlled. While each photograph constitutes its own individual dialog, the linear movement from one image to the next illuminates a sub-text of further comparison, suggestion, and allusion.

The introduction is peppered with Noggle's wit, which puts the reader in direct contact with her intelligence and humor. The text ends with a speech Noggle delivered to the Class of 1983 at the Portland School of Art in Maine:

**Living in itself doesn't have a value for you as an artist unless what you have thought and done — the fright and delight and the gin and sin and children and morning light and all the rest — ride together. Then one day you are, as I am now, up here, speaking with the voice that has called the control tower in Eagle Pass, Texas, using these hands that have so recently held that camera in Seattle, Washington, standing on these feet that loved to dance in the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago — and it all makes sense and it all adds up. I am alive and well and living in Albuquerque.**

Anne Noggle sees life very clearly. Without pretense or fluff, she tells the truth as she knows it. Her immutable sense of her own sexuality permeates these images, which might explain why, when taken as a whole, her pictures emphatically

deny the operative cultural stereotypes of feminine beauty and being. She is an iconoclast speaking of issues that remain anachronistically impolite, asserting a female voice made resonant by a complement of life and art.
*Barbara DeGenevieve*

**Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915**

**Peter Bacon Hales**

**Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1984**

**$47.95 HB**

Photographs aren't just for looking at anymore. No, photographs are and have been for some time the objects — some would say victims — of closer and closer close readings. Said readings range from the inspired to the quixotic, from the accurate to the so what?, and are often worth considerably more than their established allotment of a thousand words. Or so their close readers would have us believe. They find texts, subtexts and maybe even pretexts. And they are known to find encoded in photographs information no one else can (or will) see.

Happily, this is not the case with the image-readings in Peter Bacon Hale's *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915*. Hales's analyses are most interesting, seem reasonable and are obviously the result of long and hard study. Hales took his degree in American Studies — he now teaches in the History of Architecture and Art Department at the University of Illinois's Chicago Circle campus — and his book is necessarily interdisciplinary; photographs are placed in contexts, contexts are well established.

For example: in the books's first chapter, "Development of an Urban Photographic Style, 1839-1870," Hale discusses a seemingly mundane ambrotype of Henry Klinkel's Lager Beer Saloon (pl. 11). "This apparently artless, stereotypical group portrait deserves our serious attention," he writes,

**for it indicates the extraordinary range of implications the best commercial operators could encode into their views. The prominent inclusion of women and children in the scene makes this a portrait of a community rather than simply a symbol of entrepreneurial success. The photographer's decision to pose a man on the roof of the saloon in such a way that he mirrors the keg-keeper in the advertising sign was not, as it might appear, a formal nicety; in the photograph, the figure stands with a flag rather than a beer keg, thus declaring the Americanness of the German beer saloon in a time and place when nativist sentiment and temperance campaigns threatened Chicago's German-American saloons. Within this historical context, the picture served the saloon-proprietor client as an emblem of community and visual proof of the compatibility of German and American lifestyles. Framed behind the bar, such a picture would be a continual reminder to patrons and proprietor alike of the cultural significance of the saloon.**

**Views of this sort were made in virtually all the cities of the frontier areas...** (pp. 22-23)

The above could serve as something of a litmus test for would-be readers of *Silver Cities*, for in each of the book's five chapters Hales produces similar sorts of readings. His ability to do so rests partly in his academic training, and, also, in the fact that he spent years plowing through archives across the country looking for what he calls "formulae or 'pictorial conventions'" in the enormous body of photographs made of our cities in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As Hales traveled from collection to collection, he found, he says, "to my surprise, the patterns appeared almost without effort — and reappeared in city after city. Of course the emphasis shifted depending on locale, but the deceptively simple question, 'how did photographers deal with the subject of the city?' soon appeared to have an answer — rich and complex, but nonetheless accessible and ripe for analysis."

*Silver Cities's* first three chapters — "Development of an Urban Photographic Style, 1839-1870," "Grand Style Urban Photography, 1870-1893" and "At Its Peak: Grand Style Photography and the World's Columbian Exposition" —show how city photography evolved from description and/or cataloguing into something grandiose and with near-mythic implications. "Between 1870 and 1900," says Hales, "photographers developed a 'grand style' which ambitiously analyzed the individual symbols of urban maturity and civilized status, produced an amalgam of the American scene which declared it to be healthy and melioristic, and disseminated that vision to a huge audience composed

not only of urban dwellers, but of viewers throughout the nation and the civilized world" (p. 120).

While all of this was going on, the other shoe was ready to drop off the foot of Jacob Riis and onto the consciences of that half who didn't know, and didn't want to know, how the other half lived. The fourth chapter of *Silver Cities*, "Jacob Riis and the Birth of Reform Photography," addresses that which is essentially a what-goes-around-comes-around proposition. Hales spends considerable time talking about the strident rhetoric of Riis and his imagery, reminding us as some other critics — most notably, Sally Stein — have, that his work was more than simply visual statistics.

Hales' epilogue is a recapitulation of what has preceded it. There was a "shift in urban photography from advocacy to doubt," writes Hales, who also tells us that "the early work of early twentieth century reform photographers remained firmly grounded in the belief that the city was and would continue to be a comprehensible, controllable phenomenon." Of course, nobody thinks that anymore, and even for the Modernists, according to Hales, "the locus of meaning and value would now lie in the photograph itself, not in the city from which it drew." Abstraction.

*Silver Cities* is an admirable piece of interdisciplinary writing on photography, but it is not without flaws. At one point, Hales refers to the work of Cecil Beaton arriving in this country in the 1870s — surely he means Felice Beato. There are also annoyingly academic phrases, things like "idealistic *gouache* of things" and "Thus Riis's Manicheanisms resolved to a dialectic," and I still don't see how panorama photographs "gave the city holistic identity." On the other hand, there are in *Silver Cities* three foldouts reproducing panoramas by Charles Shew, Eadweard Muybridge and Joshua Beal — they're very nice. And so, for the greater part, is *Silver Cities*, a responsible and thorough inquiry into the photographing of our cities.

*James Kaufmann*

**Book Reviewers**

**James Kaufman** writes photography and literary criticism for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Los Angeles *Times*, and *Afterimage*.

**Barbara DeGenevieve** is a photographer and teaches at the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana. In the spring of 1985, she will teach at the School of the Art Institue at Chicago.

# Letters to the Editor

17 September 1984

To the Editor:
Diane Neumaier's "Alfred, Harry, Emmet (etc.) and Me" in *Exposure* 22.2 was outstanding and very welcome. I'd like to make some additional comments:

1. Yes, we've had enough of the photographs male photographers take of "their" women while male critics rhapsodize. But also, we've had enough of the cliché presentation of naked women as "art". Until a new female form appears we can safely say *that subject has been done* and the practice simply perpetuates the status of women as meat. (I would advise women against nude "self portraits" as well. They are nearly always exhibitionistic, masochistic or naive, the very attitudes women must renounce before they can be equal.)

2. Neumaier's criticism of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, et al; from a feminist viewpoint is sharp and long overdue. The phenomenal success of Cindy Sherman, I believe it is not too cynical to conclude, is because she does what girls are supposed to do — stay home and play dress-up. (Other girls become famous by playing with dolls.) Male critics evidently like this.

3. The painfully honest description of the Revelle-Sweetman baby pictures as "romantic and narcissistic" was also welcome. Having a baby does tend to make us romantic and narcissistic. That's nature's way of fortifying us for the rigors of parenthood that lie ahead. But it was astonishing to find such family album stuff construed as art, insight, etc.

4. In fairness it should be noted that if Emmet Gowin had photographed his daughter masturbating public disapproval might have been comparable to that accorded Jacqueline Livingston. Also, Gowin presented a spectrum of work in which certain intimate photographs were included. Livingston's intimacies were more or less undiluted.

5. Neumaier's portrait of her "soon to be ex-husband and son" is arresting. But many of the O'Keefe portraits by Stieglitz that Neumaier seems to revere are indifferent to insufferable. The sensitively arched fingers and "aesthetic" postures are more or less in the photographic mode of their times, but the flared nostrils tip the scene into comedy.

Catherine Lord's "A Thorn is A Thorn is A Thorn" and Alan Sondheim's "Sexuality/Power/Feminism" in the same issue are equally outstanding, dense with current ideas improved and new ideas articulated. *Exposure* 22.2 brings photography, finally, as far as, say, the 1970's on these issues (while of course the "art world" slides back to the '50s, or is it the '30s?). It is to be hoped that SPE will not think it has thus taken care of matters. But in any event, congratulations.

Judy Seigel
New York

2 October 1984

Dear Sir or Madam,
Diane Neumaier's article, "Alfred, Harry, Emmet, Georgia, Eleanor, and Me" reveals a personal bitterness carried over from a marriage gone sour. I do agree with her central point that gender roles in our society carry restrictions which can be addressed through art, but I still recall passages in her writing that raise questions in my mind.

Neumaier's article mentions Stieglitz, Gowin and Callahan as making photographs which promote the use of woman as possession; however, her own views of husband and child make them into objects. She "looked forward to having a spouse [possession] to sit for... pictures." She adds, "Gowin's passionate photos of his babies made me ache for the day I'd have my own [to photograph]." Did Neumaier seek, as she accuses others of seeking possessions in the form of a child and/or spouse? Were they solely wanted for the project of family photographs? And was this the only way for her to make family images? Would it have been wrong, say, to have photographed another's family thereby eliminating mothering responsibilities of which she complains?

I doubt very seriously that Harry married Eleanor just to have rights to a model. Nor is Edith Emmet's property; her purpose in life is not to make Emmet famous and nothing else. His photographs of her are a by-product of their relation-

ship, not the relationship itself. O'Keeffe maintained her life as artist even with Stieglitz photographing her. He even discouraged her having children (the burden of which Neumaier writes) because he felt it would interfere with her work.

Another question is brought to my mind while reading the article. Neumaier says she had "precious little success at photographing her husband, making him resemble Eleanor, Georgia, or Edith..." Eleanor, Georgia and Edith were, it seems, photographed as themselves. Why try to force a role on an individual? I don't believe that was how those pictures were made.

Neumaier also mentions the lack of "ideal conditions" while beginning her project. I'm not too sure what she means by that. Ideal conditions in a family unit? Do they ever exist?

Mary Kucera
New Orleans, La.

**Reply**

Mary Kucera:
Please don't forget Edith! Although she is included in the title of my article she didn't make it to the Table of Contents.

My intention was not to comment on my marriage or those of the Gowins, the Callahans, or Stieglitz and O'Keeffe, but rather to consider the relative differences of male and female photographers in their family situations. I wanted to point out that social conditions prevent women photographers from using their husbands as passive subjects in the tradition established by and for men photographers. As should have been evident in my article, I have come to believe that it is neither desirable nor healthy for either gender to possess a spouse as photographic object. As I said, "If what is good for the gander is not considered to be good for the goose, I had to reevaluate all those powerful, beloved images of wives."

Diane Neumaier
Riverdale, New York

18 October 1984

Dear Editor:
I would very much appreciate it if you would print the following follow-up to my article, "Private Parts" (22:3), in the next issue of *Exposure*.

The City of Providence has proposed a settlement of claims for Private Parts exhibitors whose work was lost, damaged or destroyed by police action. If you were an exhibitor and have such a claim and have not been otherwise contacted, please call of write Attorney John M. Roney, 344 Wickenden Street, Providence RI 02903, (401) 421-9794.

I would like to thank all those involved in the case and in the preparation of the manuscript. Particular thanks go to Richard Lebowitz, William Parker, attorneys John M. Roney and Lynette Labinger, and to Alan Coleman and the Committee on Censorship and Freedom of Vision of the SPE for its support and sponsorship of my article.

Baruch D. Kirschenbaum
Professor of Art History
Rhode Island School of Design

5 November 1984

Dear New Editors:
An excellent first issue! And what a coincidence: I had just finished reading an essay, "Censorship: Local and Express" (1973) by Ayn Rand in which she discusses the very legal and "altruistic" premises which eventually led to the unfortunate seizure of the work in the RISD "Private Parts" show as discussed in Baruch Kirschenbaum's essay. Rand, true to her philosophy of Objectivism, does bring up an important point, an issue surprisingly not attacked by Mr. Kirschenbaum: the fact that the Supreme Court ruling in Miller v. California (1973) leaves the crucial decision concerning whether something is obscene to the "average person, applying contemporary community standards..." Although I disagree heartily with much of Rand's philosophizing, her com-

ments do seem apropos in this instance:

"Do you care to contemplate the spectacle of the average person as the ultimate authority — the censor — in the field of literature? In the field of art? In the field of politics? In the field of science? An authority whose edict is to be imposed by *force* and is to determine what will be permitted to be suppressed in all these fields? I submit that no pornographic movie can be as morally obscene as a prospect of this kind… the trial judges and juries are empowered to determine whether a work that contains sexual elements 'lacks *serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value*'… This means — and can mean nothing else — that the government is empowered to judge literary, artistic, political, and scientific values, and to permit or suppress them accordingly."

As even the Supreme Court judges could not agree upon *objective* criteria for deciding what is pornographic and what is not, how is the average person to accomplish it? By intuition? Surprisingly, Mr. Kirschenbaum must think so for he writes near the conclusion of his essay:

"…I now seem to side with Yacovone [the policeman who seized works he felt were obscene during the police raid on the show], who maintained that after thirty years as a cop he knew perfectly well what was and wasn't obscene."

Such an admission plays into the hands of the censors and hardly encourages any rational engagement with the issue of obscenity and censorship.

James Hugunin
Los Angeles, California

**Reply**

November 20, 1984

Dear Mr. Hugunin:
Thank you for your letter in regard to my article, "Private Parts and Public Considerations," which appeared in the fall issue of *Exposure*. You and Ayn Rand (with whom I also have trouble agreeing with most often) are, of course, correct. The *Miller* Decision is flimsy and dangerous for precisely the reasons you suggest. Who indeed is to define obscenity if, as you point out, even the Justices of the Supreme Court could not. Ironically, it has often occurred to me that in an inversion of expectations it is in fact average persons acting within community standards that support commercial pornography or else it wouldn't be so successful. I did raise the very serious question of definitions under *Miller* in a longer version of the paper which had to be cut for publication. [*Editor's note: this version was not submitted to* Exposure.]

In regard to the reconsideration of my testimony the quotation you offer should more fairly be taken in relationship to what precedes and what follows. The three dots which precede your quotation from the article replace two important words for my argument. The sentence actually reads, "*In this* I now seem… etc." The "In this" refers to my position of the previous paragraph that art does not transcend its sexual material by virtue of its identification as art. The other important word for my meaning is, of course, "seem". In the paragraph following the one from which you take your quotation I state my opposition both to such judgments by Yacovone or by anyone else and to any resultant censorship. What must be defended is the right of artists to deal with whatever contents they wish without either fear of censorship and prosecution or the necessity to establish some sacred high ground of art which in its own way insulates us from potentially disturbing realities. Private Parts could have been successfully defended without arguments as to the effect of context on content or definitions of obscenity. Even the flawed statute under which it was attacked protected art regardless of its content.

Again, thank you for your interest and your response.

Baruch D. Kirschenbaum
Professor of Art History
Providence, Rhode Island

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