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A Structure for Appreciating Photographs

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Introduction

This paper presents my attempt at devising a system with which students can approach photographs intelligently and appreciatively. It offers a structure for criticizing images with an emphasis on interpretation rather than on evaluation. It can also be applied by those primarily interested in making images.

The first three sections deal with what I think are some common and unique characteristics of photographs: selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility. The fourth section presents overlapping categories to consider differences among photographs. In it, viewers are asked to consider a given photograph as if it functioned analogously as one or more types of language statements and are invited to argue for one interpretation over other plausible interpretations. I believe my categories are superior to such traditional divisions as landscape, still life, nude, portrait, and so forth, in that they recognize significant differences among photographs sharing similar subject matters and do not allow the viewer the false comfort of naming "landscape" or "nude" without considering aspects of its meaning. The categories are more complex than such bipartite classifications as "straight and manipulated" or "mirrors and windows" and resist oversimplification by giving the viewer the advantage of more options. The fifth section discusses various contexts that can be constructed around a photograph for expansion of information that ought to aid understanding and appreciation.

Commonalities:	**Differences:**	**Contexts:**
Selectivity	Descriptions	Original
Instantaneity	Explanations	Internal
Credibility	Interpretations	External
	Ethical evaluations	
	Aesthetic evaluations	
	Theoretical photographs	

I. Selectivity

The major problem facing the photographer is choice. Given sufficient light, the universe becomes available: outer space, underwater, the wilderness, the city, the backyard, the body and the face. Adapting the camera to a microscope or telescope, the world closed to the natural unaided eye also becomes visible. Subject matter is everywhere.

If everything is possible, what should be chosen? And what should be expressed about what is chosen? Minor White chose to present the ordinary as extraordinary, while Diane Arbus advanced the extraordinary as commonplace. Some photographers are interested only in documentation while others are only content with transformation. For several a primary motivation has been their ability to present the otherwise inaccessible, to bring people to places they had not reached by other means: Bruce Davidson brought Harlem to White coffee tables, the press brought us to Viet Nam, and the astronauts took us to the moon and the stars; Giles Larrain showed us drag, and Diane Arbus took us to nudist camps, insane asylums, theater backstages, and other places we would not otherwise be allowed.

If photographers are not recognizing significance existing in the world, they are inventing it through imagination. Duane Michals, Lee Krims, and Arthur Tress have not been content to search the outer world but have forcefully turned to imagined experience, selecting and directing as many variables of time and space as possible in the creation of their compelling fictions.

No matter what their predilections toward presenting their views of art and life in photographs, photographers are constantly involved in choices. The contact sheet is a visual metaphor for these choices. Having already made a major choice regarding the world-view they are to inscribe on film, photographers are then confronted with further selection and distillation from the

several options confronting them on their contact sheets. Many of these will never be brought further, and of those that are, fewer yet will ultimately be selected by the photographer as worthy of exhibition or publication.

The litany of visual choices regarding what to include and what to exclude from the frame during the act of photographing is extensive. It involves choices of cameras and lenses that have been broadened by the acceptance of Instamatics, Polaroids, copy machines, and process cameras. The litany also involves choices of color or black and white, film formats and types, apertures and shutter speeds and resulting crispness or softness, frozen or blurred action. An equally exhausting series of choices is presented in the darkroom, and these must be decided upon in relation to decisions regarding whether these images are to be presented in print or mounted on walls, discretely or in sequence.

All of these choices, no matter how intuitively or deliberately they are made, determine the look, the feel, and the idea of the picture and considerably influence whatever response the photographs will generate.

In educating for sensitive and enlightened viewers and makers of photographs, we need to help people become more aware of the kinds of decisions involved in the making of photographs. This can be achieved by their drawing inferences from what is presented in the photograph, how it is graphically structured, how it is crafted, and how all of this is expressive. Through imaginative speculation we can also consider what the photographer excluded by the edges to further appreciate what is given in the picture.

John Szarkowski's words are offered as an apt summary: "The simplicity of photography lies in the fact that it is easy to make a picture. The staggering complexity of it lies in the fact that a thousand other pictures of the same subject would have been equally easy."[1]

II. Instantaneity

Photographs are frozen instances from an uninterrupted spatial and temporal flow. The universe is vast and everything in it is in a process of change. The photographer frames a limited section of the universe and presents a memory of what it was before it changed to become what it is now. We are left with a picture of a segment of the universe that is still and silent.

In the midst of change the photographer moves through the world searching for the instant when all the elements in their state of flux reveal an aesthetically charged combination. For Joel Meyerowitz the combination may be the magic of the coolness of fluorescent light mixing with the light of the setting sun or an orange kerchief of a woman in a window of a Cape Cod cottage. The shininess of brass buttons against the weave of wool is enough to arrest Ralph Gibson's attention.

Henri Cartier-Bresson speaks attitudinally about the elusive time-space continuum of subject matter in the physical world and his relationship to time and change:

> For the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude toward something that is moving. Sometimes you light upon the picture in seconds; it may also require hours or days. But there is no standard plan, no pattern from which to work. You must be on the alert with the brain, the eye, the heart; and have a suppleness of body.[2]

Or in Szarkowski's words, "An infinite number of possibilities present themselves simultaneously, to be instinctively resolved, well or badly, in a moment, while the situation itself continues to change."[3]

The simultaneity of things changing independently of, or dependently on the photographer is an important consideration. The photographer must not only see the visual forms in front of the lens and how they are interacting, but must also simultaneously evaluate the meanings those interactions imply. Painters have the ability to see forms slowly emerge as they work; they may alter them or introduce new forms to enter into dialogue with the former ones. The photographer, however, must perceive qualities as they appear in a unified instance. It is not only the interaction of these forms which must be perceived but the expressive potential of these interactions.[4] The painter begins with a blank canvas, but the photographer's viewfinder is never empty.

For the viewer the time problem is reversed. The instant of exposure as seen in the photograph may be imaginatively expanded before and after as if it were one

frame from a time-lapse film. For an Ansel Adams photograph the instant of exposure may be speculatively reconstructed to hours before or after to imagine the changing sun affecting the tonal relationships of foliage; for a Cartier-Bresson street shot, the before and after may need be expanded only seconds.

III. Credibility

It is obvious that photographs are not people, places, or events but are flat pieces of paper covered with tiny particles of silver. It is also obvious that photographs are not made by cameras alone but are still and silent visual observations selected by humans from complex and dynamic human existence. Yet in viewing photographs, distinctions between subject matter and pictures of subject matter are blurred, and the photograph is often accepted as reality rather than a photographer's point of view. Several photographs by Lee Friedlander and some more recent color photographs by Max Kozloff which incorporate their own shadows or reflections in their pictures visually assert this distinction.

From its inception photography has been prized as an accurate and reliable transportation of real-world people and places. Today the electronic and print news media in their particular uses of the camera implicitly claim objective facticity and reinforce credibility in photography. Advertising photography in particular uses the believability of the photograph very effectively, subtly playing on people's photographic gullibility, seducing them into believing that through compulsive consumption they too can share in the attractiveness, status, and happiness of the people pictured in the ads.

A. D. Coleman has specified three reasons to account for people's belief in the photograph. Photography institutionalizes Renaissance perspective, scientifically and mechanistically reinforcing an acquired way of perceiving. Second, even though the photograph is a deposit of silver on paper, the image does encode a unique optical and chemical relationship to reality. And third, the mechanical, non-manual aspects of the process make photography appear to be nothing more than concretized seeing, and seeing is believing.[5]

That the photograph has a unique bond with the physical world is a given. The world of objects is the literal content of photographs. All photographs, no matter how ephemeral their themes, are inevitably linked to a specific time and space in the world since the photograph depends on light reflecting from objects to light sensitive materials.

With the overtly and obviously manipulated work of William Larson, Syl Labrot, Ray Metzger, Robert Heinecken, and Jerry Uelsmann there is no chance of overlooking the artist's input, control, and unique sensibility. Their work has the look and feel of art and it is responded to as art. But in seemingly more straightforward work that utilizes striking subject matter, distinctions between the photograph and the initial reality are often neglected. Giles Larrain's[6] lushly colored, fashion-like photographs of men pantomiming in full drag has subject matter that is shocking and bizarre enough to direct attention exclusively to the content of the pictures, excluding considerations about Larrain's contribution.

Photographs of strikingly beautiful natural settings raise similar considerations. Pristine natural beauty presented by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Paul Caponigro are accepted as the way it was, the way it would have been seen by every man given only the luck of being in the right place at the right time. Actually these views cannot be seen except as presented by photographers because they exist only photographically.

If we are to have people more fully understand and appreciate the still photograph we need to make distinctions between the object or event and all that has gone into transforming these into compelling images. In short, we need to put the maker back into the picture.

IV. Differences

The preceding has been an attempt to explore ideas about what photographs share in common and to raise considerations for response to imagery through an awareness of the posited similarities of selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility. While all photographs may, to greater or lesser extent, share these characteristics, they also exhibit a tremendous diversity which can begin to be imagined by multiplying potentially infinite sub-

ject matters by the number of idiosyncratic human beings serious about making visual statements through the medium of photography.

The following is an overlapping category system meant to help render the diversity of photographic images more conceptually manageable by pursuing analogies between visual images and verbal statements. The system is overlapping in that the categories are neither discrete nor exclusive.

As discussed in the section on Credibility, all photographs describe surfaces of objects. But a large number of photographs function primarily as *descriptions.* Paradigm cases are identification photographs, medical X-rays, photomicrographs, and NASA space exploration photographs. These photographs are analogous to statements of fact in language, are visual recordings of empirical qualities and quantities, and are interpretively and evaluatively neutral. They attempt no more than an accurate rendering on a photographic surface.

Other photographs attempt to go beyond description by offering falsifiable explanations or nonfalsifiable interpretations. Paradigm cases of the first type, *explanations,* are Eadweard Muybridge's animal locomotion studies; Bill Owens' *Suburbia*[7] and *Our Kind of People,*[8] and Bruce Davidson's *East 100th Street.*[9] Most press photographs would also apply. These photographs attempt objectivity in explaining how things are. They are falsifiable in the sense that they could potentially be empirically demonstrated to be true or false, accurate or inaccurate.

The other type of explanatory photographs are nonfalsifiable *interpretations.* These are analogous to metaphysical claims in language in that they purport to give information about the universe but are asserted independently of empirical evidence. Clear examples are several sequences of Duane Michals', for instance, "The Spirit Leaving the Body" and "The Creation,"[10] and most of the work of Jerry Uelsmann. Photographs in this category depict an intentionally subjective understanding of phenomena, often use photographic fiction as a mode of visual expression, and generally yield information about the world-views of the photographers who make them. They are nonfalsifiable in that in cases of dispute they cannot be confirmed or denied empirically: if, for example, Duane Michals asserts an afterlife in some of his sequences, the claim would be difficult to prove or disprove with empirical evidence.

Another large body of photographs can be understood as judgments of two types, ethically evaluative and aesthetically evaluative. Photographs which are *ethically evaluative* imply moral valuations or moral judgments, generally depicting how things ought or ought not to be. Most photographic advertisements present us with aspects of the advertiser's conceptions of the good life or what should be desirable. The majority of the work of W. Eugene Smith may also serve as a clear example, most notably his last book, *Minamata,*[11] with his portrayals of village fishermen suffering as a consequence of industrial poisoning.

Aesthetically evaluative photographs are visual notifications of people, places, or things seen by the photographer as intrinsically valuable for apprehension due to a harmonious formal relationship of elements. There are large numbers of these in the history of photography, most obviously exemplified by the work of Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, Minor White, and Paul Caponigro.

The last category accounts for *theoretical photographs,* or those which address issues about art and photography, functioning as visual commentary or visual arts criticism. More simply, these are art about art. Two examples are the cancellation series of Tom Barrow and *Making Chicken Soup*[12] by Les Krims. The latter visual cookbook on making chicken soup is dedicated to "concerned photographers," a term usually designating those concerned with social issues. Krims is engaged in elaborate critical sarcasm pointed at those who would attempt to solve social problems with cameras; in Krims' view, as useless an effort as making chicken soup to cure physical infirmities.

My intent in designing this category system is certainly not to end discussion of photographs though pigeonholing but on the contrary to open a directed discussion about photographic meaning in order to increase understanding and appreciation of the variety of photographic statements made. The system asks the viewer to

question whether, for example, Bill Owens' *Suburbia* does function as an objective evaluation or whether it is imbued with value judgments. To place a photograph into one category rather than another requires reasons in support of the decision, and the decision invites counter-argument of a substantive critical nature.

The categories also offer options for the teaching of production in that they can encourage image-makers to consider the meaning of their work in addition to their concern for technical mastery of the medium. As students are learning to control photographic craft and technique they may also be encouraged to develop a point of view regarding what they wish to express photographically about physical and social reality. An assignment that asks students to produce an image that forcefully and clearly presents their value positions regarding a social situation will necessarily include considerations about their world view, their ability to express visually something significant, as well as considerations about how their technique will carry their statements. This seems more beneficial, to them and to photography, than the usual introductory depth-of-field assignments or advanced zone system problems, although it does not exclude these technical concerns.

V. Context

To build a case for well-argued category placement, the viewer needs to consider context. I am using the term to include three senses: *original context,* the specific time and space present to the photographer at the instant of exposure; *internal context,* the set of relationships between depicted elements in the picture which provide the viewer with information for positing meaning; and *external context,* in which the picture is part of a larger body of the photographer's work, a part of all visual statements, with possible accompanying thoughts from the photographer, critics, and historians.

While much understanding and appreciation can be gained by closely analyzing the elements in the picture itself (internal context), most photographs will yield fuller understanding and appreciation with the gathering of relevant knowledge about the social and intellectual milieu of the times during which the photograph was made, and the intellectual and political inclinations of the photographer (original context). Seeing the photograph in its new context within the body of other work by the photographer and in the history of art and photography (external context) yields yet further insight into the picture under consideration.

The viewer who has only one photograph by an unknown photographer of an unidentified location with no historical references will have great difficulty in achieving a reliable understanding. This was close to the case with the discovery of Atget's work. Since that initial finding, critics and historians have worked to build a context from various sources with which we may now approach Atget's photographs. On the other hand, Les Krims presents the viewer with a relatively rich context in that he has produced a large amount of work, has published his major pieces, and continues to produce and exhibit profusely. But the viewer does not have the advantage of other critics' or historians' thoughts since comparatively little has been written about him, and Krims himself doesn't talk much about his work. For a fuller understanding of Krims' work, viewers will have to build a fuller context for themselves. Edward Weston, however, rewards the viewer reviewing his work with a two-volume diary, numerous published books and folios, carefully maintained archives, and critical essays and historical accounts by several critics and historians. Not to take advantage of this information in attempting fully to understand and appreciate Weston would generally be mistaken.

Szarkowski's thought that the photograph has never been able to contain a coherent narrative, but rather isolates fragments containing scattered and suggested clues[13] adds import to the desirability of the serious viewer building a context in which the fragments take on coherence. For somewhat similar reasons British art critic John Berger speaks directly of the importance of establishing contexts for photographs: "The aim must be to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photo-

graphs and images."[14] He suggests that we construct the context radially with multiple associations and diverse approaches in a way similar to the workings of memory: "A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic."[15]

Summary

This is a three-part system for understanding and appreciating photographs. In using the system viewers are asked to consider their thoughts and feelings regarding photographic elements of selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility, which, to greater or lesser extent, are common to all photographs. The six-part overlapping categories are designed to engage viewers in interpretive thought about photographs. They may also serve as a stimulus for image-makers, helping them to realize the diversity of possible statements that can be made photographically. Viewers are also directed to consider a given photograph in one or more contexts, namely, the context given in the picture itself, the context of the social and intellectual milieu of the time at which it was made, and the context of the photographer's corpus of work in particular and of art history in general.

The system does not need to be followed in the order in which I have presented it. An attempt at first interpretively placing a photograph in one or more of the categories may then lead the viewers to justify their decisions contextually or by considering the photographer's use of selectivity, instantaneity, or credibility. My primary purpose in proposing the system is to give a structure to viewing which quickly moves one into substantive considerations about photographic expression.

Notes

1. John Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 134.
2. Nathan Lyons, ed., *Photographers on Photography* (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 42.
3. Szarkowski, *loc.cit.*
4. Terry Barrett and Pamela Linehan, "Photographic Criticism in an Educational Context," *Afterimage,* Vol. 5, No. 1 & 2 (May-June 1977).
5. A. D. Coleman, "The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition," *Artforum* (Sept. 1976), p. 55.
6. Giles Larrain, *Idols* (New York: Links, 1973).
7. Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973).
8. Bill Owens, *Our Kind of People* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Press, 1975).
9. Bruce Davidson, *East 100th Street* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).
10. Ronald H. Bailey, *The Photographic Illusion: Duane Michals* (Los Angeles: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975).
11. W. Eugene Smith and Aileen M. Smith, *Minamata Words and Photographs* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1975).
12. Les Krims, *Making Chicken Soup* (Buffalo, New York: Krims, 1972).
13. John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).
14. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 60.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

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