Thinking About Photographs

Terry Barrett
Instructor of Art Education

Terry Barrett teaches media and related courses in the Department of Art Education. He has written articles about photographic education and is especially interested in photographic criticism. Barrett is also an exhibiting photographer.

The mode of visual expression called photography represents a wide area of human endeavor. There are millions of extant photographs made by thousands of photographers for a multitude of purposes. These images are displayed daily in newspapers, magazines, books, on billboards, and on walls of galleries and museums. In the art world, photography is currently enjoying more respectability than at any time in its history. As an art educator I am interested in increasing understanding and enjoyment of these photographs through criticism of them—a criticism that is primarily interpretive rather than evaluative.

Photographs are too often confused with what they depict. Distinctions between subject matter and a picture of subject matter frequently are not made, with the photograph being accepted as reality rather than as a photographer's point of view. Photographs are not people, places, or events but are flat pieces of paper covered with tiny particles of silver. But from its inception, photography has been priced as an accurate and reliable transcription of real world people and places, and today, both electronic and print news media use the camera to witness events, asserting that the photographs or footage is just how it happened, reinforcing an unquestioned credibility about photography.

The photograph does have a unique bond with the physical world: The world of objects is a 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. But these factors contribute to a view of the photograph that is overly mechanistic, causing us to forget that photographs are not made by cameras alone. We need to put the maker back into the picture. Photographs by Lee Freidlander incorporating his shadow or reflection in his pictures make this point visually.

When a photographer such as Jerry Uelsmann obviously manipulates his work through multiple exposures, or when a photographer such as Duane Michals overtly employs costumed models in designed sets, there is no problem in seeing the artist's input, control, and unique sensibility. Their pictures have the look and feel of art. But in more seemingly straightforward and direct work that utilizes strikingly beautiful nature as subject matter, such as that of Ansel Adams, the task of distinguishing between the photograph and the initial reality becomes more difficult. Likewise with the photographs of circus freaks, nudists, and the insane by Diane Arbus, we tend to limit our concerns to the individuals depicted, justifiably wondering about their life styles, thoughts, motivations, and so forth, and we tend to forget about the artistry employed that has gotten us involved in the first place. These are not people on the streets we are wondering about, they are pictures made by Diane Arbus, and had she not made them in the way she did we would not be wondering about them at all.

The visible universe is available to the photographer. Using commonly available lenses, the close-up and the telephoto, the photographer can choose to focus from inches to miles. The camera can go anywhere man goes; under water, into outer space, to the Viet Nam jungles, into the bedroom, and behind bars. Adapting the camera to a microscope or a telescope, worlds closed to the unaided eye also become visible. Subject matter is everywhere. Nor are photographs made by cameras alone: they are still and silent visual

Jerry N. Uelsmann, 1968
Interpretive. A subjective positing of how the world might be conceived.

Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion*
Explanatory. An attempt at an objective understanding of worldly phenomena.

observations selected by humans from complex and dynamic existence. The diversity of resulting pictures can begin to be realized by multiplying potentially infinite subject matters by the number of idiosyncratic human beings with cameras.

A traditional way of coming to grips with the great diversity of photographic images is to divide them according to subject matter such as "portraits," "still lifes," "landscapes," "nudes," and so forth. While this system is expedient because it is based on obvious characteristics, it does little to enlighten the viewer about the images being considered. Some portraits such as ID photographs are substantively different than portraits of fashion models posing for cosmetic advertisements or Diane Arbus' portraits of transvestites. I am proposing a new system that does not allow one the false comfort of naming "landscape" or "nude" without considering aspects of the image's meaning.

Following is a six-part category system that is analogously based on different types of language statements. The categories are overlapping in that any given photograph may be placed in one or more of the categories. The
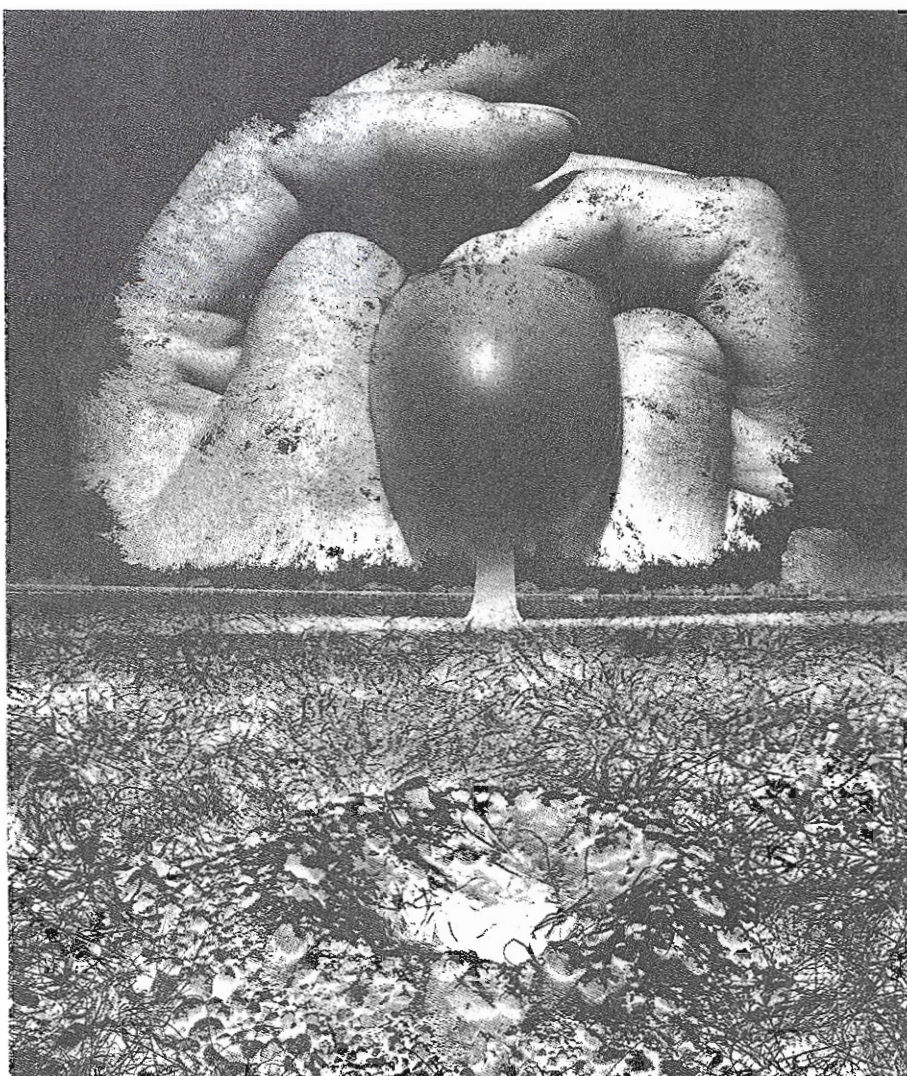

categories are designed to engage the viewer in interpretive thought. The viewer is asked to consider a photograph as if it were functioning in a similar way to one or more types of language statements and is invited to

argue for one interpretation over other plausible interpretations.

While by nature of the photographic medium most photographs describe surfaces of objects, a large number of photographs function primarily as *description* and attempt to do no more. The clearest examples are identification photographs, medical x-rays, photomicrographs, and NASA space exploration photographs. These photographs are analogous to statements of fact in language and are visual recordings of observable qualities and quantities that are interpretively and evaluatively neutral. The photograph on my driver's license, for example, attempts to do no more than describe what I look like.
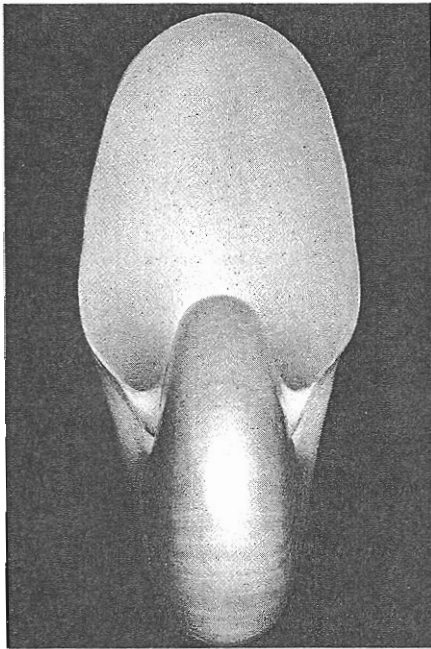
Other photographs attempt to go beyond description by offering falsifiable explanations or
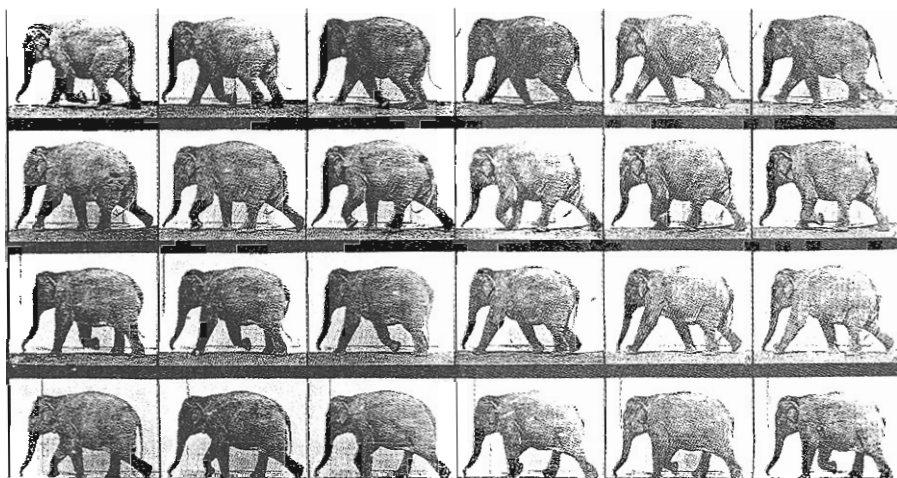
Edward Weston, *Shell*, 1927
Aesthetically Evaluative. A conception of the beautiful.

W. Eugene Smith, 1971
Ethically Evaluative. A photographic statement of how
the world might be conceived.

non-falsifiable interpretations. Paradigm cases of the first type, *explanations,* are Bill Owens' *Suburbia,* a collection of photographs of people in their suburban environments; Eadweard Muybridge's animal locomotion studies; and Bruce Davidson's *East 100th Street,* a book dealing with people in Harlem. 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 second type, non-falsifiable *interpretations,* are analogous to metaphysical claims in language in that they purport to give information about the universe but are asserted independently of empirical evidence and in cases of dispute cannot be verified. If, for example, a Duane Michals sequence asserts that there is an after-life, we would be hard pressed to prove or disprove his claim. These photographs are often fictional, offer a subjective understanding of phenomena, and generally yield information about the world view of the photographer who made them. Examples are several sequences by Duane Michals and most of the multiple exposures by Jerry Uelsmann.

Another large body of photographs make judgments. I am breaking this group into two categories: ethically evaluative and aesthetically evaluative. Photographs that are *ethically evaluative* imply valuations, moral judgments, or generally promote conceptions of what we should desire as aspects of the good life. The majority of the work of W. Eugene Smith may also serve as a paradigm example, most clearly his book *Minamata,* which portrays the suffering of village fishermen as a result of willful industrial pollution. *Aesthetically evaluative* photographs are visual statements of the photographer's conception of the beautiful or the ugly. There are large numbers of these including most of the images of Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Paul Caponigro.

The sixth category is *theoretical* photographs, or those which address issues in art and photography, functioning as a kind of visual art criticism. Succinctly, these can be understood as art about art rather than art about life. Some examples are "Alice's Mirror" by Duane Michals and *Making Chicken Soup* by Les Krims. The latter is a visual cookbook on making chicken soup and is dedicated to concerned photographers, a term often used to designate those photographers concerned about social issues. Through his dedication, Krims seems

presenting the ingredients.

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and appreciation of the variety of photographic statements being made. The system asks the viewer to question whether, for example, a particular photograph or body of work functions as a mere description or as a value judgment; as an objective explanation or as a value-laden interpretation. To accurately place a photograph, the viewer may well need to consider more than one example of the photographer's work. To place a photograph into one or more categories rather than another requires reasons in support of the decision, and the decision invites counterargument. Reasons ought to be based primarily on evidence contained within the photograph, and, when necessary, from evidence external to the photograph gathered from relevant contextual information of the times in which the photograph was made. The system is meant to give a structure to viewing that moves one into substantive considerations about photographic meaning. ☐

References

Davidson, Bruce, *East 100th Street,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970.

Krims, Les, *Making Chicken Soup,* Krims, Buffalo, N.Y., 1972.

Owens, Bill, *Suburbia,* Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco, California, 1973.

Szarkowski, John, *Looking at Photographs,* The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., N.Y., 1973.

to be engaged in elaborate sarcasm pointed at any photographer who would attempt to solve social problems with cameras; apparently, in Krims' view, as useless an effort as serving chicken soup to cure physical infirmities.

Types of photographs:
1. Descriptive
2. Explanatory
3. Interpretive
4. Ethically evaluative
5. Aesthetically evaluative
6. Theoretical

My interest in designing the category system is not to end discussion of photographs through pigeon-holing but to open a directed discussion about photographic meaning to increase understanding