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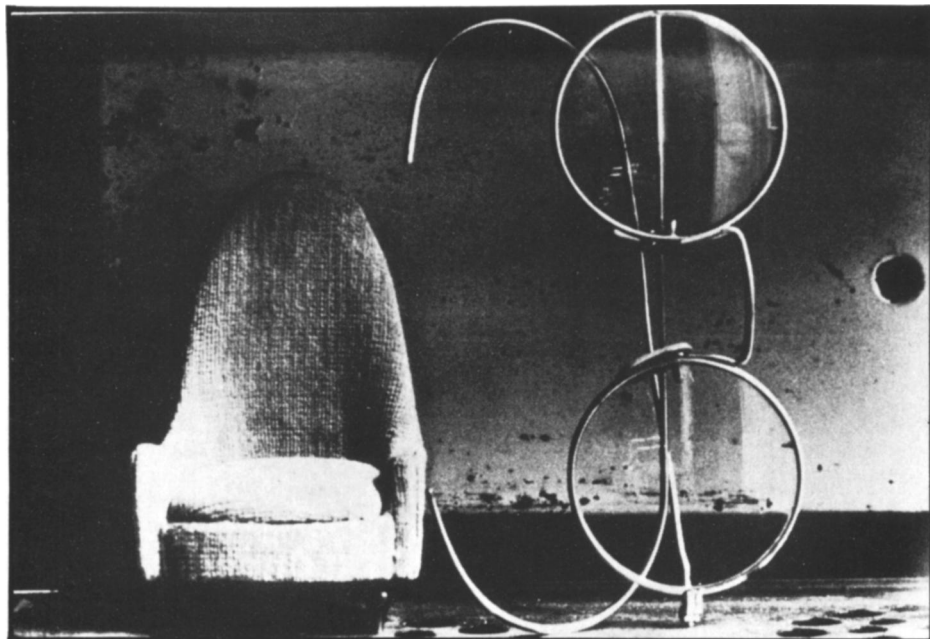
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Bright Discussions About Photographs

Terry Barrett and Kathleen Desmond



Duane Michals, from ALICE'S MIRROR, 1974. (By permission of the photographer.)

In this article . . . Barrett and Desmond describe their experiences in involving young art students in critical examination of photographs. "Their interpretations, if not their language, rivaled those of college students."

Today, there is hardly a museum of art that does not include photographs as parts of its permanent collection. Although many art teachers recognize photographs as significant objects for art appreciation, too few art teachers engage children in serious consideration of photographs. Obstacles are twofold: lack of teaching materials and lack of confidence on the part of art teachers who have not studied photography. Both obstacles can be overcome with relative ease, particularly if photographs are presented to children as pictures for discussion. Teachers who wish to include photographs as stimulating art objects for response activities can make slides from the ever increasing amount of photography

books and magazines on the market and in libraries. A large study print collection can be made quickly by cutting and mounting lushly reproduced photographs from back issues of photo-magazines such as *American Photographer* or from free promotional materials such as *Nikon World*¹ and Polaroid's *Close-Up*.² Excellent and diverse postcard reproductions of master photographers' works are now readily available in bookstores and cardshops. A good paperback book of photographs, such as *Looking at Photographs* (1973), when cut apart and mounted, supplies a large quantity of quality reproductions that span the history of photography.

Teachers who are initially intimidated by their lack of knowledge

about photography can build on what they already know about paintings, prints, and drawings and treat photographs as *pictures*. Photographs are pictures, after all, and share several similarities with pictures done in more familiar media. Lack of familiarity with photographic jargon and lack of knowledge of photographic technology need not restrict teachers from engaging children in critical discussions of photographs. Photographs, like paintings, ought to be analyzed as expressive pictures made by individuals who interpret what they see by means of cameras and enlargers rather than with pencils or paint brushes. That photographers use visual qualities to express their beliefs is an important point to teach because photographs, too often, are seen merely, and wrongly, as objective, impartial, and unbiased recordings by machines. Photographers, as much as painters, attempt persuasive pictures. Because of the stylistic realism of most photographs, however, the expressive qualities of photographs are easily overlooked.

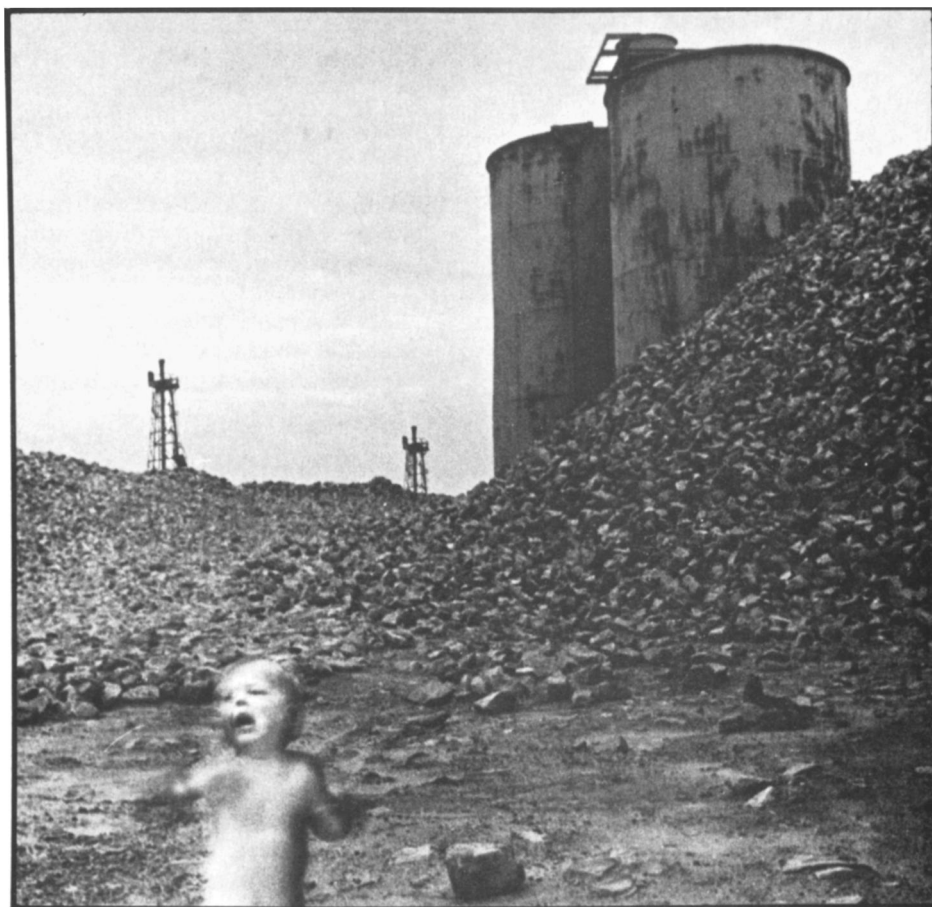
A simple, but effective, strategy for helping children recognize expressive qualities of photographs is to have them imaginatively and speculatively compare a photograph to what may have been present to the photographer when the photograph was made. What may have been excluded from the frame? Why? What happened before and after the instant chosen to be photographed? Are there indications in the photograph that the people or things were physically arranged by the photographer? Is there evidence of cooperation between the photographer and subject of the photograph? How does the angle of view, amount of focus, lighting, and distance the photograph was taken from effect the picture? What seems to be the purpose of the photograph? How do the answers to these questions bear on the picture?

These types of questions provoke several interpretive insights from Indiana University Summer Arts Institute photography students regarding a surrealist photograph by William Larson. Larson depicted a small naked child running away from a stark, desolate, and hostile industrial environment. When questioned about the image, students noted color contrasts between the warm flesh tones of the

child in relation to the eerie coldness of the industrial background. They noted the anguished expression on the child's face and blurred rendering of its body. Discussion entailed decision about whether the photograph was set-up by the photographer or documented an actual event. The latter was rejected by students who offered stronger evidence, drawn from the picture and their experience, to support a "set-up" interpretation. The group concluded that the photograph was a photographer's personal statement about industrial pollution. They found it very effective because it was so "scary."

The children then rose to the challenge of a more conceptually difficult group of photographs, a contemporary sequence of images by Duane Michals entitled "Alice's Mirror." This sequence of ten photographs shows physically impossible situations presented with stylistic realism. Eye glasses are shown as large as an armchair and both are reflected in mirrors that reflect the scene again and again in other mirrors. The final photograph of the sequence shows a large hand holding a crushed hand mirror that had previously reflected the other images. The children quickly decided that the photographs were fictitious. Some children took the title as an initial clue to interpretation and drew relationships to *Alice of Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Others expanded this interpretation by commenting on the eye glass lenses, mirrors, and photographers' cameras as objects that given false perceptions. Their interpretations, if not their language, rivaled those of college students.

These two exemplary discussions were conducted with a large group of students who had little prior instruction about photography, though they were all concentrating on the same photographs. Each plausible initial response was reinforced by a moderator who encouraged others to add other comments and offer alternative considerations. The students, at first tentatively and then confidently, checked their impressions with others in a supportive, communicative environment focused on solving mysteries about the images. Similar groups can be formed to facilitate good discussion. In small groups, each student can be assigned a task: one to moderate,



William Larson, *Untitled*, 1974, original in color. (By permission of the photographer.)

another to record, and a third to report to the whole class. This strategy has been effective with gifted and talented students who respond well to tasks, and discussion usually flows with little teacher direction. A small strategy follows.

Divide a class into groups. Give a provocative and stimulating photograph to each group along with a blank card on which the group can state challenging questions about the photograph they would like answered by another group. Have groups trade photographs and questions and then attempt answers to the new photographs and questions they have received. Groups can either answer the questions as they are stated or challenge appropriateness of the questions and provide answers to questions not asked. When such small group discussions wane, teachers can have reporters address the entire reconvened class. The class rarely listens passively and usually gets avidly involved in each small group's interpretive findings.

These kinds of response activities teach children that photographs are expressive and require critical thought. Such discussion strategies help students learn that interpretations need support-

tive evidence to be convincing and that all interpretations are not equally plausible. The latter strategy teaches that some questions are more appropriate for more enlightening answers. Given the opportunity, and some guidance, students can and do engage in stimulating thought and talk about the art of persuasive photographs that confront them daily on billboards, in the press, and on museum walls. ■

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References

- ¹*Nikon World* magazine, Nikon, Inc., P.O. Box 520, Garden City, New York, 11530.
- ²*Close-Up* magazine, Polaroid Corp., 575 Technology Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02139.
- ³Szarkowski, J. (1973). *Looking at photographs: 100 pictures from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Museum of Modern Art.