

PHOTOGRAPHY SPEAKS[®]
150 PHOTOGRAPHERS ON THEIR ART

BROOKS JOHNSON

APERTURE FOUNDATION



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Aperture Foundation, including Book Center and Burden Gallery:
20 East 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010
Phone: (212) 505-5555, ext. 300. Fax: (212) 979-7759
E-mail: info@aperture.org

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Paul Outerbridge American, 1896–1958

After training as an illustrator and painter, Outerbridge began taking photography classes in 1921. His early work consisted of still life abstractions of ordinary objects, reflecting his interest in design. By 1924, Outerbridge had become a successful advertising photographer, freelancing for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair*. After living and working in Paris in the late 1920s, Outerbridge set up a studio outside of New York where he experimented with carbro color photography; his mastery of this process earned him further commercial success. The following discussion on photography and still life is taken from Outerbridge's 1940 publication *Photographing in Color*:

There is always the distinction between fine and applied art to be borne in mind. Fine art exists for itself alone; applied art as an adjunct to or quality of something else—for a use, as it were. Now, whereas we do not find it hard to accept the beauty of a flower for itself alone, in present-day, mechanical-industrial civilization, people will usually question the use of a picture. Things are estimated much more for what they do or will do than for what they are or will become....

To appreciate photography one must disassociate it from other forms of art expression. Instead of holding a preconceived idea of art, founded upon painting (painting is cited because, in general, the word "art" seems to be somewhat synonymous with painting), it must be considered as a distinct medium of expression, and one must first of all realize that it is a medium capable of doing certain things which can be accomplished in no other way. No one condemns architecture because it does not look like a painting or a painting because it is not done in stone.

Of those who say that photography is too mechanical to produce works of art—and this category includes many otherwise competent art critics—it may be safely said that such an attitude denotes a lack of knowledge. The camera and the various apparatus and materials used in photography are, after all, merely tools, as are the paints, brushes, and chisels of other arts. And the result is bounded, not by the limitations of the tools, but by those of the man.

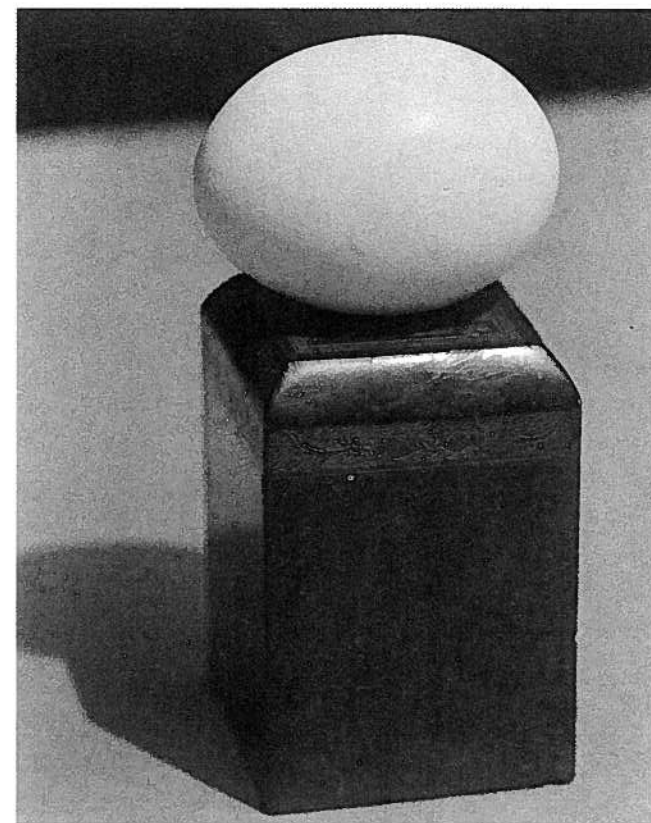
If the test of artistic worth is that an object be the means of aesthetic enjoyment, who will deny that through photography such objects may be and have been created?

Still life subjects will often reflect a clearer picture of a photographic artist's imaginative vision than landscape work, which is usually more dependent upon the choice of a point of view than upon anything else; or portraiture, in which the photographer must somewhat subordinate his own personality to that of his sitter.

Still life takes up less space and does not move; therefore less light is required. It stays where you put it, so that you can come back to it and make whatever changes in the composition or arrangement, lighting, or exposure, that you have found necessary to a better result....

What makes still life good instead of mediocre is the quality of vision and imagination employed by the photographer, and especially his reaction to his subject material. Though this subject may be, from one point of view, much more impersonal than many others, from still another viewpoint it may be intensely personal and quite a revealing expression of its creator's mind.

A sound knowledge of chiaroscuro and a passionate interest in and reaction to the shape of objects devoid of sentimental association is essential to producing the best results.



© 2004 G. Ray Hewins Gallery, Los Angeles

Egg on an Ebony Block, 1923

Platinum print, 4¼ x 3½ inches
Purchase, gift of Robert B. and Joyce F. Menschel, 80.223

Aleksandr Rodchenko

Russian, 1891–1956

Originally trained as a painter, Rodchenko, who was active in the artistic development following Russia's 1917 revolutions, was a pioneer of new processes and ideas. Mainly self-taught, he began experimenting with photomontage in 1923, and worked as a magazine photographer and photo-reporter. His abstract images eliminated unnecessary detail and emphasized dynamic compositions; he often photographed scenes from odd angles in order to challenge the viewer's perception and delay recognition. In the following statement published in 1928, Rodchenko strongly urges his colleagues to create photographs that go beyond imitation of painting:

We struggle against easel painting not because it is an aesthetic form of painting, but because it is not modern, for it does not succeed in bringing out the technical side, it is a redundant, exclusive art, and it cannot be of any use to the masses.

Hence, we are struggling not against painting but against photography carried out according to the models of painting as if it were an etching, a drawing, a picture in sepia or watercolour.

Struggling for "what" to photograph means nothing. Examples must be provided. That is what we are all doing.

A "fact" photographed badly does not represent a cultural phenomenon, and still less a cultural value for photography....

Revolution in the photographic field consists in photographing in such a way that photography will have enough strength not just to rival painting, but also to point out to everyone a new and modern way of discovering the world of science, of technology and of everyday life....

We are obliged to make experiments.

Photographing facts as mere description is not an innovation. Behind a simply photographed fact painting can be concealed, and behind a simply described fact, a romance. You may be advocates of the "fact," but you do not describe it so simply.

Comrades, you will soon end up confusing left and right.

A Leftist is not someone who photographs facts, but someone who, through photography, is able to struggle against "the imitations of art," with images of high quality, and to do this he experiments until he obtains a perfect "easel" photograph.

What is this easel photograph...? It is the experimental photograph.

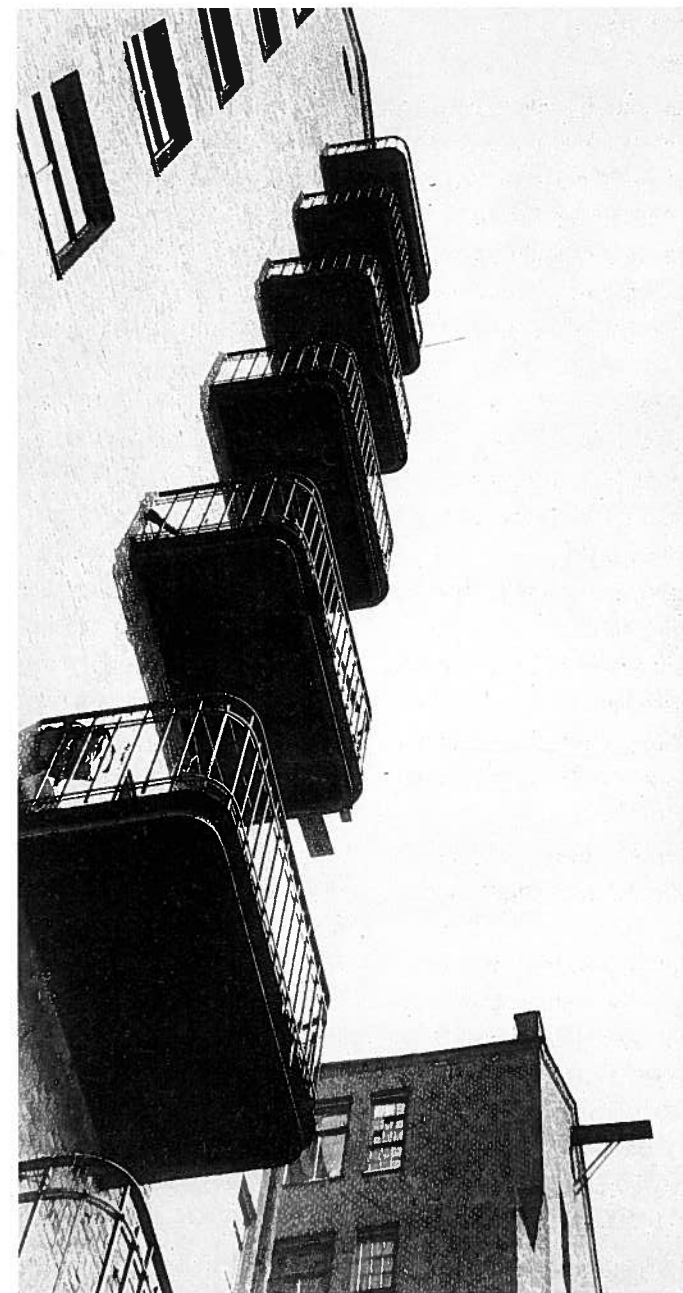
Do not study theoretically without taking advice from those with experience and do not be the worst friends of your enemies.

For those who are doing actual work, abstract theories based on the aesthetics of asceticism are highly dangerous....

It is said: Rodchenko's photographs have become a bore: always looking down from above, looking up from below.

But everyone has been photographing "from centre to centre" for years; not just I but the majority of photographers ought to be taking pictures looking up from below or down from above....

Damn it, nobody knows what is beautiful and what is not. They do not understand new things.



Balconies, 1925

Gelatin-silver print, 1930s, 8¼ x 4½ inches
Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., Photography Fund, 9514

© Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko / IAD, Moscow / VAGA, New York

Henri Cartier-Bresson

French, 1908–2004

Cartier-Bresson's spontaneous photographs, cross-sections of life framed with a hand-held camera, embody his concept of "the decisive moment"—images made in a fraction of an instant that would otherwise be unobserved. Although he was a founder of the cooperative photojournalistic agency Magnum (1947), his work in China, India, France, the United States, and elsewhere is concerned more with a singular photographic beauty than with specific reportage. His photographs have been reproduced in virtually all of the major magazines. Cartier-Bresson has also been deeply interested in painting and film and has pursued these media along with his influential photography. This statement is from the introduction to Cartier-Bresson's 1952 book *The Decisive Moment*:

The photographer's eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimeter. He can modify perspectives by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws a detail—and it can be subordinated, or he can be tyrannized by it. But he composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action.

Sometimes it happens that you stall, delay, wait for something to happen. Sometimes you have the feeling that here are all the makings of a picture—except for just one thing that seems to be missing. But what one thing? Perhaps someone suddenly walks into your range of view. You follow his progress through the view-finder. You wait and wait, and then finally you press the button—and you depart with the feeling (though you don't know why) that you've really got something. Later, to substantiate this, you can take a print of this picture, trace on it the geometric figures which come up under analysis, and you'll observe that, if the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless.

Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move. In applying the Golden Rule, the only pair of compasses at the photographer's disposal is his own pair of eyes. Any geometrical analysis, any reducing of the picture to a schema, can be done only (because of its very nature) after the photograph has been taken, developed, and printed—and then it can be used only for a post-mortem examination of the picture. I hope we will never see the day when photoshops sell little schema grills to clamp onto our viewfinders; and the Golden Rule will never be found etched on our ground glass.

If you start cutting or cropping a good photograph, it means death to the geometrically correct interplay of proportions. Besides, it very rarely happens that a photograph which was feebly composed can be saved by reconstruction of its composition under the darkroom's enlarger; the integrity of vision is no longer there. There is a lot of talk about camera angles; but the only valid angles in existence are the angles of the geometry of composition and not the ones fabricated by the photographer who falls flat on his stomach or performs other antics to procure his effects.



Seville, Spain, 1933

Gelatin-silver print, 1940s, 9¼ x 14½ inches
Purchase, in memory of Alice R. and Sol B. Frank, 2002:12

Bill Brandt
English, 1904–1983

After studying with Man Ray in Paris in 1931, Brandt moved to England and, over the next forty years, created a singular body of work that has identified him as one of Britain's most important photographers of the twentieth century. Brandt's moody, evocative landscapes, portraits, and domestic tableaux reveal a unique sensibility imbued with inventive and iconoclastic romanticism. Although best known for his documentation of the stark social contrasts in Britain between the World Wars he also created innovative surrealist nude studies that resulted in a book published in 1961 as *Perspective of Nudes*. In his 1948 book, *Camera in London*, Brandt delivered his Photographer's Credo:

I did not always know just what it was I wanted to photograph. I believe it is important for a photographer to discover this, for unless he finds what it is that excites him, what it is that calls forth at once an emotional response, he is unlikely to achieve his best work. For me it was not easy. Simply because my response was so much a matter of instinct that consciously I could not formulate it. In fact I did not try to do so. I now have through experience a more conscious knowledge of what it is that excites me—or would it be more exact to say of what does not excite me? Yet instinct itself should be a strong enough force to carve its own channel. Too much self-examination or self-consciousness about it or about one's aims and purposes may in the early stages be a hindrance rather than a help.

If his instinct did not guide him, either consciously or subconsciously, a photographer might work for years without experiencing the excitement of creative work with his camera. To discover what it is that quickens his interest and emotional response is particularly difficult for the photographer today because advances in technical equipment have made it possible to take such a wide variety of subjects under such varying conditions that the choice before him has become immense in its scope. The good photographer will

produce a competent picture every time whatever his subject. But only when his subject makes an immediate and direct appeal to his own interests will he produce work of distinction....

It is part of the photographer's job to see more intensely than most people do. He must have and keep in him something of the receptiveness of the child who looks at the world for the first time or of the traveller who enters a strange country. Most photographers would feel a certain embarrassment in admitting publicly that they carried within them a sense of wonder, yet without it they would not produce the work they do, whatever their particular field. It is the gift of seeing the life around them clearly and vividly, as something that is exciting in its own right. It is an innate gift, varying in intensity with the individual's temperament and environment....

By temperament I am not unduly excitable and certainly not *trigger-happy*. I think twice before I shoot and very often do not shoot at all. By professional standards I do not waste a lot of film; but by the standards of many of my colleagues I probably miss quite a few of my opportunities. Still, the things I am after are not in a hurry as a rule. I am a photographer of London.



Parlormaid and Under-Parlormaid Ready to Serve Dinner, ca. 1933

Gelatin-silver print, 9 x 7¼ inches
 The Family of Alice R. and Sol B. Frank

John Gutmann

American (b. Germany), 1905–1998

Originally a painter, Gutmann claimed to be a photojournalist in 1933 in order to escape the German government under Hitler. Upon his arrival in the U.S., Gutmann photographed scenes of everyday life during the devastation of the Depression, as well as other troubling episodes in American history, including the National Guard occupation of San Francisco during the General Strike of 1934. Between 1940 and 1962 Gutmann's photographs were published in many magazines and periodicals, including *Life*, *Time*, and *National Geographic*. The following text, selected by the artist, is excerpted from a 1983 interview and from a statement written by Gutmann in 1979 in which he discusses how the interpretation of photographs is often open-ended at best:

Content to me is very important, but I like it when [the photograph] is also enigmatic. If you don't know what it is you begin to speculate, and that is what I want. I want people to be interested in my pictures, to say: "What does it mean? Is there anything else?" And I don't feel there are any absolutes in life.... In my philosophy in life, everything is related to something else. Every experience is relative...which I find very exciting, because of the contrasts and affinities....

Titles or captions are important to me. I try to either state a fact of reality, give information to the

curious viewer or direct attention to what the picture means to me. As a rule I do not like to explain my photographs. I want my pictures to be read and explored. I believe a good picture is open to many individual (subjective) associations. I am usually pleased when a viewer finds interpretations that I myself had not been aware of. I believe that some of my best images have this ambiguity which is an essence of life. In this sense I am not interested in trying desperately to make Art but I am interested in relating to the marvelous extravagance of Life.



Omen, San Francisco, 1934

Gelatin-silver print, 13 x 10³/₄ inches
Purchase, 81.193

Ilse Bing

American (b. Germany), 1899–1998

During the 1930s, Ilse Bing was a pioneering avant-garde photographer in Paris, working for magazines such as *VU*, *Arts et Metiers Graphiques*, and *Le Monde Illustré* and shooting fashion for *Harper's Bazaar* and Schiaparelli. Working exclusively with a Leica, she was a pioneer in the use of the small handheld camera. In 1936, during a visit to New York, she declined an offer to work for *Life* magazine and instead returned to France to marry. In 1940, the Vichy government interned her and her husband as enemy aliens. A year later they immigrated to New York where she remained for the rest of her life. She was included in the Museum of Modern Art's first landmark exhibition of photography in 1937 as well as the Louvre's in 1936. This statement is drawn from her unpublished manuscript entitled, "The Camera as My Artistic Tool."

Not the fact that photography deals with reality, but the question of how an artist makes each picture deal with it, has always appeared to me the essential denominator in a photographer's work. Here is indeed where photography can elevate itself far beyond mechanical snapping. Here was my incentive to work in this art form. My goals were determined by the free choice regarding three of the constituents of all reality: Time, Space, and Chance. I recognized the possibility of combining them so that, instead of a blank statement, the result became an artistic message—that is, one in which the subject of the picture was made to relate to life in general....

The pointing out of differences in style should not lead to misunderstanding: I was always the same ME. Therefore, my work comprises essential permanent characteristics, and the whole of it bears, more or less latently, qualities of its different periods: features of my late work are integral parts of earlier photographs, and vice versa. New experiences made me change emphasis, and thus led to a new style. Yet, there was never a sudden break, only an evolution....

I must explain that when speaking of abstract composition, I do not refer to the Bauhaus style, in which an object can be used as a device to create a new shape leading away from the traditional nature of that object. The abstract I intend to show is inherent in the object itself, or lies in the natural position of different objects.

Historic events were not exclusively responsible for the change in me and my work. The place where we live also influences our approach to life. And, as I said before, all such influences operate with "delayed reaction." I lived in Paris before the War, and since 1941 I have lived in New York. Paris has that shimmery silver light, its streets are built so that they embrace everything, everyone in harmony. Walking in Paris, I feel roots growing from my feet down into the pavement. I feel part of my surroundings.

New York has a clear and differentiating light, which makes me see things in sharp detail. The streets in which I walk do not "integrate" me like the Paris streets; the architecture with its inhuman proportions makes me feel isolated and, as it were, living in a vacuum. Here I see the wonders of the world as if from inside a space capsule.

This shows in my photographs.



New York, The Elevated, and Me, 1936

Gelatin-silver print, 7½ x 11 inches
Purchase, Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., Photography Fund, 2001.3

Aaron Siskind

American, 1903–1991

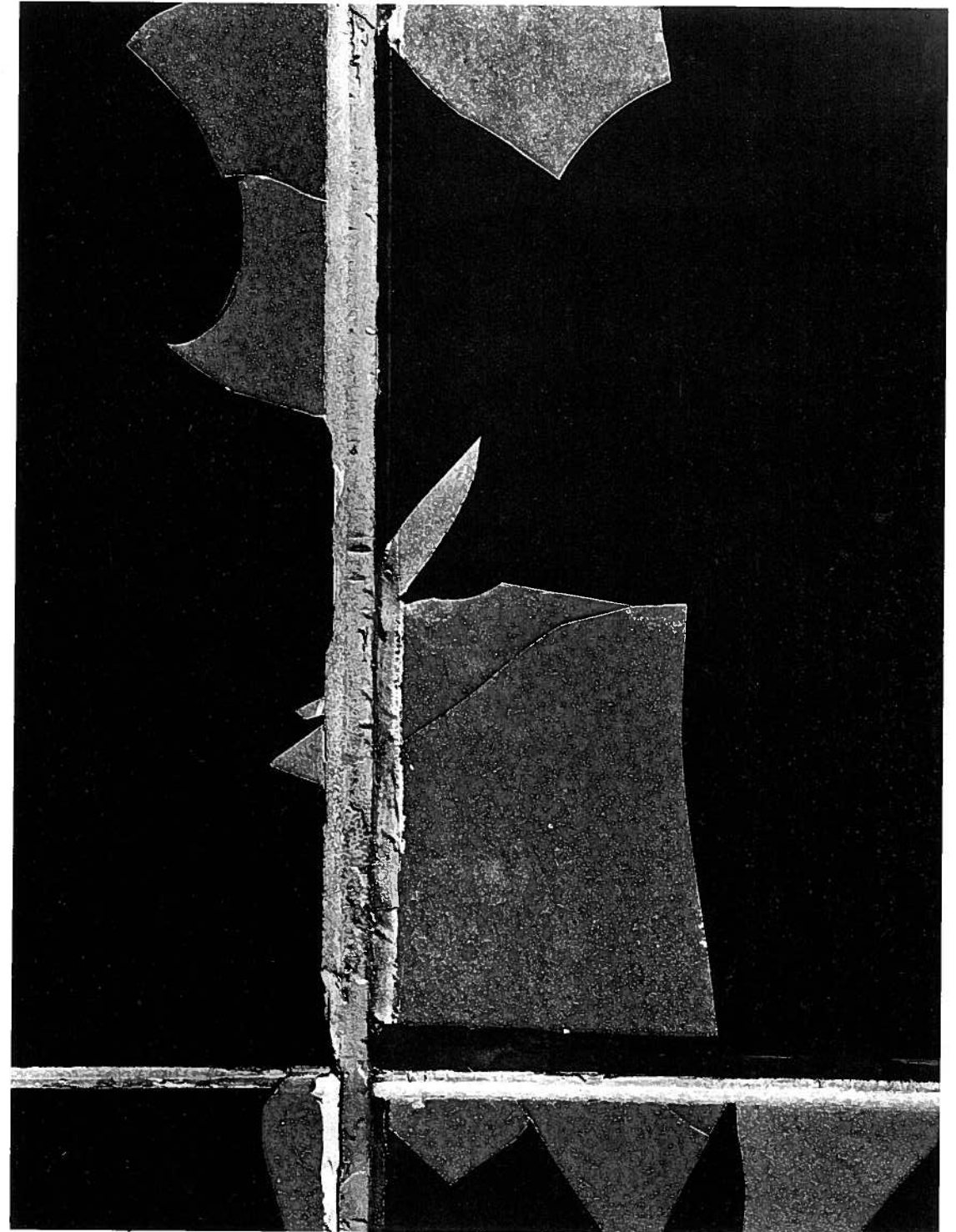
Although his planar, abstract work from the late 1940s on is recognized as some of the greatest twentieth-century American photographic art, Siskind began his photographic career in a documentary style. From 1932 to 1935 he was active in the New York Workers' Film and Photo League and from 1936 to 1941 he was involved with the reorganized New York Photo League, organizations whose collective mission was the advancement of socially engaged documentary work. Siskind's departure from the League symbolized a decisive shift in his work (and in mid-century American photography in general) away from the primacy of subject matter per se toward the dominance of individual vision. Siskind has had great influence as a teacher, both at the Chicago Institute of Design and the Rhode Island School of Design. In the exhibition catalog, *Aaron Siskind: Photographer*, 1965, Siskind states:

When I make a photograph I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order—(unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder).

The business of making a photograph may be said in simple terms to consist of three elements: the objective world (whose permanent condition is change and disorder), the sheet of paper on which the picture will be realized, and the experience which brings them together. First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture. The experience itself may be described as one of total absorption in the object. But the object serves only a personal need and the requirements of the picture. Thus, rocks are sculptured forms; a section of common decorative iron-work, springing rhythmic shapes; fragments of paper sticking to a wall, a conversation piece. And these forms, totems, masks, figures, shapes, images must finally take

their place in the tonal field of the picture and strictly conform to their space environment. The object has entered the picture, in a sense; it has been photographed directly. But it is often unrecognizable; for it has been removed from its usual context, disassociated from its customary neighbors and forced into new relationships.

What is the subject matter of this apparently very personal world? It has been suggested that these shapes and images are underworld characters, the inhabitants of that vast common realm of memories that have gone down below the level of conscious control. It may be they are. The degree of emotional involvement and the amount of free association with the material being photographed would point in that direction. However, I must stress that my own interest is immediate and in the picture. What I am conscious of and what I feel is the picture I am making, the relation of that picture to others I have made and, more generally, its relation to others I have experienced.



New York 1, 1947

Gelatin-silver print, 13¼ x 10 inches
The Family of Alice R. and Sol B. Frank

Jan Groover

American, 1943–

In her ongoing exploration of photography's formal conventions and limitations Groover, who worked in painting and drawing during the 1960s, has utilized numerous techniques and experimented with a variety of subjects. Her work in the early 1970s involved color triptychs of architectural details and urban scenes; subsequently she made color images of intricate kitchen utensil still lifes, platinum prints of cityscapes, close-up portraits and table-top arrangements of found objects. In each project, Groover seeks to ascertain the ideal balance between style and substance in the print. This statement is taken from an interview originally published in the Akron Art Institute's *Dialogue*, 1979.

I was fortunate to have the understanding of the silverware business when I did. It's such wonderful stuff. It reflects everything all the time. It's so liquid in terms of its ability to pick things up. It's so transformable; a knife can be a knife and a color too. It can be a silver knife next to a silver bowl, and another knife next to it can be pink. I like that kind of visual switch.

How do I get the different colors? I have a very funny lowered ceiling right over my still-life table. Generally to get enough light on the still life you have to bounce light off all kinds of things. You can't use direct light because direct light on the silverware makes an ugly glare.... I found you can position certain colored cloths, or plants, or whatever out there so that you can make the color in them reflect on one thing and not another, or on all things except one by having different tilts and angles of reflection. I bounce the light off the color and position the color exactly where I want it to hit on a reflected surface. It's using them like mirrors....

The activity of looking at a photograph is that you are looking at something; it's like looking at a

tree or looking at a painting. I care about how something looks and I make pictures that show that care in some way or another.

I think one of the things that has irritated me about Photography is the intellectual lack of wanting to talk about pictures as pictures instead of all this talk about subject matter. I think a lot of photographers are pictorially illiterate.... When people ask about a painting they don't necessarily say it is about a house; yet, in photography, that is the general usage and I don't like that because it is so limited....

One of the hardest things in life and art is to know what you want. It seems to me that the business of making art is to push toward—I always feel weak saying it, although I know it is the truth when I think about it—is that you are always pushing to find out what you want out of a situation, and it is not anything knowable until you know it.

You can't have a game plan except in working. Photography is a fluid activity; it's not a football game.



Untitled, 1978

Chromogenic print, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
The Family of Alice R. and Sol B. Frank

George Tice
American, 1938–

A self-taught photographer, Tice has been working in photography since he was fourteen years old. A master technician, he frequently uses the 8-x-10-inch view camera and is largely responsible for the resurgence of interest in the platinum printing process. Tice works with the extended photo-essay and has published more than a dozen books of his photographs, including *Fields of Peace: A Pennsylvania German Album* (1970), *Paterson* (1972), *Urban Landscapes: A New Jersey Portrait* (1975), and *Hometowns: An American Pilgrimage* (1988). Tice submitted this statement about the creation of *From the Chrysler Building*:

My photograph *From the Chrysler Building* resulted from a commission I received from the Association for a Better New York. It was their purpose to create and publish a series of posters on the theme—"New York, New York." I was free to present my own concept of the city. Because of the official nature of my commission, I thought I might gain access to vantage points that I could not on my own.

I started thinking about photographing the city from a skyscraper and that idea brought to mind a 1934 photograph by Oscar Grauber of Margaret Bourke-White perched atop a gargoyle jutting off the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building. She is depicted aiming her Graflex camera at something higher.

I informed the Association of my idea to photograph from the Chrysler Building, and they paved the way and obtained the permission needed. They also took out an insurance policy on my life. I

remember photographing with the policy sticking out my back pocket.

To approach the gargoyles I had to climb out an office window with my view camera to a walkway. Once up there, I realized I had a larger choice of eagles than I had thought. Instead of the four I anticipated, there were eight. Juxtaposed against the city, each provided different views. I passed several hours of a sunny June day studying the various compositions presented by each gargoyle as the light changed. Finally, I selected a view looking past the Lincoln building toward New Jersey, whereby I could include the people and traffic on the streets below.

After developing my film, I was pleased with the composition, but I did not like the harsh effects produced by direct sunlight. A week later, on a grey day, I returned to the Chrysler Building's 61st floor and took it again.



From the Chrysler Building, New York, 1978

Gelatin-silver print, 19 3/4 x 15 3/8 inches
 Purchase, 86203