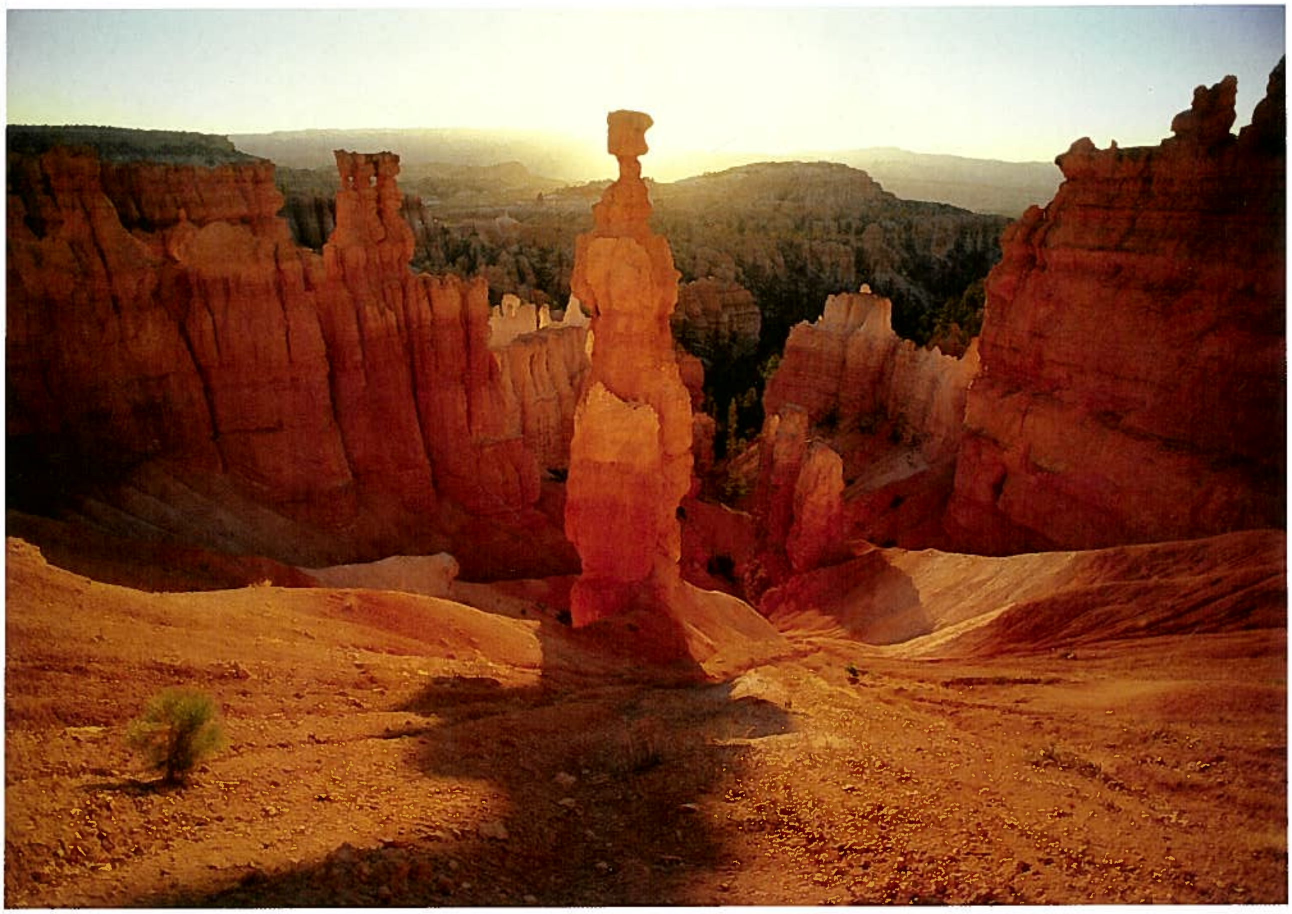
CLICHÉ AND IRONY

Clichés may be a little less common in photography than in, say, writing, but I would argue that they are more of a problem. The reason is that they are more difficult to avoid. A clichéd phrase can easily be replaced—you only have to use a thesaurus—but in photography there are some scenes that simply do not have very good alternative viewpoints. And while viewpoint does not rule every photograph, it very much applies to those large, fixed scenes and subjects that everyone has an opportunity to visit. Whether the Grand Canyon, Eiffel Tower, or any popular magnet, the problem is that it's all been done before.

Cliché has come to mean generally a trite or over-used idea, or in our case a photograph. It is almost universally condemned as a sign that whoever is using it is unimaginative, lacking in creativity, or lazy, or all of these. That sounds reasonable, but how did clichés get to be in the first place? Almost none of them started as trite and commonplace. When the English photographer Francis Frith photographed the Sphinx and Pyramids in 1857, he brought back to the untraveled viewing public an amazing sight, all the better for not being shot with a tricky angle and parts obscured. Since then, it has become a postcard view, which in its own way goes to show that it was a popular view. Here, admittedly, we're looking at ways to take our photography forward and work hard at it, but it might not be completely fair to dismiss tried and tested images out of hand. The American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer, best known for her text installations in public spaces, plays devil's advocate: "Clichés are truth-telling, time tested, and short. These are all fine things in words. People attend to clichés, so important subject matter can be disseminated. Clichés are highly refined through time."

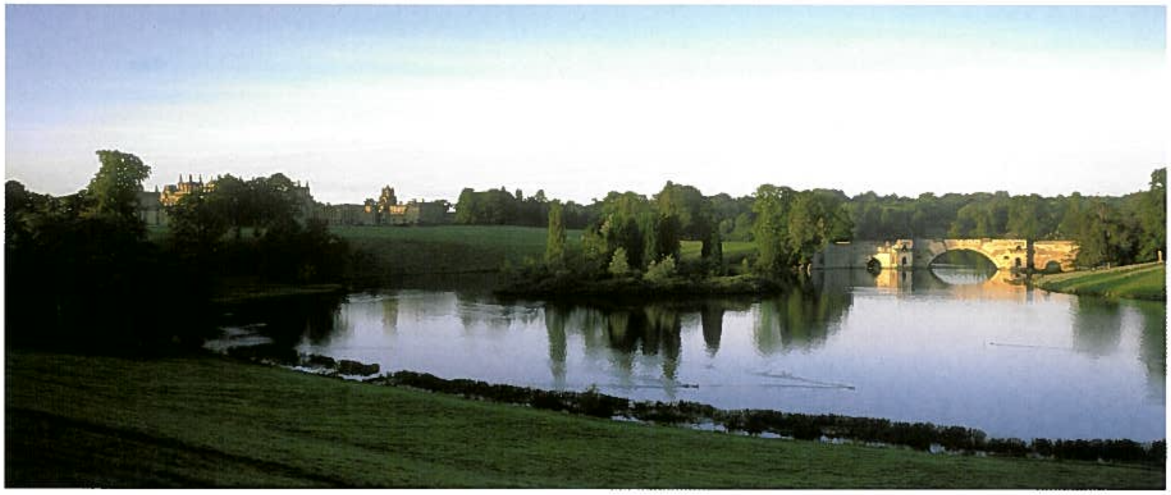
It's a provocative idea and perhaps there is something to learn from it for photography. Instead of a knee-jerk dismissal of a view as too



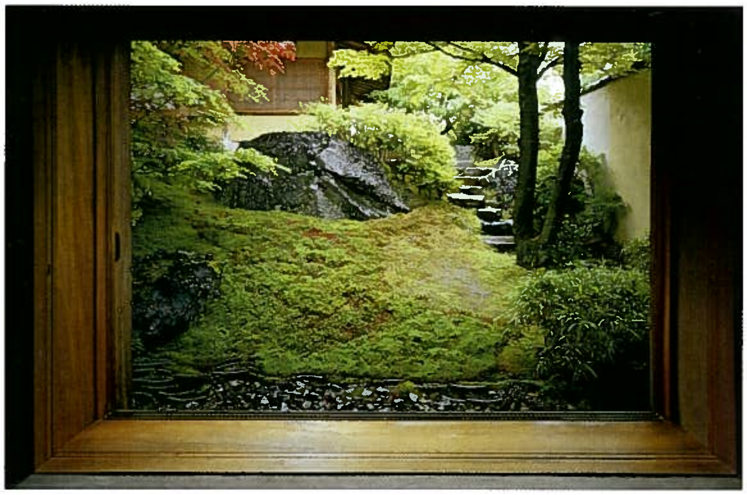
◄ A BASIC DILEMMA
By almost any standards, this is a striking view and a dramatic landform. There are many angles for this sandstone pillar, known as Thor's Hammer in Bryce Canyon National Park in the western United States, but this is particularly tempting—sunrise with the tip just occluding the sun's disk. The bowl that rises up to the left, right, and behind the camera position acts as a reflector to give the best of both worlds of lighting—a silhouette, but with a high level of fill. The problem is that the very precision of the viewpoint means that anyone who has the idea for this will inevitably take a near-identical shot.

obvious, it might be worth re-appraising it if there is a way to persuade an audience to look at it freshly. This is exactly what Holzer does with her installations. Maybe not so easy with a photograph, but if you think about presentation, there are some possibilities. One is scale. In fine-art photography in recent years, very large prints have been in vogue. By large, I mean measured in feet or meters rather than inches or centimeters. In the West, Andreas Gursky is probably the best known of photographers working to scales that exceed 15 feet/4 meters. The Chinese photographer Wang Qingsong does similarly large-scale prints, including one that is 31 feet (9½ meters) long. Debate continues as to how much of the strength of these photographers' work lies in sheer size, but it certainly does command attention in a gallery or show. I'm not, incidentally, implying that either of these artists' images are in any way a cliché, but rather that unexpected presentation compels viewers to look at photographs more carefully. Another possibility might be in the form of an animated slideshow or movie; dissolves and tracking shots applied to still images can certainly enliven them, while well-chosen music adds another dimension to the viewing experience.

However, back to the problem of the obvious, acknowledged, "perfect" viewpoint. Does it even exist? Or rather, according to what taste does it exist? First, let me mention a special case, which is when the intention of the creator of a scene or subject is to control the view. This is less common in large views, for obvious practical reasons, but quite usual with architecture and design. In fact, designed spaces share a great deal with works of art. Photographing them involves considering how they were intended to be seen. Strong examples are English landscape architecture of the 18th century and Japanese formal garden design, particularly stroll gardens developed from earlier Chinese principles.



◄ THE FINEST VIEW
A famous view of Blenheim Palace that Randolph Churchill called with some justification "the finest view in England." The 4th Duke of Marlborough employed Lancelot "Capability" Brown in 1765 to redesign the gardens. He created the lake and this highly engineered view, which greets the visitor arriving through the Woodstock Gate by carriage. I was shooting a story on Blenheim for the Smithsonian and so had access at any time, and was able to explore this viewpoint minutely. It soon became obvious that the view—which takes in the house, lake, and bridge—is extremely precise, to within a few paces. To shoot in any other way, it seemed to me, would be perverse. Lighting is the only variable.



► PERFECT FRAMING?
A view and a garden, which has been designed deliberately to look like a painting or photograph. Any other camera angle is simply less good.

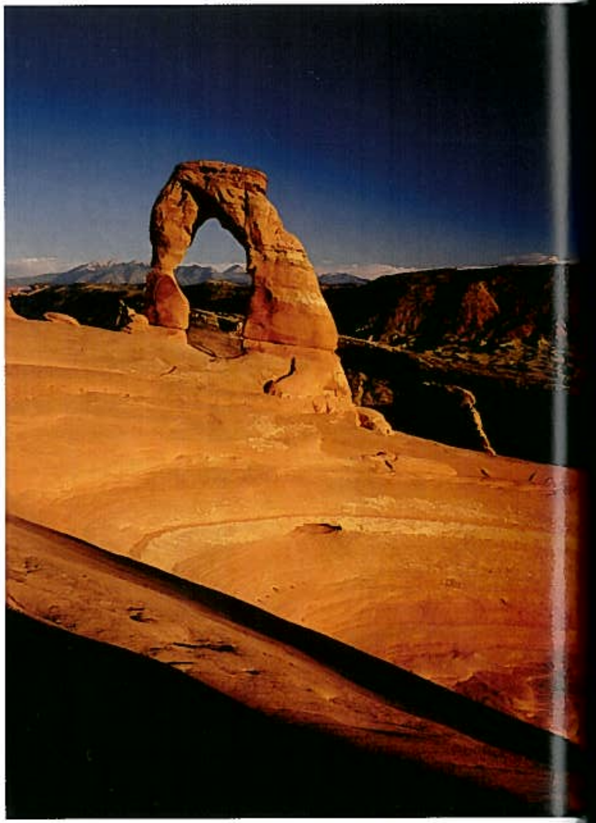
Unlike the constructed, or designed landscape, natural views rely on consensus, and one practical consideration is simple efficiency. As long as the subject is agreed on, and is something concrete and straightforward, such as a rock formation or a building, then only a limited number of viewpoints will show it recognizably. There would be little point, for example, in photographing the rock arch shown here side-on, unless, of course, you were being extremely ironic and doing this to challenge the viewer's assumptions. A second consideration is what people expect to see in terms of a satisfying angle and pleasing proportions. This is where we get into the issue of normal versus cutting edge, and the essential conservatism of what most people like.

Interestingly, there is a measure of the common denominator of public taste, and that is the sales of stock photography. This is really where the marketplace for photography now resides, with many millions of images licensed for sale and accessible online. In whatever commercial area—travel destinations, fashion, and lifestyle—the really big earners are images that sell over and over. Simply because of being sold and reproduced so many times they have become, in effect, clichés. Creatively that might not be a good thing, but financially it could hardly be better. The founder of one of the most successful stock agencies of the 1980s and 1990s remarked that 90 percent of the sales came from 10 percent of the images.

Strategies employed by professional stock photographers are instructive, because they are dealing with cliché-prone material (as I write this, a check on a major online stock site shows more than 12,000 hits for a search on "Eiffel Tower," for example). I'm indebted to my friend Steve Vidler, a travel stock photographer, for explaining how this works. Rule one is to concentrate on what you know will sell, which demands the discipline of not getting side-tracked into the unusual. This is probably the opposite of what many photographers would do. Instead of adopting a "dare to be different" approach, successful stock photography means identifying with both the mass of final viewers and the picture editors who are catering to them.

This research would lead Vidler, for example, to shoot a well-known site with a tourist couple prominently in view—a couple that a reader could identify with. "Tourists in front of the Eiffel Tower: how boring, you might think. But bear in mind that this type of image is one of the most sought-after in the travel industry." While acknowledging that it has "certainly become increasingly difficult to get a different slant on the iconic subjects because of the sheer volume of imagery and choice available to image buyers," Vidler sees it as a challenge rather than a cause for despair. He makes sure that he is on-site before dawn, in good weather, and will work hard to compose the shot with some extra element, such as a reflection or, in the case in question, a street and attractive café with the Eiffel Tower in the background.

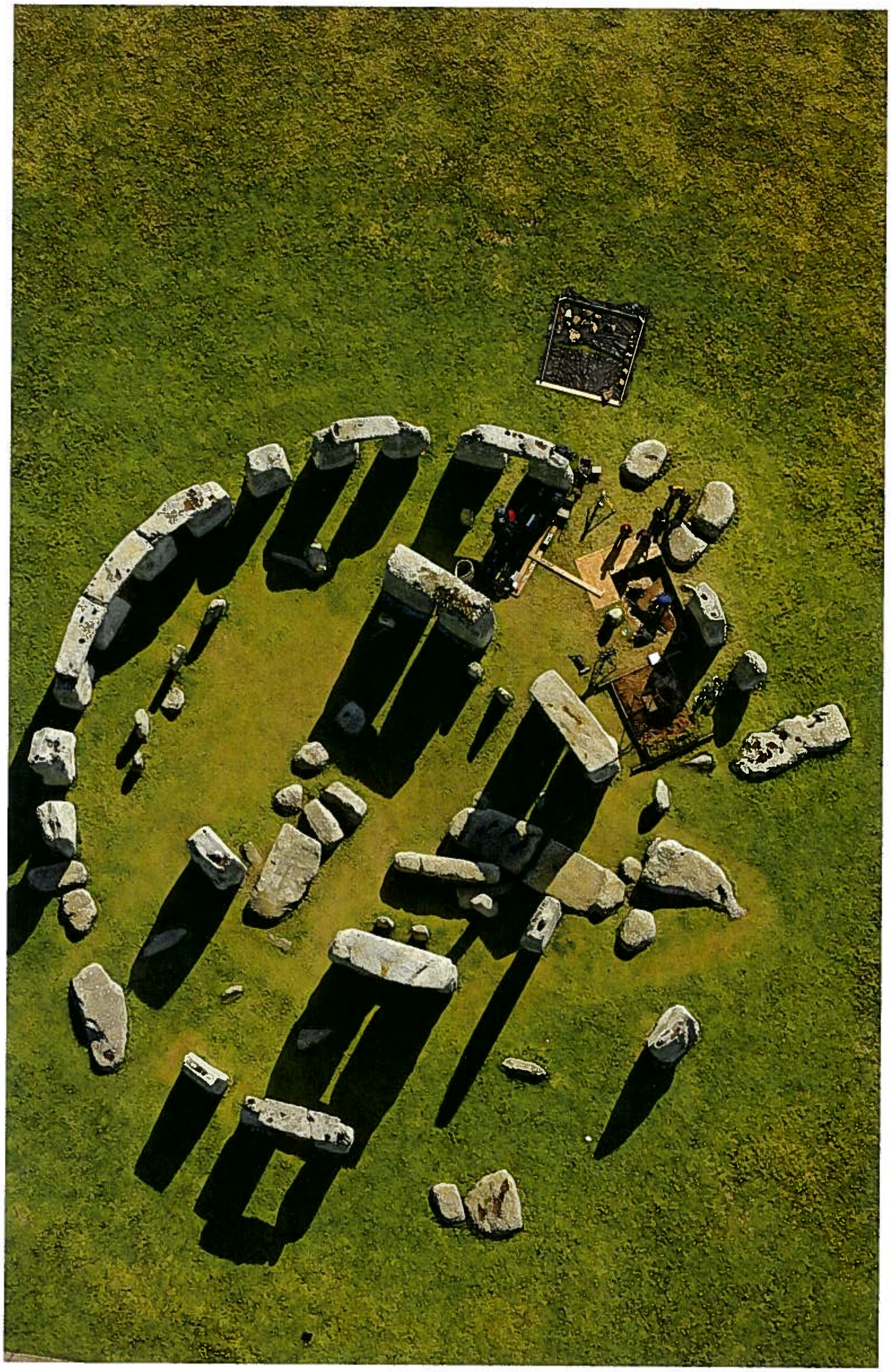
For photographers who want to separate themselves creatively from others, and carve out their own distinctive niche, the limited-viewpoint scene is more difficult to solve. Not least, there is the underlying irritation that you are not the first. Yet if you had been, or if you didn't already know what had been done, would you naturally go to the same spot as others? The same problem in reverse is if you are fortunate enough, or persevering enough, to be more-or-less first (as happened to me at Angkor). Then, you should really anticipate what everyone else will do later, because what you find obviously satisfactory, they will too. But in any case, if you did manage to find a very specific and less-obvious view, as most of us try to, you can be sure that when it has been published it will be copied. I once had the doubtful pleasure of being at a temple in Angkor and seeing a photographer, and assistant exploring with camera and tripod in one hand and my book in the other, looking for the same views.

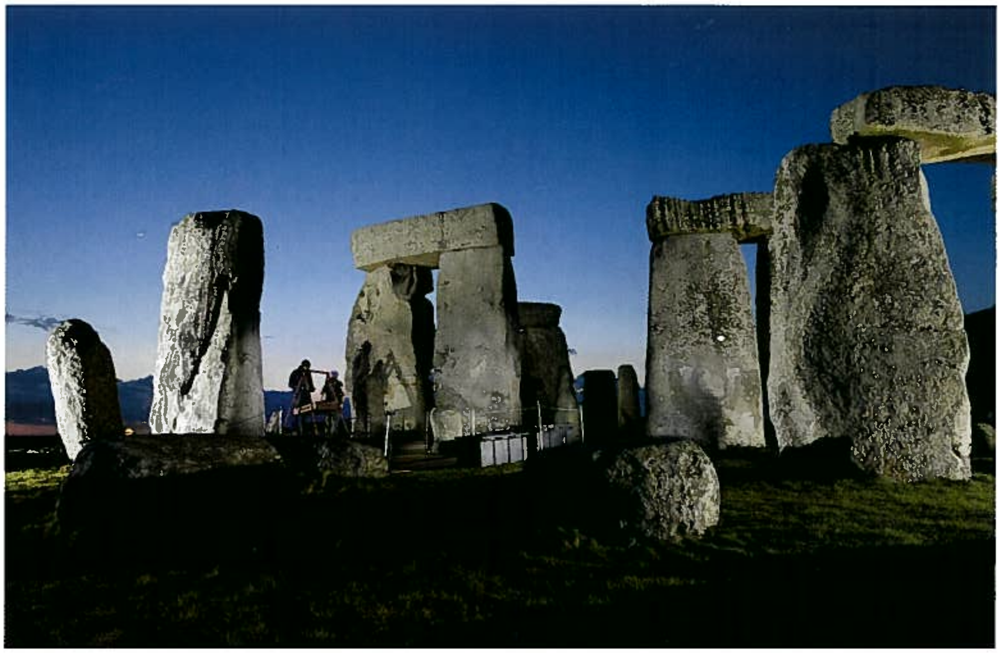


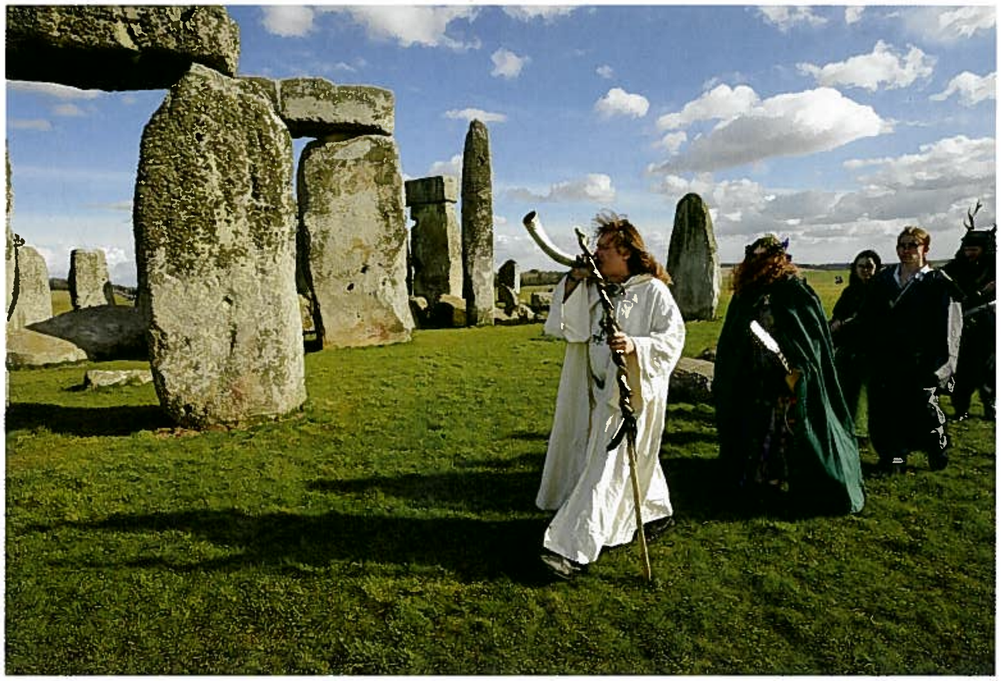
▲ A NECESSARY VIEWPOINT
As described in the text, a rock arch, in this case Delicate Arch in eastern Utah, is visually only an arch from a limited angle.

As the previous examples have shown, with a given subject there is a limit to the number of ways in which you can treat it photographically, and still come up with a sensible, acceptable image. The further you stray into weird angles and effects, the greater the risk of the image simply looking silly. One thing that can help is fashion. Treatments and techniques that at one time would have been completely rejected by most people can gradually become tolerated by a general audience, and then even liked. For instance, when ultra-wide lenses (meaning a shorter focal length than 28mm) began to be used by professionals in mass publications in the early 1960s, they were controversial for their distortion (even though Bill Brandt, for one, had made extreme wide-angle nude photographs in the 1950s with a specialized Kodak police crime-scene camera). Art Kane, for instance, made 21mm close-and-distorted fashion photography his hallmark, and the style soon became almost normal in the United States and Europe. But what is "fashionable" can just as quickly be thrown out, becoming yet one more cliché, as indeed happened with the wide distorted look.

The most decisive way of dealing with photographic clichés is to redefine the subject, and we have already looked at how much broader the definition of a subject is than most people would think. A clichéd beauty spot may well be susceptible to being treated in a different context, and an effective route into this is a journalistic approach. Researching the subject thoroughly may throw up a very different kind of opportunity, such as restoration work or an event. This would prevent any attempt at "improving" on the classic treatments, but it also offers something different.







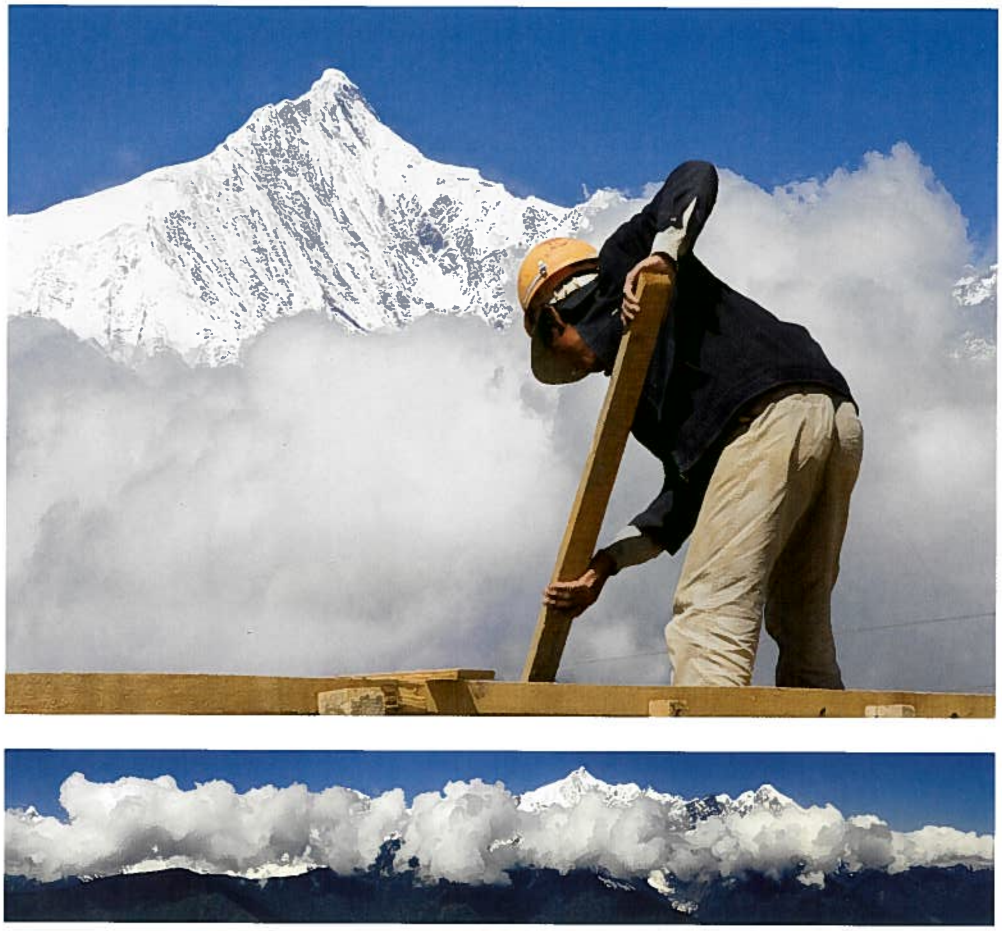
◄▲ AN UNTRIED VIEWPOINT
A view of Stonehenge, which receives 800,000 visitors a year, at the time of an unlikely-to-be-repeated excavation. This was the point of the assignment—the first archaeological dig that had been permitted in almost half a century—and while the results are likely to be useless for a travel brochure, they are priceless as a unique view.

WAYS OF DEALING WITH CLICHÉD SCENES

- Make a technically superior version, such as higher resolution or a fuller dynamic range.
- Make a stylistically superior version (admittedly a matter of taste), such as refining the composition.
- Search for a different viewpoint or framing, if one exists. With a very over-photographed subject, this is unlikely, but still possible.
- Different lighting or weather to that which has already been shot. With luck and perseverance this can succeed even with heavily shot locations.
- Make a stylistically different treatment (not the same as "superior"). This could involve a different color look, a monochrome version with special treatment of the key and/or contrast, or even using a style that exploits new technology, as happened with ultra-wide lenses in the 1960s.
- Redefine the subject. In fine-art photography this is the most rewarding solution. Redefining is open-ended, but one example might be to step back and show other photographers shooting the scene, altering the subject of the image.

WHAT MAKES A PHOTOGRAPHIC CLICHÉ?

- An inherently attractive subject with a conventionally attractive viewpoint.
- Established points on the tourist trail that fit the above.
- A strong stylistic technique that is past its sell-by date–in other words, identifiable and over-used. Example: racking the zoom during the exposure for a radially blurred treatment, fashionable in the 1970s, but quickly done to death. Another, more recent example: simulating a miniature scene by shooting a normal landscape with a tilt lens that limits the focus to a narrow plane.
- Any subject or style that becomes so popular and so reproducible that it is taken up by many other photographers. A victim of its own success, in other words. Example: running straight lines as diagonals, which was considered "edgy" for a few years in the 1990s. As was overexposing for a washed-out look. As was cross-processing film.



▲ FINDING AN ISSUE

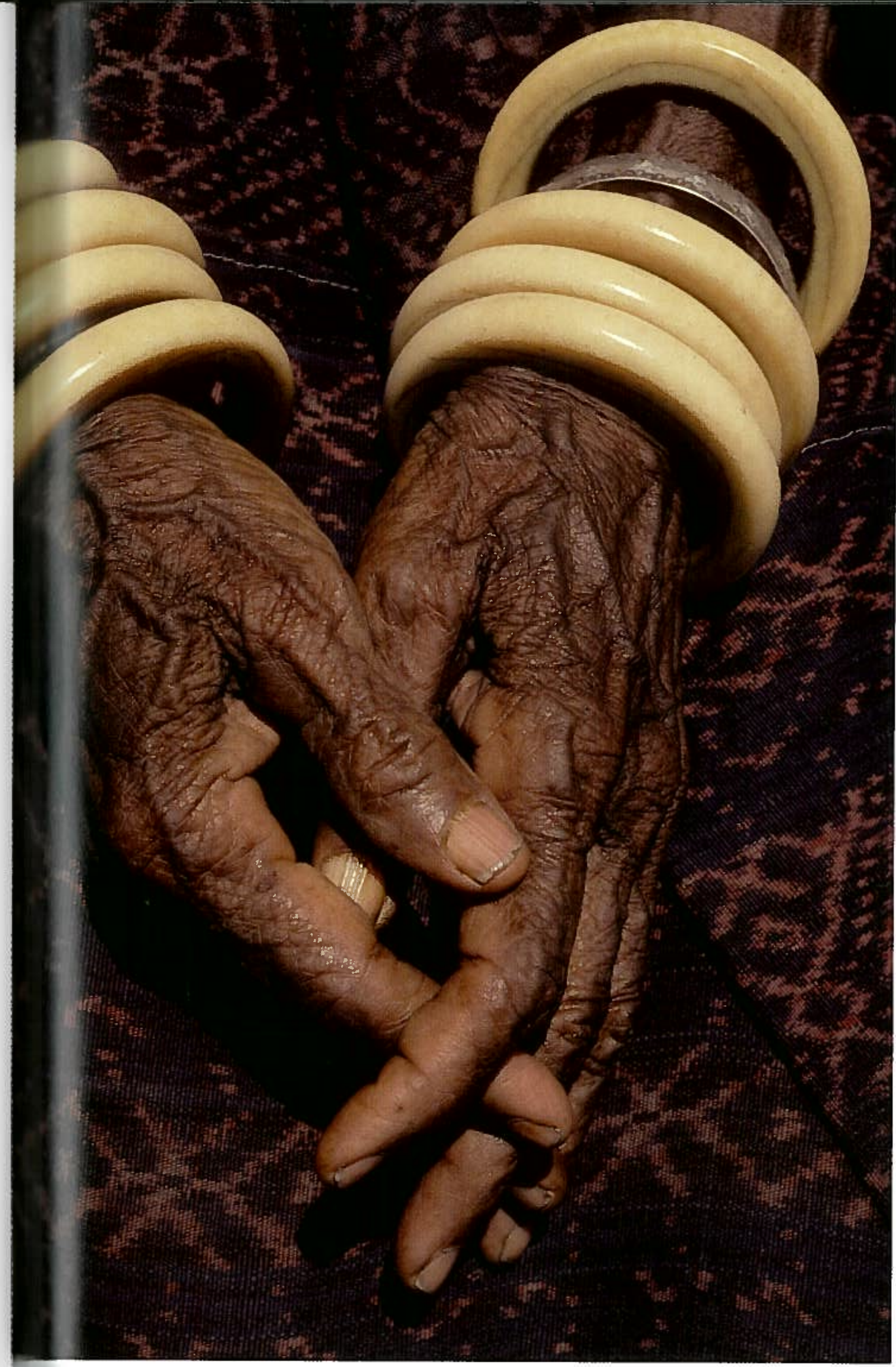
Retaking for the many-thousandth time the admittedly beautiful sunrise shot for which this mountain is famous seemed pointless. Instead, as described in the text, I chose to focus on the dubious exploitation of it.

While the previous example of Stonehenge reveals a uniquely positive view of the subject, a less positive example is the case of the mountain in the image shown right. This is Meili Xue Shan ("Beautiful Snow Mountain") in Yunnan, China. Rising above the Mekong gorge to nearly 23,000 feet (7,000 meters), it lives up to its name as a very attractive peak, and is actively promoted by the province's fledgling tourist industry. So, what to do with an admittedly pretty sight at sunrise that is endlessly reproduced on posters and in brochures? The classic viewpoint is from a small town on the east bank, and every tourist dutifully rises at dawn to take a picture. However, when we visited, a high wall was in the process of being built by the road to make sure that only paying tourists could see the mountain. Outrageous, of course, but at the same time a photograph with a story.

This is the more ironic, or even cynical approach to a subject, and as a general attitude can be applied not just to the obvious targets, but to subjects in general. It appeals to a different kind of audience, and suits some photographers' personalities better than others. It also runs its own special risks, such as misfiring (no-one gets the point) or seeming simply willful. The safest way of doing this is to make sure that the story you are telling is a solid one, not frivolous.

Certain subjects themselves have either become clichés or are teetering on the brink. To quote Sontag again, this time on Paul Strand and Edward Weston: "Their rigorous close-up studies of plants, shells, leaves, time-withered trees, kelp, driftwood, eroded rocks, pelicans' wings, gnarled cypress roots, and gnarled workers' hands have become clichés of a merely photographic way of seeing." This recalls the art director of *American Vogue* in the 1930s, M. F. Agha, rounding on such clichés of modernist photography as "Eggs (any style). Twenty shoes, standing in a row... Ten teacups standing in a row... More eggs ..." But Sontag added that such subjects had become clichéd because "what it once took a very intelligent eye to see, anyone can see now." In both of these cases—natural found objects and commercial/retail ones—the subject material was destined for cliché by being first innovative and then fashionable. As with other kinds of cliché, they started with hard work and imagination, and became victims of their own success. Finally, subjects with a potential for cliché may simply not catch your eye. Many photographers pay attention to other aspects of life and scenery than the picturesque. It's admittedly difficult to ignore the sights that most people are drawn to, but not always impossible.

WEB SEARCH
- Francis Frith Pyramids
- Jenny Holzer
- Andreas Gursky
- Wang Gingsong
- Francisco Asis Taos image
- Macchu Picchu image
- Bill Brandt nude
- Art Kane wide angle
- zoom effect photography
- Edward Weston driftwood
- Paul Strand abstract



▲ THE "WEATHERED HAND" SHOT
There are endless variations of this, which by no means invalidates it, but does raise the standard, and demands that any new shot has to be very well executed.

▲ BEHIND THE SCENES
A fashion show, but to explore a bit further, the camera here goes behind the scenes to capture a moment, pose and expression that are less ordinary.

▲ A LITTLE STRANGE
It's just a cheap restaurant in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, but the welcoming sign at the door displays rather odd taste on the part of the owners.

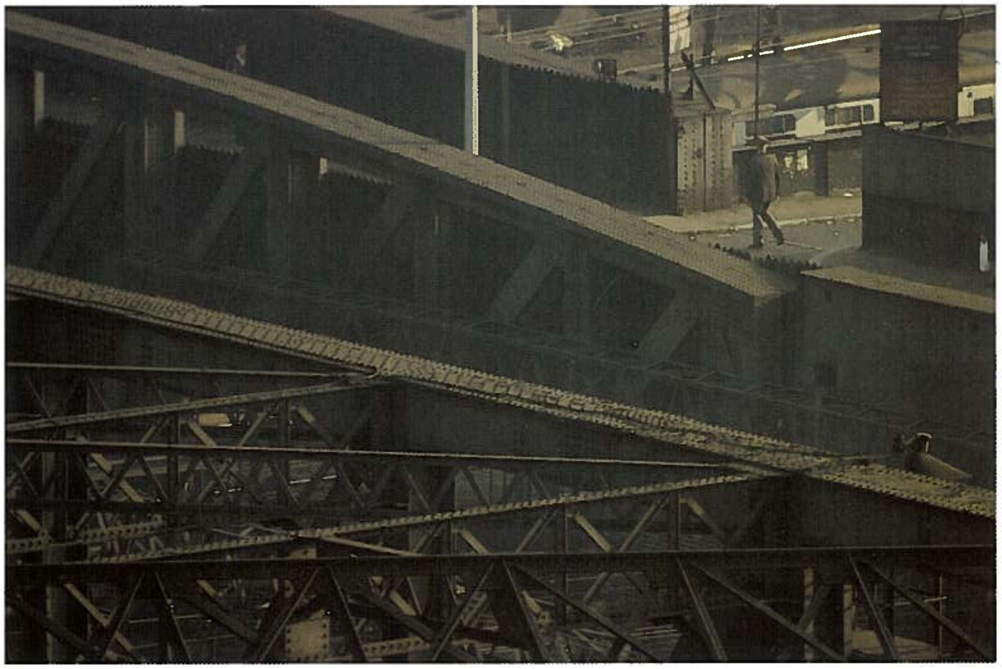
LIFTING THE MUNDANE

Considering clichés leads us naturally to questioning what makes a fit and proper subject for photography. This has been argued for as long as cameras have been used. Even the expression "fit and proper" has undertones of correctness, but things have changed. With photography now much less influenced by corporate media and by photography "stars," the question has become a more personal one that has less to do with meeting approval than with satisfying the photographer's own sense of what is worthwhile. Most photographers begin by searching for a type of subject that will satisfy their ambitions, and the two most obvious places to look are the established categories and whatever is close to hand. These couldn't be further apart: what *Time-Life* used to call "the great themes"with history and tradition behind them, and the easy-to-reach bits and pieces lying around the home and the neighborhood. One is what people think they ought to be doing, the other is just something to point the camera at without thinking too hard, but I suspect that most of us have gone for both.

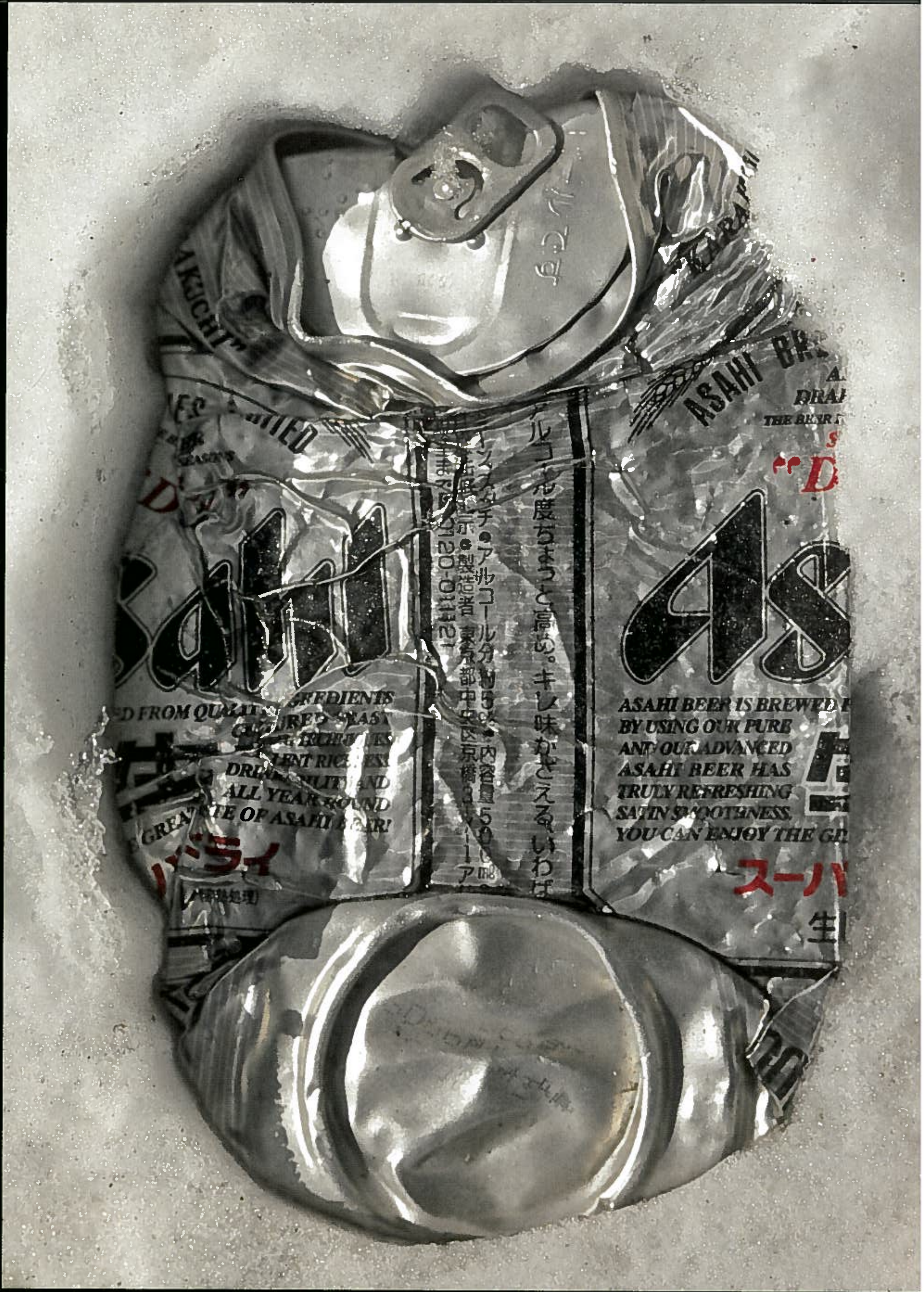
When photography was taken more respectfully than it now is, the acknowledged genres were either lofty or at least purposeful. *Time-Life*'s great themes in the *Life Library of Photography* were "portraits, still life, the nude, nature, war, and the human condition," and commercial photography followed some of these at a less exalted level (weddings were a mixture of the first and last, and pack-shots a form of still life). There were other ways of dividing photography, but they were always directed at content, and worthy content at that. Most photographers pursuing a career still define themselves as belonging to one chapter or another, joining other members. It helps answer the inevitable question "what kind of photography do you do?" and adds a little structure to an activity that is often loose and anarchic. But there is also the counter-view that following one of these themes or genres is unnecessarily limiting. Photographer Romano Cagnoni, when asked about the genre of his work (mainly reportage), replied, "Is there a creative photojournalist? Or a fine art photographer? Wedding photographer? Advertising? Fashion? Is it not enough just to be a photographer?"

Taking a less disciplined, or at least less restrictive view of what to shoot may be healthier for one's creativity, and one of the significant changes in photography has been opening up acceptable subject matter to include the ordinary and unspecial: both ordinary objects and ordinary lives. The news event that affects millions, never-before-seen wonders of wildlife, and expressions of great emotion will always, of course, be important and fascinating, but the mundane can be intensely rewarding for photography if the photographer treats it as something special. After all, Edward Weston probably didn't think he was being trivial when he photographed a toilet. He was trying to look at it with a fresh and concentrated eye.

In fact, it was the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s that first prompted the photography of the ordinary. This may come as a surprise to the many people who think of Surrealism in terms of fantastic, dream-like imagery, epitomized by Salvador Dali and Magritte and followed in photography by Man Ray and Angus McBean. Certainly, fantasy is the visual legacy best remembered and still exploited, but the success of manipulated and staged Surrealist imagery put more basic Surrealist ideas in the shade: fundamental ideas that everyday subject matter had meaning and that we can find the extraordinary in the ordinary.



➤ **ORDINARY URBAN**
The muted tones and thick atmosphere tie the urban elements of this scene together. There is no grand architecture here, just the margins of railway running through London, and an ordinary passer-by, but it communicates the atmosphere of the usually ignored parts of a city.



➤ TRAMPLED UNDERFOOT
A beer can left on the pavement and trodden on by many passing feet, becomes an *in situ* still life, made more interesting by the surrounding snow. Images like this rely on persuading the viewer that the close inspection of the ordinary will be worthwhile.

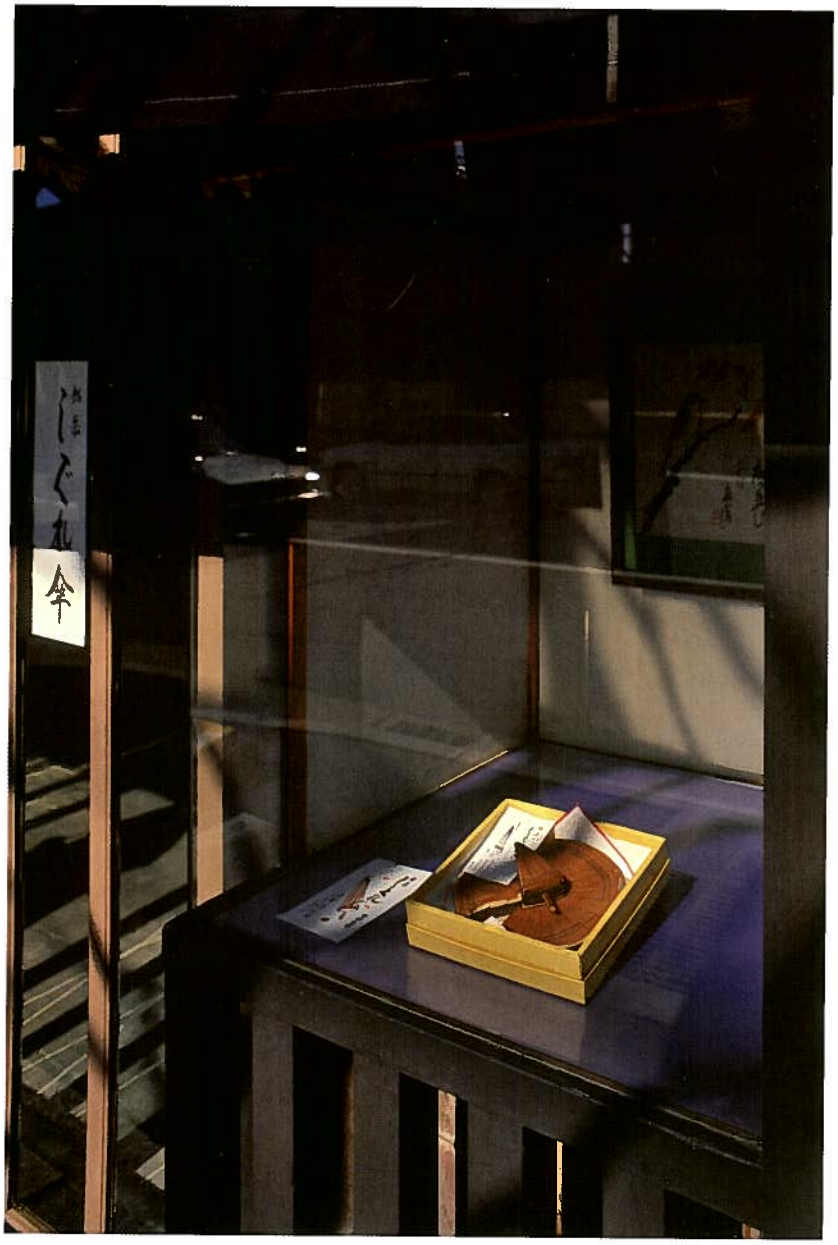
A photographic hero for the Surrealists was Eugène Atget, whose obsessive and meticulous scenes of Paris were largely absent of people, but full of detail. Rather than great buildings and grand boulevards, he preferred quiet corners, shop windows, and nostalgia, and his images—shot with a large-format camera—invite deep examination. This is a kind of *Inventory* photography, and it intrigued the Surrealists with its wealth of subject matter captured more or less instantaneously and "automatically." Three Surrealist obsessions were automatism (creative works produced innocently), appropriation, and the found object (*objet trouvé*) that was given new meaning simply by being chosen. Straight photography of the everyday, like Atget's, had all of this.

One of the most influential art critics of the time was Walter Benjamin. In *A Small History of Photography*, published in 1931, he wrote, "Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of surrealistic photography." He also wrote that Surrealist "writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms." More recently, teacher and critic Ian Walker's books, *City Gorged with Dreams* and *So Exotic, So Homemade*, revive the argument that the meaning of Surrealism in imagery has been hijacked by the dream-like, Freudian, and manipulated, whereas it is really more about "photography that largely takes place in and around the city, where the banal and the marvellous coexist on a daily basis."

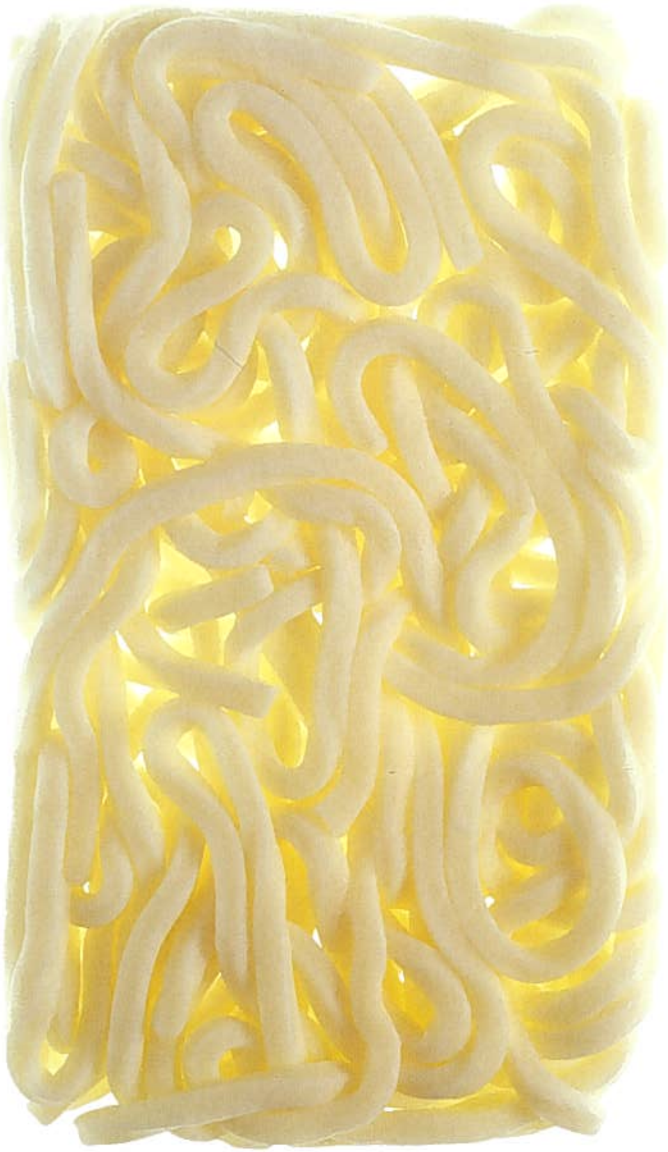
In the 1920s, a considered photograph of a Paris shop window had a certain surprise value (*Avenue des Gobelins*, 1927) for its very banality, and when I say an *Inventory* photograph I mean an image that is more than just a record, but one that holds within the frame a wealth of undiscovered detail to examine. This is still a rich vein to explore, which favors high-resolution images and large reproduction. Interestingly, while this was once the preserve of large-format photographers with bulky equipment, digital photography has made this style of image more accessible to many more people. Not only are sensors improving in resolution, but the high megapixel count is becoming available in less expensive cameras. There may well be an element of pixel addiction in this, but it certainly makes detailed *Inventory* images more possible. In any case, very smartly designed stitching software is widely available and virtually automatic, so by shooting an overlapping series of frames of a scene—up and down, as well as from side to side—any camera can produce a very large final image.

◄ SHAKER BOX
Flat-on, the contents of this Shaker box, in neat compartments, are interestingly lit, but the composition is deliberately uninflected—just a record. This matches the plainness of the subject. This is one kind of "inventory" subject, in which we are invited to study the contents rather than admire the photography.

▲ FOUND LIGHTING, FOUND SUBJECT
This pair of shoes was untouched for the photograph; they looked like this, taken off the night before, at exactly this moment of morning sunlight entering the room. The only arrangement needed was to position the camera and crop for this framing.



▲ SHOP WINDOW
The crisp afternoon lighting gives graphic interest, but the appeal of this photograph of a shop window in Kyoto lies in what we can tell about the culture—total focus on a perfect product.



▲ UNEXPECTED ELEGANCE
A package of Japanese udon noodles, when unwrapped, revealed a surprising perfection of form. Lighting completed it: placed on a lightbox, they glowed.

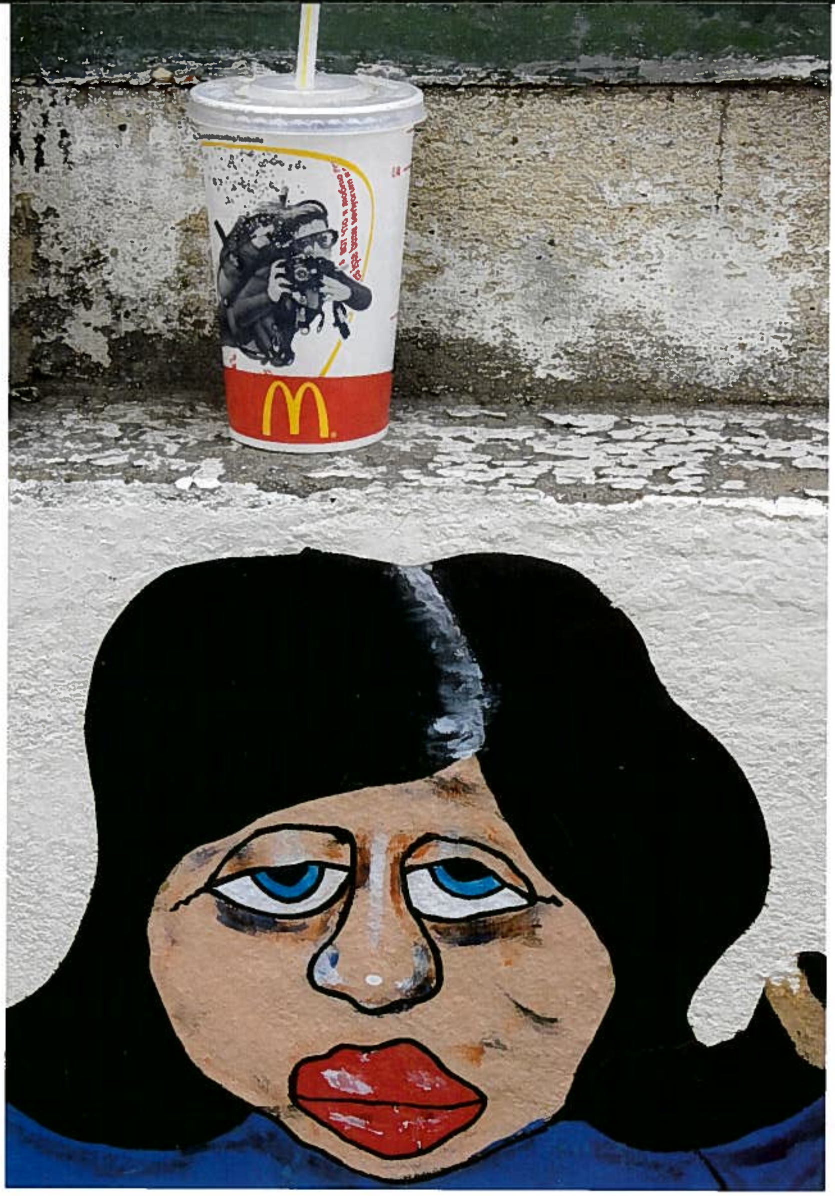
The elevation of the mundane has gone much further, though. Milestones on the journey toward "anything at all" in still life were Frederick Sommer's photographs of assembled chicken parts and similar, Irving Penn's series of scavenged cigarette butts in the 1970s, and Jan Groover's very domestic arrangements of kitchen utensils. So for anyone who felt a little shame in photographing very ordinary things from around the house, there is now no need. What there is need for, however, is a high degree of imagination, style, and technique to compensate for the lack of, well, meaningful content.

This still leaves the puzzle of why so many photographs of, say, fire hydrants still look like, snapshots of fire hydrants. A trawl through some of the images of these you will find online is anything but inspiring, and would encourage many people to go back to finding special subjects as a way of guaranteeing a good final result. But it doesn't have to be like that. Street furniture is still a worthwhile subject, given some pre-conditions. They are, first, originality, and second, that one way or another the audience is compelled to look at it seriously, and these apply, naturally, to all mundane subjects. It may not be possible to be completely original, but either in choice, composition, lighting, or something else, the image has to compel. This is even more important with an ordinary subject than with one that is already special. As for presentation, it needs to be put in front of viewers in such a way that they do not pass over it because they know what it is and are not interested. An exquisitely interesting treatment may or may not be sufficient for this. It may need extra help.

Let's put this to the test: What made Irving Penn's studio photographs of street detritus compelling and memorable? To start with, they were original, in that no-one (that anyone remembers) had chosen used cigarette butts swept up from the street before. In addition, he brought his considerable skills as a photographer fully to bear on them in the studio, as if they had been an expensive item of jewelry. They were also presented to an audience who paid full attention to them, partly because of his name and reputation, and partly because they were printed in a special way—platinum prints and very large.

So what lessons can we learn from this? First, Penn was truly beyond his time, but that was a long time ago and simply choosing the equivalent of cigarette butts isn't going to cut anything anymore, as the barriers of acceptability have been breached already. Treatment is the key, made all the more important by the banality of the subject matter. Here, we are in the land of style, which is the theme for the second part of this book. Any of the approaches and methods featured there are potentially applicable here, and I mentioned one already—the full studio beauty treatment. Another might be a reprise of the abstraction approach of the Fotoform movement. There are many stylistic possibilities, and while much of this falls under the heading of "still life," that does not mean that it has to be studio-based and under tight control. For example, the work of British photographer Martin Parr, best known for his (usually) close-up images of the trashy British vacation experience, is most often lit unflatteringly by flash and points the way to more of a reportage approach.

Finally, presentation is important, and this is a theme I will keep returning to. If you photograph for an audience—and almost all photographers do—how the work gets seen makes a great difference to its effect on a viewer. The possibilities here have been expanded greatly with the development of relatively inexpensive large-format printing, and web-based shows.

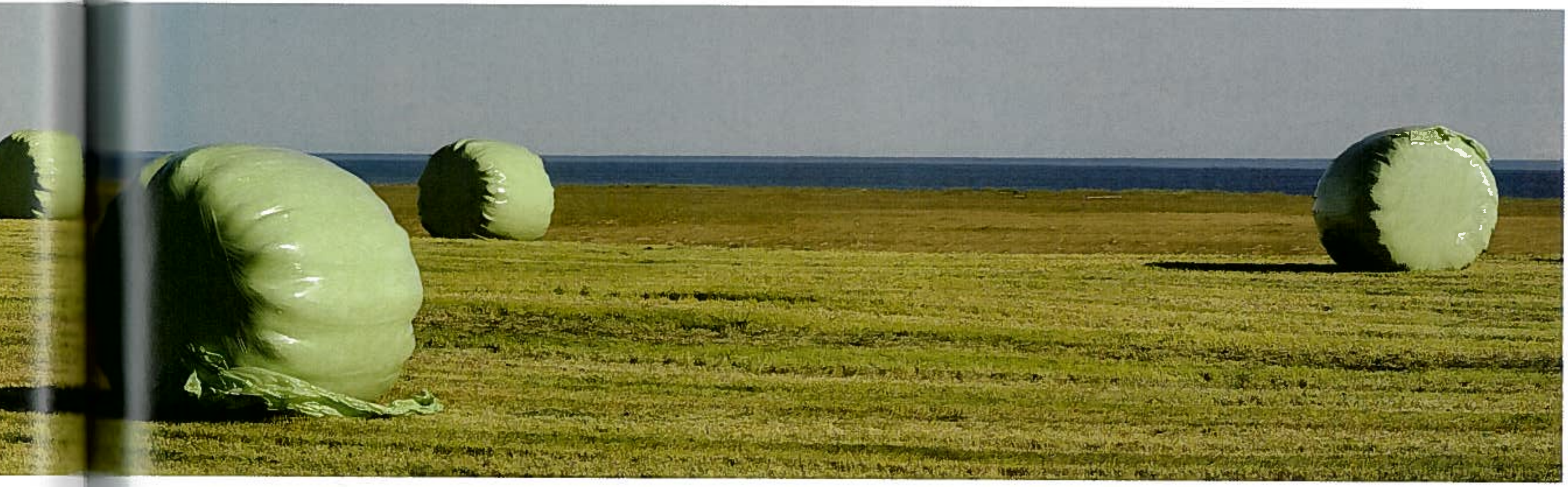


◂ McDRINK
Read what you like into it—untidiness, littering, unintended humor or McCulture—this urban detail of graffiti and an abandoned fast-food drink had an obvious unintended humor.

WEB SEARCH

- Edward Weston toilet
- Objet Trouvé Surrealist photograph
- Atget *Avenue des Gobelins*
- Frederick Sommer chicken
- Jan Groover
- Irving Penn cigarette butts
- Fotoform Otto Steinert
- Martin Parr

▾ FOUND ART
The Icelandic farmers who bale their hay in plastic awaiting collection by tractor certainly have no esthetic intentions, but the result is striking and appealing, particularly when treated as a panorama.



MICHAEL FREEMAN

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S MIND

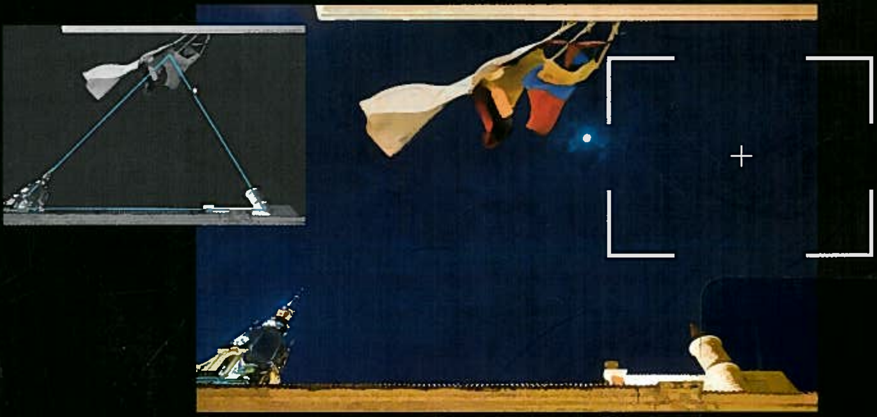
Creative thinking for better digital photos

The source of any photograph is not the camera, or even the scene viewed through the viewfinder—it is in the mind of the photographer: this is where an image is created before it is committed to a memory card or film.

In *The Photographer's Mind*, the follow-up to the international best-seller, *The Photographer's Eye*, photographer and author Michael Freeman unravels the mystery behind the creation of a photograph.

More than any other art form, the nature of photography demands that the viewer constantly be intrigued and surprised by new imagery and different interpretations. The aim of this book is to explain what makes a photograph great, and explore the ways that top photographers achieve this goal time and time again.

As you delve deeper into this subject, *The Photographer's Mind* will provide you with invaluable knowledge on avoiding cliché, the cyclical nature of fashion, style and mannerism, light and even how to handle the unexpected.



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