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Moral Geometry: Paul Strand, 1915-1932

by J. FRASER COCKS III

PAUL STRAND recalled in 1945 that “[i]n 1915 I really became a photographer. [I took a] strange leap into greater knowledge and sureness. . . . By the end of 1916 I had started in every direction in which my work has gone since.” Between 1915 and his induction into the army in 1918, Strand devised a way to understand “the real meaning of life.” He believed that rational inquiry and emotional insight provided different but equally valuable information about the world. The maintenance of equilibrium between them was the only sure way to develop a “creative consciousness” which could capture and direct toward beneficial goals the universal, life-giving sources of energy in nature. In his best images from 1915 and 1916 he felt he had begun to exploit the potential of the camera to record, as he put it later, “that moment when the forces at work in a human being become most intensely physical and objective.” Once reified in clean, sharp, accurate images, he believed, the forces could be identified and directed toward the physical and moral reformation of society. Before going off into the army, he dedicated himself to “obtain[ing] through photography an] ever fuller and more intense realization” of natural energies as the first step toward the repair of a sadly deficient human environment.¹

Strand had in effect set himself the task of uniting what Victorian culture had held inviolately separate: the rational and the civilized from the emotional and uncivilized or “savage.” Nor was the job an abstract one; he himself by 1915 had had to accommodate the two spheres in his own mind. As a child and schoolboy he absorbed the rational precepts of the Ethical Culture Society, the nineteenth-century reform movement in which he had been raised. Once out on his own, trying to make a living in New York City and simultaneously discovering his vocation as a photographer, he learned the tenets of modernism from New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who became his mentor, and to a lesser ex-

1. Paul Strand, “Photography to Me,” *Minicam Photography*, May 1945, p. 46; Virginia Stevens, “Autobiographical Notes from Paul Strand’s Scrapbook,” 1917, Virginia Stevens Collection AG8 subgroup 8, Paul Strand Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona (PSA/CCP); Joseph Shiffman, “The Alienation of the Artist: Alfred Stieglitz,” *American Quarterly*, 3 (1951), 252; Paul Strand, “Photography and the New God,” *Broom*, 3 (August 1922), 256; Paul Strand, “Photography,” *The Seven Arts*, 2 (August 1917), 526.

tent from the critics and artists associated with *The Seven Arts* magazine.²

Members of Strand's family had been associated with the Society for Ethical Culture from its founding by Felix Adler in the depression year of 1877. In an effort to align Reform Judaism more closely with the social activism of the Social Gospel Movement, Adler, through the Society, advocated the Reform Darwinist principle that humans were not helplessly subject to material forces but could use the human mind—itsself a product of evolution—to alter the environment so as to benefit the race. Adler conceived of and taught the existence of a universal ethical norm to which all properly educated minds would naturally adhere. The Society, he hoped, would find and apply democratic solutions based in the ethical norm to the social inequities brought about by industrialization.³

The best way to effect a solution, Adler felt, was to promote the extension of a "religion of morality" by establishing nonsectarian schools to teach ethics and provide moral instruction to students and parents. Like his friend and colleague, John Dewey, Adler envisioned the ideal school as a workshop in which students learned how to live in a democracy. Instruction in a properly oriented school, Adler was convinced, was the most effective means by which to make young minds aware of the existence of a universal ethical norm. Young people educated in this manner would devote their lives to social amelioration, bent on "chang[ing] their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals." They would express these ideals by striving to create a harmonious community based on an "understanding sympathy with human nature in its various guises."⁴

Adler founded his first school, a tuition-free kindergarten located in the New York City slums on West 64th Street and called the Workingman's School, in 1878. In 1880 he added an elementary school to the kindergarten. Fifteen years later in 1895 he expanded the school again to include a high school, changed its name to the Ethical Culture School, and moved the operation to Central Park West. The new name and location indicated how the orientation of the school had changed since its founding. At the turn of the century, the School had become the preserve of the members of the Ethical Culture Society. The Society by this time was composed of a small number of well-to-do Jewish families who sent

2. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 3-10; Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly*, 27, No. 5 (December 1975), 507-32.

3. Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), pp. 109-10, 158; Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1956), pp. 170n, 171, 184; Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 121-22; James Waterman Wise, *Jews Are Like That* (New York: Brentano's, 1928), p. 133; Naomi Rosenblum, "Paul Strand, the Early Years, 1910-1932," Diss. City Univ. of New York 1978, pp. 21-22.

4. Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground, the Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1969), p. 29; Alan Trachtenberg, "Ever—the Human Document," in *America and Lewis Hine, Photographs, 1904-1940* (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1977), p. 121; Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*, pp. 121-23, 125, 124.

their children to Adler's school for excellent primary and secondary education. They expected their offspring to be trained there for lives devoted to social reform.⁵

In 1904 Paul Strand's parents sent their fourteen-year-old son to the Ethical Culture School for his high-school education. There he encountered Lewis Hine, "my first teacher in photography." Adler was convinced that creative artists must play a role in social reform and in 1901 had hired Hine to teach photography as a social science. As a member of the after-hours camera club which Hine supervised, Strand learned from the older man's example that "photography was a way to practice one's beliefs." By 1904 Hine had begun to create his famous portrait series of the immigrants crowding onto Ellis Island. His empathetic images transformed a shapeless mass of aliens into recognizable human beings not only worthy of inclusion in American society but also capable of contributing to the improvement of the New World. Strand saw in these images that a life devoted to photography could also be the moral life of social reform demanded of graduates of the Ethical Culture School. The curricular orientation of the school and Hine's particular expression of it gave Strand a lifelong interest in the means by which people interacted with their surroundings, a propensity to judge the efficacy of that interaction and a commitment to propose improvements to both the interaction and the setting so as to produce people of superior moral stature.⁶

Before he graduated from the Ethical Culture School in 1909, Strand had also been introduced to avant-garde thinking in a class taught by art critic Charles Caffin and field trips led by Hine to, among other places, the New York gallery 291 run by photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Strand was "bowled over" by what he saw at the gallery and by 1909 had decided to make photography his career. Between 1911 and 1915 he supported himself by making and hand-tinting images of college and university buildings and fraternity houses which he sold to nostalgic graduating seniors. These first, tentative, antiseptic explorations of the relationship between people and their environment did not long satisfy him. Sensing the need to break with the dominant pictorial tradition, he drew closer to the circle of modernist artists, writers, and critics connected with the magazine *The Seven Arts* and photographers of the Photo-Secession around New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Members of these groups, several of whom founded *The Seven Arts* in 1916 as an outlet for

5. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*, pp. 95, 99; Robert H. Beck, "Progressive Education and American Progressivism: Felix Adler," *Teachers College Record*, 60 (October 1958), 78, 86; Trachtenberg, "Ever—the Human Document," p. 121.

6. Naomi Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 23–27; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, November 16, 1920, Alfred Stieglitz Archive, Beineke Library, Yale University (ASA/YU); Trachtenberg, "Ever—the Human Document," pp. 122–24; Lewis W. Hine, "Social Photography," in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), pp. 110–14; Judith Maria Gutman, *Lewis W. Hine and the American Social Conscience* (New York: Walker and Company, 1967), p. 17; Paul Strand, "Photography and the Other Arts," Lecture at the University of Chicago, 1946 (?), Virginia Stevens Collection, PSA/CCP.

their ideas, believed with Adler and Strand that art could be an instrument of reform.⁷

Music critic Paul Rosenfeld was the principal theorist for *The Seven Arts*. He stressed the importance of establishing an intimate and indissoluble connection between the artist and the environment. The natural setting to Rosenfeld was the medium of a universal divine truth which permeated all life. Informed, sensitive response to "universal life forces" brought the artist into contact with other people, made them aware of these forces, and laid the basis for the creation of a spiritual, organic, unified community. The successful artist to Rosenfeld was one who found the divine forces via contact with people and their environment. The artist could only acquire felt knowledge of people and hence the organizing forces of life, Rosenfeld concluded, by spontaneous immersion in their life experience. The more elemental these conditions, the closer to the savage they were, the more true the experience and the art.⁸

Stieglitz, who had been attracted to the philosophy of Henri Bergson and Maurice Maeterlinck, also believed in a dynamic life force underlying all phenomena. To Stieglitz the life force expressed itself in matter; human life for him had meaning only as it was manifest in the tangible objects of the natural and man-made world. Physical entities were the ultimate source of human spiritual and intellectual existence. Stieglitz had found, as early as 1890, that he could express his most intense emotions via precise renderings of even the most ordinary of city scenes and objects. Precision of sight combined with exact awareness of one's emotional state, Stieglitz insisted, allowed a photographer to make images that revealed eternal elements within the most commonplace of objects. Strand summed up Stieglitz's lesson for students at the Clarence White School of Photography in 1925. He admonished them to "[a]bove all, look at the things around you, the immediate world around you," so as to divine the world accurately and perceive the "laws to which [we] must ultimately conform or be destroyed."⁹

During 1915 and 1916 Strand began to integrate his rational, reform-oriented training with Stieglitz's emphasis on the accurate portrayal of emotion through the precise renderings of the objects of the world on photographic film. Strand began trying to establish his own vision, striving for images that through the clean depiction of the immediate things

7. Paul Strand, "Life and Work of Alfred Stieglitz," Lecture at the University of Chicago, September 23, 1946, Virginia Stevens Collection, PSA/CCP; Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 27, 35; Robert Doty, *Photo-Secession, Stieglitz and the Fine-Art Movement in Photography* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1978), p. 63; Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*, p. 124.

8. Hugh Potter, "Paul Rosenfeld: Criticism and Prophecy," *American Quarterly*, 22, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 82-89.

9. Joseph Shiffman, "The Alienation of the Artist," pp. 251-52; Estelle Jussim, "Icons or Ideology: Stieglitz and Hine," *Massachusetts Review*, 19 (Winter 1978), 680; Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 99-102; Edward Abrahams, *The Lyrical Left and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1986), p. 137; Paul Strand, "The Art Motive in Photography," *The British Journal of Photography* (October 5, 1923), pp. 615, 613.

of his world clearly expressed his own thoughts and feelings. In March 1916 Stieglitz gave Strand a retrospective show at his gallery 291. The favorably reviewed show presented Strand's pictorialist work done in Europe and America as well as contemporary New York urban scenes, including "Fifth Avenue, New York" (1915) and "Wall Street" (1915), and images from the American West. That autumn Stieglitz reproduced five of the New York images as well as one Texas landscape, "Telegraph Poles" (1915), in his fine art journal, *Camera Work*.¹⁰

The pictorialist views originated from a six-week tour of North Africa and Western Europe Strand had taken after graduation from the Ethical Culture School, observations in New York's Central Park, and his first explorations of the countryside immediately outside the city. In these first serious attempts to analyze humans' relationship to the modern urban environment, Strand had initially used the hackneyed vocabulary of the pictorialist tradition to make images such as "People on a Bench, Central Park" (1915/16), but quickly discarded it. He began to look more closely at the city and, influenced by the anti-urban biases of *The Seven Arts* people, found alienation and anomie infecting even the relatively well-to-do. The now famous "Fifth Avenue, New York" looks askance at seemingly purposeless movement on a hectic, noisy street corner; heavy-handed "Wall Street" makes the obvious point that modern economic forces dominate human beings.¹¹

Strand was also influenced by the new abstract methods of representation that Stieglitz had introduced to the United States from Europe through his gallery. Intrigued by the intellectual aspects of the new work, Strand did a number of finger exercises, including "Porch Shadows" (1916) and "Abstraction—Bowls" (1916). In "White Fence, Port Kent, New York" (1916), however, he took a commonplace pictorial scene—barn, house, yard, and fence—and made a modernist image from it. He flattened the plane of the photograph, brought the barn and house flush with the foreground, and balanced them on the finely realized tines of the picket fence. The effect is to rework pictorial pieties celebrating the virtues of the domestic rural life so as to suggest that they might be recast and regain thereby the moral pre-eminence they had lost by becoming enmeshed in visual clichés.¹²

In "White Fence" and little noticed "Telegraph Poles," probably made near Waco, Texas, Strand for the first time combined Adler's idea that the

10. Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," p. 52; Marianne Fulton Margolis, ed., *Alfred Stieglitz, Camera Work* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1978), pp. 134–35.

11. Strand at times literally elevated himself to get at the picturesque, ignoring more fruitful material in the process. "Then we climbed the narrowest dirtiest street you can imagine thru [sic] the Moorish section finally arriving at the market. Then we walked to a Moorish cemetery from where we got a most beautiful view. I simply took picture after picture, it was so beautiful." Paul Strand to Family, Gibraltar, Algieras, Algiers, March 25, 1911. See also, "People on a Bench, Central Park, 1915/16" and "Trees and White Farm House, Connecticut, 1915/16." For other examples, see Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," especially figures nos. 11, 12, 13, and 14, pp. 266–69.

12. Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 54–57.

mind created reality and Stieglitz's notion that the clear depiction of matter was the source of accurate feeling to create original visual compositions. These two images prefigured work on which he would concentrate in the late 1920s and continue to the end of his career. Where in "White Fence" human structures virtually exclude any sense of the natural environment, "Telegraph Poles" focuses on the interaction between the human and the natural, on what was happening at the intersection of the overpowering sky and the interminable flat land. The leaning poles in the foreground lead back to a low horizon defined by small houses and rough, outlying sheds. The resolute dwellings make the point that humans can not only survive the concussion of these two forces but also give shape and meaning to their experience. "The country is perfectly flat and mostly used for cotton," Strand wrote to his mother from Waco. "But the way this monotonous plain is broken by shacks and little white houses is quite fascinating. Things become interesting as soon as the human element enters in." "White Fence" and "Telegraph Poles" were the first significant expressions of Strand's nascent concern for the relationship between people and their environment. He was not interested in abstract natural forces per se, but rather in how these forces were expressed by humans and human handiwork. Strand was groping toward an expression of the idea that the extent to which people channelled natural forces into the creation of a viable community in harmony with nature, to that extent was Adler's universal moral order vindicated.¹³

"Telegraph Poles" suggests that closer analysis of what was happening to people at the horizon line would yield new information regarding the forces impinging upon them and the processes by which they organized their lives. Recalling Rosenfeld's insistence that real knowledge could be obtained only by immersion in the elemental life experience of others, Strand cast about for a site in which the forces of modern life would be most clearly visible. He decided to mount a photographic expedition into the Bowery. Although he claimed to be "past the stage of easy enthusiasms . . . [and suspicious of] everything," in deciding to investigate slum dwellers he probably had in mind Jacob Riis's earlier work as well as Hine's images of immigrants. In the autumn of 1916 he walked into the slum and, using newly acquired technical skills, looked to record specific effects that urban forces had on individuals subject to them.¹⁴

In order to record the action of these forces most clearly, he took pains

13. Paul Strand to Mother, April 1915 (?), Waco, Texas, PSA/CCP.

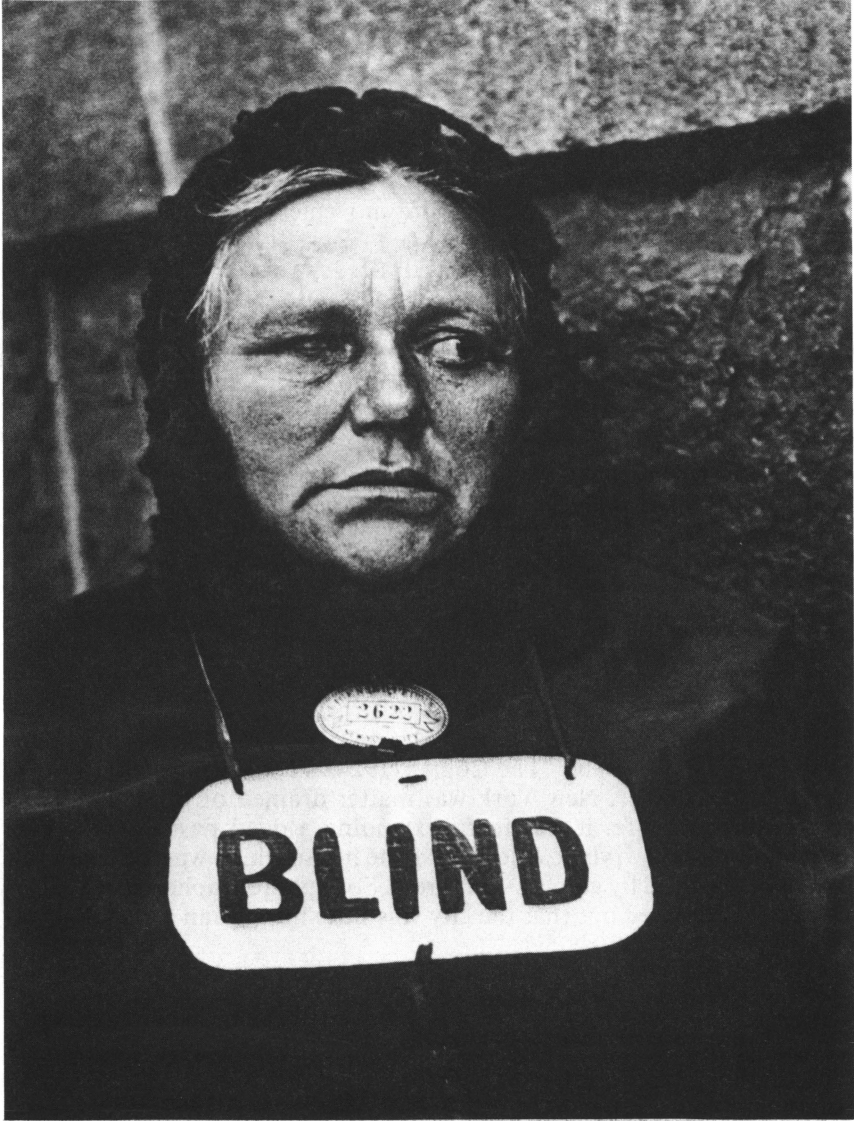
14. Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 28, 1916, ASA/YU. Rosenblum dismisses altogether Riis's and Hine's influence on Strand in this endeavor, emphasizing instead the effect of Stieglitz's genteel portrait work. This is certainly not correct. Adler and Riis were acquainted and worked together on reform projects in New York. Riis presented lantern shows of his images at reform meetings all over the East Coast. While Strand never admitted Riis's primacy, as a member of the Ethical Culture Society and graduate of the school and a member as well of Hine's photography group, he could not have been unaware of Riis's work. See Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 58-61; Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*, pp. 101-02; Ferenc M. Szasz and Ralph F. Bogardus, "The Camera and the American Social Conscience: The Photography of Jacob A. Riis," *New York History*, LV (1974), 411.

to see that his subjects neither posed for him nor rejected him. He equipped his camera with an ostentatious false lens set at right angles to the functioning lens which, mounted on an extension tube, projected out from under his right arm. Although what he was doing was more obvious than he realized, the ploy was largely successful. He made a set of 12 negatives of 11 different Bowery street people, none of whom apparently knew they were being photographed.¹⁵

In the resulting prints he jammed his subjects into the frames, holding them immobile for further inspection. The images are not exercises in taxonomy, but rather object lessons regarding the impact extreme living conditions had on people without the individual or communal resources to respond effectively. Emphasizing their vacant eyes and seedy clothing and the rough texture of their skin, Strand isolates his vagrants from their surroundings and other individuals so as to indicate his sense that they had no content to their lives other than despair and nothing to do but dwell on that despair. Their despair, so deep it was akin to madness, arose from their bewilderment at their predicament. There was not a madness consoled by knowledge but an enervating condition that rendered them incapable of community with others. Here, at the heart of civilization, was an example of the horrid consequences of emotion not balanced by the intellect.

Stunned by his discovery of incipient cultural entropy at the core of the modern city, Strand turned to Stieglitz for help in resolving the situation. In June 1917 Stieglitz revived *Camera Work* for one last issue and devoted it entirely to Strand's most recent work. Included were six of the street people series and five abstract compositions. Strand and Stieglitz were both anxious to achieve some kind of coherence out of material that taken as a body resisted it. The solution they found was to set the psychologically intense street images into a sequence that associated them with other images representing progressively more rational space. First came the six portraits, next two harsh New York streetscapes shot from above which emphasize abstract elements in the shapes and shadows that dominate the small human figures in them. These gloomy scenes dissolved into the bright "White Fence," pulled to focus against an indistinct background. The sequence concluded with Strand's two most abstract works, "Porch Swing" and "Abstraction—Bowls." The effect is to absorb the street people into a new, more rational environment Strand constructed for them out of abstract elements he found in the city and refined in the final three clean images. Strand used the fence to represent his own mind which controlled the contact between the viewer and the subject and asserted his prerogative to shape reality however he chose. Balancing the emotional impact of the portraits with cooler, more intellectual images, he created a multifaceted metaphor representing social reform. Strand's sequence

15. *Paul Strand, Sixty Years of Photographs* (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1976), pp. 144-45.



Paul Strand, "Blind Woman, New York, 1916," copyright © 1971, Aperture Foundation, Inc., Paul Strand Archive.

redeemed the vagrants, as Adler would have wished, incorporating them in a world they could never have obtained without his assistance.¹⁶

The *Camera Work* sequence marked the beginning of a fifteen-year effort by Strand to develop a comprehensive vision that encompassed and exactly balanced Stieglitz's life forces with Adler's ethical constant. Such a vision, he felt, would direct his emotions and intellect into the creation of a new world, one more deeply real, more stable, more satisfying, more orderly, and more moral than the one he had observed in gestation in the Bowery. "Photography. . .," he said in 1919, "is either an expression of a cosmic vision, an embodiment of life movement, or it is nothing—to me."¹⁷

In the autumn of 1918 Strand was drafted, served for nearly a year in Minnesota as a medical technician, and was mustered out in the summer of 1919. He returned to New York, anxious to take up where he had left off in 1916, analyzing and, if possible, altering the processes by which modern civilization was evolving. Stieglitz at this time was using the camera to replicate cubist effects by making portraits in which the subject was revealed from many angles and under various conditions. His goal was to obtain a deeper reality than a single image could achieve. Strand saw the method as similar to what he had done with the street people sequence and decided to apply it in his own investigations of the city, follow its lead to greater understanding of the forces shaping modern industrial society, and express the results in images that represented the perfect balance of his emotions and his intellect, what one of his friends termed "an absolute objectivism."¹⁸

Looking at the configuration of the city after 1919, he found something different from the frenetic activity of "Fifth Avenue, New York" and the leaden monotony of "Wall Street." Now in "Truckman's House" (1920), "The Docks" (1921), and "The Court" (1924) all was geometric form. A static, gloomy place, New York was matter drained of the potential to give meaning to life; it was inert, extending a dead past into a sterile future. As he said wryly to Stieglitz, "[t]he house which was a truckman's is now surrounded by garages—progress. So, I photographed that again." The images pointed out that the city was little more than a mindless ag-

16. The images appeared one to a page, on following pages; no two images were visible at the same time. The incorporation of the street people within the abstract images is achieved not only by the outright device of the sequence but also by the coherence of common design elements among all the images. For example: the stripes in the fat woman's dress and the slits of light cast by the porch swing; the bowls and the fat woman's yawn, the lines around her mouth, and the circle shape behind her head, as well as the hats four of the people wear; the "Blind" woman's face is an oval as is her one protuberant eye; the lines in all the faces, particularly those around the mouths and noses, prefigure the sharp lines and angles of the last five images. See Margolis, *Alfred Stieglitz, Camera Work*, pp. 138–42. Stieglitz and Caffin both understood that the context in which a photographic image was set strongly affected its meaning. See Roger Hull, "Emplacement, Displacement and the Fate of Photographs," *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England*, 10, No. 2 (Winter 1989), 6.

17. Paul Strand to Mrs. Shreve, August 9, 1919, ASA/YU.

18. Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 73–77; Nat Shaw to Paul Strand, September 25, 1920, and March 1921, PSA/CCP.

glomeration of shaped concrete providing neither enlightenment nor nourishment to him or others who lived surrounded by it.¹⁹

Turning to machinery, Strand was influenced in part by the earlier, irreverent images done by Duchamp and Picabia. In photographs such as "Wheel Organization" (1917), "Wire Wheel" (1918), "Double Akeley" (1922), and "Lathe, Akeley Shop" (1922) Strand stressed the elegance of these unique and lovely artifacts and hinted at the role individual craftsmanship played in revealing essential, universal forms through manufactured items. But, wrenched from an unyielding context, the lathes, wheels, and cameras became aesthetic fragments which disguise rather than reveal the process by which they came into being. The images ironically call attention to the fact that mass production did not enhance its components but reduced them to uniformity and dullness. He had here not a reforming vision but wishful thinking. And he suspected as much. "I feel this period as transitional . . ." he said to Stieglitz. "It means work to break through."²⁰

Unable through the medium of still photography to achieve in a study of architecture and machinery the coherence he had attained in his study of the Bowery, Strand decided to experiment with the new moving-film technology to get at the meaning of contemporary civilization. In 1920, rather than return to running his own business, he instead took work as a cameraman for a firm specializing in the production of medical films. That same year he joined painter Charles Sheeler in making a motion picture portrait of New York. Titled *Manhatta*, it was "the first genuine avant-garde film produced in the United States." The nine-minute film was an analogue of a cubist painting in its presentation of a montage of modernist images of the cityscape; interspersed were hopeful quotations from Walt Whitman which gave the impression that civilization was enlarging the scope of humanistic values. To Strand, who did most of the filming, the film conveyed a far different message. In the shifting masses of anonymous people which combine with agitated smoke and steam to create the film's dominant visual motif, Strand saw that individuals had lost their humanity and become not conscious contributing members of a supportive community but rather were mute, opaque, interchangeable parts of a mechanical leviathan which resembled a "disagreeable ant heap." An important task, he felt, was to learn more about these people. "I wonder, when I see the people in the streets all looking collectively about as intelligent as a cow, what they are feeling," he told Stieglitz.²¹

He set out to accumulate on moving film an archive of information about ordinary people out of which he hoped to distill an answer. In 1922

19. Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 141-42; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 14, 1922, ASA/YU.

20. Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 136-37; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, July 4, 1922, ASA/YU.

21. Paul Strand, *Sixty Years of Photographs*, p. 147; Jan-Christopher Horak, "Modernist Perspectives and Romantic Desire: *Manhatta*," *Afterimage*, 15, No. 4 (November 1987), 8; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 13, 1926, ASA/YU; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, July 11, 1922, ASA/YU.

the medical films company folded, and Strand bought an Akeley movie camera — “a piece of A 1 craftsmanship — a fine piece of machinery . . .” — took loving still photographs of it, and began a career as a free-lance cameraman. He used the camera to inject himself into the world, interacting with the people and environment he was studying. For the next several years he hustled jobs and traveled incessantly up and down the East Coast recording on film the economic and social activities of the middle class. He filmed on commission college football games, professional boxing matches, horse races, the erection of public buildings, and the activities of youth clubs. He also did newsreel and feature film work. He became a working man. Writing to Stieglitz he described a series of jobs he had just completed and concluded, “[s]o you can see how I am absorbed in the system.”²²

His independent film work confirmed for Strand that people in New York, unlike those in “Telegraph Poles,” had no chance to make a nourishing order out of the forces of modern life. Generalizing from the evidence he collected on film, Strand concluded that modern humans had no capacity to create harmonious urban communities, that all modern cities were in danger of becoming like the Bowery. Even, he declared, “. . . as one travels away from NY — one is always finding potentially — NY — its deadness and cheapness, standardized mediocrity — in towns and towns trying to be cities.” Frustrated by the same inability to replicate his experience with the street people in moving film as had occurred with architecture and machinery, Strand admitted to Stieglitz in 1923 that he felt “like . . . a form suspended in a vacuum — in fact I think I even go further — a vacuum suspended in a vacuum.”²³

Spiritually and aesthetically impoverished by his struggle to remake the city, Strand looked in 1925 beyond his urban prison to the countryside. In August that year, he and his wife, Rebecca (“Beck”), took the first of eight, yearly, extended sojourns away from the city. On their first trip, they spent four weeks on Georgetown Island, Maine, with sculptor Gaston Lachaise and his wife, Isabel. They returned to the island again in the summers of 1927 and 1928, and Strand concentrated on creating images of plants, rocks, and sea. In between these trips to the northeast

22. Horak, “Modernist Perspectives and Romantic Desire: *Manhatta*,” p. 12; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, July 4, 1922, ASA/YU; *Paul Strand, Sixty Years of Photographs*, pp. 147–48; Paul Strand, Scrapbook, 1902–1928, PSA/CCP; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, September 17, 1924, ASA/YU. Strand was not doing all this simply to make a living. He lived in the family home on W. 83rd Street in New York prior to his marriage in January 1922 to Rebecca “Beck” Salsbury, whom he had known at the Ethical Culture School. After the wedding Beck, who contributed to their support by working as a medical secretary, came to live with Paul and his father. An inheritance Strand received from his aunt’s estate in 1924 further eased their financial situation. Rebecca Salsbury to Paul Strand, July 11, 1920, 17:39, PSA/CCP; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 4, 1924, ASA/YU; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, June 28, 1923, ASA/YU; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, July 9, 1923, ASA/YU. Strand’s continual absences from home strained his marriage. See, for example, Rebecca Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, November 15 and 26, 1923; September 4, October 24, and November 1, 1924; June 29, 1925; and September 9, 1927, ASA/YU.

23. Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 13, 1926, ASA/YU; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, July 9, 1923, ASA/YU.

coast, they spent three months of the summer of 1926 traveling to Estes, Colorado, and Taos, New Mexico. In Taos Strand spent two weeks entranced with the scale of the western landscape and the quality of the light. They drove in September 1929 to the Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec, and immersed themselves for a month in the austere village life at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. The next three summers, 1930, 1931, and 1932, the Strands lived in the artists' colony in Taos. In 1932 they came to Taos in April and stayed through November. In December Strand drove to Mexico City to chronicle in photographs the achievements of the revolutionary regime. Beck remained in Taos, their marriage dissolved.²⁴

During these trips Strand found that immersion in the natural setting brought him into intimate contact with elemental forces, obscured in the city, which he could express in images that revealed the essential forms of his subjects. He developed a photographic technique by which he was able literally to make himself a part of nature. In order to make sharp images of growing plants he devised a way to counteract the effect of the wind. He observed that windblown plants, once the wind had ceased, returned to virtually the same position they had held before they moved with the breeze. To avoid blurring the negative during long exposures, he closed the shutter as he felt the wind build up, held it closed until the gust had passed, then opened it again when the air was still and the plant had composed itself. He would repeat the process up to four or five times during a single exposure. Strand's rhythmic sensing of and response to the wind incorporated him sensually into the landscape which he was observing and recording.²⁵

This procedure produced in him the harmonious balance between emotions and intellect that he had called for in 1917. The technique yielded abstract images of plants in situ which were, despite the lack of scale, still recognizable as natural, organic growths. While they were real plants, Strand rendered them to his satisfaction as pure form, form which was evidence to him of the underlying orderliness of nature and, as well, the congruent, peaceful orderliness of his mind and emotions. Making these images, he absorbed himself into the life force and through the images expressed Adler's ethical constant and Stieglitz's sense of the sanctity of matter as pure form, as moral geometry, "and had much joy in doing it." He continued in 1927 and 1928 to do intense close-up studies of rocks and plants in and around Five Islands, Maine.²⁶

24. Nat Shaw to Paul Strand, December 14, 1920, PSA/CCP; Strand did his first nature shots in 1920. Rosenblum, "Paul Strand," pp. 140, 150-64.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 151; he and Beck became part of the landscape. They bathed nude and frolicked together on deserted Maine beaches. See Rebecca Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 1, 1925, and August 14, 1925, ASA/YU. They became, in Stieglitz's grandiose phrase, "free in the bigness of nature"; Alfred Stieglitz to Paul Strand, September 5, 1925, ASA/YU.

26. See "Rock by the Sea" (1925), "Cobweb in the Rain" (1927), "Fern in the Rain" (1927), and "Garden Iris" (1928); Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, September 4, 1925, ASA/YU. For the next fifty years, to his death in 1976, Strand returned again and again to the intense study of plants. He found in the exercise the visual and moral equivalent of a tuning fork which kept sharply honed his ability to see,



Paul Strand, "Beaching the Boat, Perce Beach, Gaspé, 1929," copyright © 1976, Aperture Foundation, Inc., Paul Strand Archive.

By the late 1920s Strand could express to his satisfaction coherent feeling through abstract shapes drawn from natural forms, natural forms which in purified images were to him an expression of an underlying universal order. He felt he was approximating John Marin who, he said, "moves toward an apocalyptic penetration of the spirit of place. . . ." The next step was to do work on a larger and, at the same time, more intense scale, rendering, as he felt Sherwood Anderson did, "a sense of the land itself as part of the people." Strand looked now to fashion an arena in which to show how the human and the natural could interact to create a community which demonstrated the ethical order. He approached this goal with images he made on the Gaspé Peninsula in 1929. Recalling "Telegraph Poles," he conveyed in them the sense of a delicate balance between implacable natural forces and humans and their works. In photographs such as "Village on the Gulf of Saint Lawrence" (1929), "Black Horse on the Beach, Perce, Gaspé" (1929), and "Beaching the Boat, Perce Beach, Gaspé" (1929), a coastal town and its inhabitants survive at the narrow line of tolerance between sea and the land. Land, water, and human beings are posed in dynamic, but not antagonistic, antithesis; each element, animate or inanimate, is clearly separate from every other yet marked and sustained by the action of each upon each.²⁷

Significant as the Gaspé photographs were, Strand had not yet overcome his lack of empathy for the mass of people. The Gaspé fishermen are not individuals but rather elements in an ecological equation, as distant as the crowds in *Manhatta*. During the summers of 1930, 1931, and 1932 which he and Beck spent at Taos, New Mexico, Strand was taken by this "strange and miraculous country," consisting of "intensely living" earth that seemed to him a reification of Stieglitz's essential matter. This sense of the animating power of the land, which he shared with a number of American intellectuals who visited the Southwest and Mexico, led him to sense deep meaning in the lives of those people who lived in close conjunction with it.²⁸

In the group of dispirited native Americans living around Taos, he discerned the remnants of a once-vibrant folk culture that in its tattered rituals and its decaying buildings retained a tenuous link with a pure, primitive source of values. These dispossessed people retained a vestigial

he felt, precisely into the spirit of matter. See C. Duncan, "The Garden: Vines and Leaves," *Aperture*, No. 78 (1977), 46-61. The numerous portraits of friends he did during the decade are of a piece with his work with plants. He tried to penetrate to the rhythms of their lives and reveal the life force within them. See "Portrait of Lachaise" (1927); an image of Stieglitz that Beck said made him "look like a battered temple"; and "Marsden Hartley" (1927), who, shot from below, looms up like a granite boulder, his eyebrows, nose, and cheeks an outcropping of stone marked by erosion lines; Rebecca Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, June 26, 1923, ASA/YU.

27. Paul Strand, "Marin Not an Escapist" (letter to the editor), *New Republic*, 55 (July 25, 1928), 254-55; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, September 28, 1925, ASA/YU.

28. Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 22, 1931, ASA/YU; Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 27, 1930, ASA/YU; Henry C. Schmidt, "The American Intellectual Discovery of Mexico in the 1920s," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 77 (Summer 1978), 335-51.

sense of integrity and just enough strength to put up symbolic resistance to the subversion of their way of life by the dominant white culture. Employing sporadic civil disobedience, they sometimes refused to perform tribal dances for the tourists and paid a fine as the penalty for such refusal. Strand sensed the bitter irony of a situation in which the Indians, to preserve a small measure of integrity, would destroy the culture which gave meaning, however attenuated, to their lives. "When their life feeling takes form, as it does in the dances—it's wonderful—but it doesn't happen often—in the summer—and of course it is all doomed." Doomed, yes, but the memory of their once-vital relationship to the land and their largely symbolic attempts to preserve their dignity taught Strand that common folk achieved moral stature by "break[ing] through" to contact with the elemental forces of the land itself. Whatever his changing perceptions, however, he was still not able to make images in which the native peoples appeared as individuals. As with the Gaspé fishermen, he presented them much as natural features of the landscape, for example as rock forms in "Apache Fiesta" (Colorado, 1930). He visualized other inhabitants of the West as a sensuous line of silhouettes approximating a jagged landform in "Rodeo" (1930).²⁹

In this series of images Strand extended the range of his landscapes, trying to express a sense of place, trying to determine the essential natural phenomena that shaped both the land and the people. He made the sky a shape, stressing cloud formations that interacted with the land and accentuated its contour, tone, and feeling, as in "Rinconada" (1932) and "Dunes" (Abiquiu, 1931). Elaborating on his Gaspé work in which he had stressed the abstract essence of villages, as in "White Shed" (1929), and emphasized in "Village on the Gulf of St. Lawrence," for example, how the communities were organically connected with the land, in New Mexico Strand tried to express geometry and an organic connection simultaneously. He rendered buildings in long, flowing lines, like ridges of land in "Cerro" (1932) or as massive upthrust eruptions of stone in "Ranchos de Taos Church" (1931) and, more strikingly, "Buttress, Ranchos de Taos Church" (1932).

Many of the buildings he found visually significant were sacred places, Ranchos de Taos Church being the most famous. But he was drawn to a number of other, more isolated sites which he also carefully photographed, such as "Church" (Chimayo, 1931), "Campo Santo" (1932), and "Abandoned Church" (near Taos, 1932). Strand was attracted to churches and other abandoned buildings out of awe for their longevity which he ascribed to their intimate relationship to the people who participated in a sustaining partnership with the land. Strand found churches particularly potent not as representatives of a religious hierarchy but as expressions of

29. Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, August 27, 1930, ASA/YU. A classic statement of the relationship between natives and conquerors is Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967). See also Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (London: Collins, 1970).

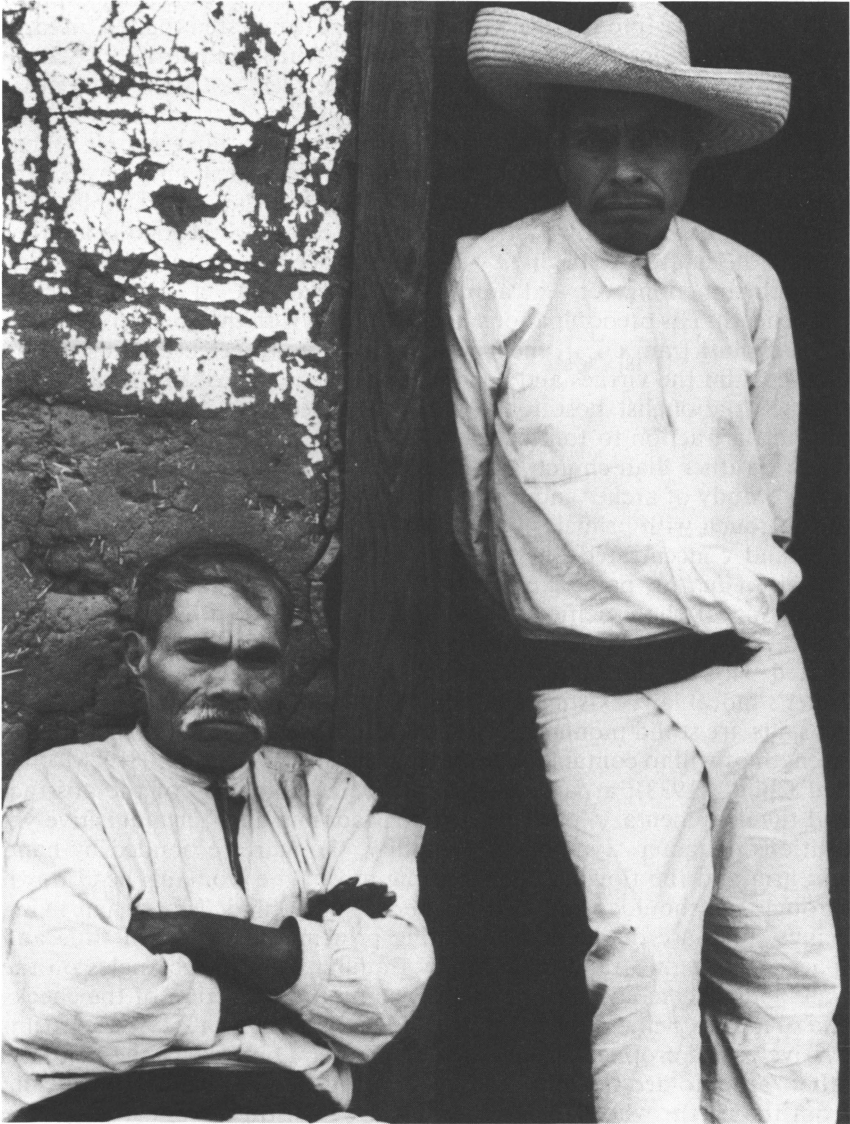
a deep emotional tie to universal mysteries. Isolated, lonely, enduring, these icons were primitive explanations of primeval forces which Strand could express through geometric form, reformulating these early explications of mystery into his own sense of order. He invested these structures with an atmosphere, Beck said, that showed "the grandeur and isolation of the New Mexican country—something he feels not only about that country—but about living itself."³⁰

Increasingly, he saw Mexico as a source of truly alive people, those unspoiled by industrialization and in touch with elemental earth processes. From the autumn of 1932 into 1934 Strand visited and explored in Mexico, immersing himself in Mexican folk culture. "Mexico is another world," he wrote to Stieglitz, "—on the surface almost too picturesque. Beneath something very extraordinary." He worked very hard to get to the beneath. His preoccupations fit quite neatly with the goals of the Mexican revolutionary government which hired him to celebrate in still and moving film the virtues and achievements of the Mexican peasant. The regime's nationalist hostility to the established church coincided with Strand's attraction to folk beliefs, and he emphasized folk art and portraiture rather than church architecture. "Portal and Church" (1933), a remote study of arches and forbidding recesses, gives a sense of a church out of touch with primal, pure matter.³¹

Strand concentrated on making portraits of Mexican peasants and images of *bultos*, painted carved images arranged in tableaux depicting the agony of the crucified Christ and the Virgin. Both sets of images depict icons which stand for a religion fashioned by people yet which co-existed with the earth, requiring humans for its transmission but, like Adler's moral law, existing autonomously from them. Strand's Mexican peasants are stolid monuments to an inchoate faith, individuals with the strength of will to contain the force that runs through them. His "Mother and Child" (1933), a particularly effective combination of the abstract and the documentary, portrays a stoic Madonna and her inquisitive yet cautious daughter. Symbols of fecundity, the pair are bonded by hand and arm and the flowing line from the top of the woman's head down through the shoulder and arm of the reclining child. More than living beings, they are the eternal animating principle, a fusion of time and space, a concept Strand indicates by framing them in rectangles on the wall behind them and by stressing the complex interaction of the checks and stripes of their clothing. The two "Men of Santa Ana" (1933) stare impassively, one propped against the doorframe, a buttress to the post, the other, arms folded, leaning back to support the mud wall, both sprung from the earth, wholly dependent on it, yet distinct from it. Like the

30. Nancy Newhall, *Paul Strand, Photographs, 1915-1945* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945), p. 6; Calvin Tompkins, "Profile," in *Paul Strand, Sixty Years of Photographs*, p. 24; Rebecca Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, April 8, 1931, ASA/YU.

31. Paul Strand to Alfred Stieglitz, February 5, 1933, ASA/YU.



plants and rocks of Strand's Northeast landscapes, the people in these images are rendered abstractly, described primarily as line, shape, and volume, yet clearly human. They are the people who fashioned *bultos*, such as Strand depicted in "Calvario, Patzcuaro" (1933), forcing the primal energy into shapes that in their garish extremes demonstrated the inadequacy of the art fully to express it. These tableaux, Strand believed, represented the peasants' amalgamation of their intellect with pure emotion drawn from the elemental forces of the land. They lived the "life feeling" fleetingly exhibited by the Taos Indians.³²

With the Mexican landscapes and portraits, Strand had finally resolved the issues that had troubled him in the Bowery portraits. In that first set of disquieting images, Strand had been able to redeem these people only by associating their images with more abstract compositions that reflected what he saw as a deeper reality, an underlying ethical order to the universe. The Mexican peasants seemed to him, however, by virtue of their immersion in the land to be naturally congruent with the essential spirit of matter, innate manifestations of it. He had no need to redeem them, only record the facts of their existence and by such recording reveal an ideal world which he could offer as an alternative to the contemporary industrial world out of touch with elemental moral and material forces.

In his work after 1932, the radical documentary films of the 1930s, and particularly his later still photography beginning with the magisterial *Time in New England*, Strand elaborated on his Mexican insights. He found the Mexican peasants perfect examples of the authenticity so desired by modernist artists; they blended the conscious with the unconscious, the rational with the emotional, and lived their unadulterated "true" selves. Yet Strand was not content with accurate observation and disinterested admiration. He possessed a didactic streak inherited from the nineteenth-century genteel reformers of whom he was a lineal descendent; his essential concern had become the evolution of a human character that would ensure the salvation of the race. Like them a believer in the power of intellectual and moral effort to effect beneficial changes in society, he, as they, ended up celebrating the products of mind and spirit once the world proved oblivious to his blandishments. For Strand the desire to integrate these two traditions had led him to use his art to create a finer politics, to retain the link between the moral and the cultural. Ironically, by the mid-twentieth century, the effort had vitiated his reform impulse and led him into an aesthetically powerful yet wistful primitivism.³³

32. William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), p. 374.

33. Ian Jeffrey, "Image and Dream: The Photography of Walker Evans and Paul Strand," *Artscribe*, No. 7 (July 1977), 35; Daniel Joseph Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly*, 39, No. 1 (Spring 1987), 8; Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America, a History* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), pp. 263-76. See "Mr. Bennett, New England" (1944).