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THOSE unfamiliar with the controversies and polemics that have enlivened photographic studies for more than a decade may find these papers curiously ill at ease with their subject matter. Let me explain.

Not too long ago, photographic practice was ranged along a continuum extending from high art to documentary. Most commercial, and all snapshot, photography was omitted from serious consideration.

Though it was virtuously simple, it was not a very good model. It excluded more than it included, reducing photographic practice to a small fraction of itself. Moreover, the art-documentary continuum proved to be internally unstable.

Items established as documentary photographs (the work of Lewis Hine or Timothy O'Sullivan or Eadweard Muybridge) had a way of seeping through to the art side—which was only fair because art photography itself was a slippery category. Photographers overtly devoted to art, or at least those who subscribed to the theory that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery—O. J. Reylander, Henry Peach Robinson, and most of the pictorialists—with the passage of time slid off the continuum altogether and ended up residing in an unnamed but assuredly dank limbo for culture mavens.

There is a museum for everything these days, and when the museum for outworn intellectual apparatus is opened, I am certain that photography's art-documentary continuum will be in the running for the paradigm that explained the least for the most amount of time.

But that is not to suggest that the art-documentary continuum has dissipated from lack of use. Photography is, as Allan Sekula has written, "haunted by two chattering ghosts: that of bourgeois science and that of bourgeois art."[1] The extent to which the art-documentary continuum is still the common wisdom can be gauged throughout 1989 in the public events celebrating photography's sesquicentennial.

But in many museum and academic circles, because of the influence of feminist studies, film theory, psychoanalysis, social history, and semiotics, photography's art-documentary continuum has been dis-

1. Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

mantled. While the photograph may be thought to index the world of optical reality, it is no longer thought to be a transparent medium. We recognize that photographic meaning is constructed in ever shifting and frequently conflicting discursive spaces. That is to say, there is no grand, transcendent model with which to understand photography, only a welter of unruly facts and circumstances and a set of hypotheses about their interrelationships.

The grand model presumed an affinity in the work of Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston, which writers drew on inferentially. It even had a place for Bernard Shaw's reflections on photography, which were extracted from Shaw's social thought and situated in an overdetermined argument against painting and high art. But in the absence of the traditional model, scholars are currently writing without a net, *and* without much respect for nets, which would make anyone ill at ease.

These writers have come to their subjects with the presumption that art photography is not simply about the disinterested contemplation of art. Yet the basic source of any uneasiness is not so much the state of photographic history in this moment as it is the philosophic problems and practical outcomes of photographic modernism which these essays describe.

Each of these essays betrays a suspicion—David Peeler calls it a dark dimension. Whether inculcated in Shaw's embrace of the camera as an enhancement of the superman's capabilities or expressed in the vision loosely shared by Strand, Weston, and Adams that by force of mind an elite could transform human society, photographic modernism was dangerously ignorant of its own reductivism, and of the dehumanizing effects of its own wintry humanism.

Although David Peeler has chosen to deal with some of the most aesthetically pleasing American photographs, he does not prettify Weston's and Adams's naive notions of photography. He points out how what began as a Promethean search for harmonic order deteriorated into a "strangely predatory," possibly prurient appropriation of images—a symbolic expression of subjugation, not enlightenment. In an important sense, Weston and Adams were the heirs of Paul Strand's intellectual journey, recounted by Fraser Cocks. Strand moved from the social gospel to the gospel of vitalism, and thence to a kind of purism that echoed in the arts for more than fifty years, from Clive Bell to Clement Greenberg.[2] And it is through vitalism, of course, that these three photographers are

2. Clive Bell published his influential book, *Art*, in 1914. Clement Greenberg's clearest statement on modernist purity occurs in his essay, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature*, 4 (Spring 1965), 193–201. It is interesting to note his appreciation of photography, which he, like Shaw, felt to be unencumbered by pictorial convention. It occurs in his critique of Edward Weston, "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston," which first appeared in *The Nation*, March 9, 1946, and is reprinted in "Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949," Vol. II in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). Greenberg felt Weston to be too painterly, that is, too dependent on abstraction. Photography, he suggested, is at its best when it is naturalistic.

intellectually related to Melinda Parson's subject, that amateur photographer, Bernard Shaw.

Shaw's "Life Force," and attendant notion of "Creative Evolution," is not exactly the concept of *élan vital* that Stieglitz and Strand developed out of Henri Bergson,[3] nor is it the elemental essence pursued by Weston and Adams. What these concepts share is the idea of purposive metaphysical entity, what Adams called a "super-reality," obscured by the great messiness of the world. And that idea relies on the concomitant notion of the artist-seer or, better, artist-social visionary, who has special access to this realm. Ironically, Shaw praised the labor-saving, vision-enhancing, progressive, and even populist potential of photography at the same time as he perpetuated an idea of rare artistic genius inherited from the Renaissance and reinflated by the Romantics and Aesthetes.

The ruthless, excoriating truthfulness that Shaw found in the camera, and which he invested in the protagonist of *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883), was revised in *Man and Superman* (1903) and, of course, in *Back to Methuselah* (1921) as Shaw's understanding of the Life Force changed. Strand's pursuit of the elemental life force also altered over time; it became increasingly insistent on the camera's distillation of pure form as revelation of some cosmic moral gyroscope. Eventually, Strand and Weston and Adams became what Lovejoy and Boas[4] called cultural primitivists, betraying the telltale "discontent of the civilized with civilization." A truculent anti-urbanism runs through their work, as, indeed, it runs through much of American culture. Adams headed for the hills; Weston and Strand went to Mexico. Each opposed timeless nature to a sullied and ephemeral culture. Each came to believe that one grows closer to truth as one moves further away from the world's arguments—an anti-intellectualism that Shaw would have pricked with great pleasure.

These essays are about what their titles tell us. But they are also about the politics of representation—the politics that prefer the type to the individual, the representation that assumes that technologies arrive unencumbered by social practices. Ultimately, these papers do the one thing that photographic modernism, for all of its intensity and highmindedness, did not do: they are part of the process taking place across the humanities, of modernism examining itself.

3. Bergson's *Creative Evolution* was published in 1907.

4. "Lovejoy and Boas" is the familiar shortening for the seminal "Prolegomena to the History of Primitivism," which appeared in the one and only volume of *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, eds. Arthur O. Lovejoy, Gilbert Chinard, George Boas, and Ronald S. Crane.