

June 1989

## Announcements and Comments

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.2, June 1989

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## *Announcements and Comments*

**D**URING the summer and autumn of 1987 David Peeler developed the idea for a panel presentation on photography and intellectual history to be given at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Cincinnati in December 1988. He titled his proposal "Photography and the Life of the Mind." Recognizing that historians had long employed photographs for documentary evidence and illustrative value, he intended the panel to demonstrate that new scholarship viewed the photograph not as a mere record of the world but instead as the product of intellectual stances and aesthetic devices intended to order that world.

Professor Peeler enlisted myself and Melinda Parsons to join him on the panel and present papers that represented this effort to develop a new way to read photographs. David Jacobs of the University of Texas and editor of *exposure* agreed to chair the session. Mary Warner Marien was willing to provide a reflective response to our comments.

Douglas N. Archibald, editor of the *Colby Library Quarterly*, offered us space in the *Quarterly* to publish expanded and fully documented versions of the papers we presented in Cincinnati. Professor Peeler and I are pleased to act as guest editors for this enterprise. We welcome the company of Professor Sundahl's essay on Francis Parkman's biography of the French explorer La Salle. Parkman, like Weston, Adams, and Strand, contended with the immense fact of the American landscape and found that the metaphor of the mythic quest was one of only a limited number of means of comprehending its immensity.

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### CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

MELINDA BOYD PARSONS has published extensively on the intersection of photography with the other arts and religion and on turn-of-the-century England. She is currently working on folkloric, musical, and religious expression in the art of Pamela Colman Smith. Ms. Parsons is an Assistant Professor of Art History at Memphis State University.

J. FRASER COCKS III, Curator of Special Collections and Assistant Professor of History at Colby College, is particularly interested in the relationship between the history of photography and the history of ideas in America. He is a co-editor with Douglas N. Archibald and Gretchen Schwenker of the forthcoming annotated edition of William Butler Yeats's *Autobiographies*.

DAVID P. PEELER, Associate Professor of History at the United States Military Academy, is the author of *Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America*. His current research, "The Mind's Eye," is an intellectual history of twentieth-century American photography.

MARY WARNER MARIEN reviews contemporary photography and research on photography for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Views*, and *Afterimage*. An Assistant Professor in the Fine Arts Department of Syracuse University, she is currently at work on a book-length study of photography and cultural history.

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J. FRASER COCKS III  
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### *Photography and the Life of the Mind*

IT is particularly appropriate for the *Colby Library Quarterly* to give special attention to photography in 1989. This year marks photography's one hundred fiftieth anniversary, an event that will be celebrated with exhibitions, symposia, and workshops throughout the world. Since its inception in 1839, people have been fascinated with photography, for its curiously arresting images often lead to questions about the relationship between art and reality. In photography's first days, significant writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne were drawn to explore the nature of photography. Late-nineteenth-century authors such as Henry James and Émile Zola continued the exercise, and in the twentieth century writers like John Dos Passos and Susan Sontag also made photography a central issue in their books.

But in the midst of all this literary attention, scholars were slow to take up photography as a topic. One of the earliest analysts was Walter Benjamin, whose 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," framed the issues of originality and creativity that would continue to concern scholars for the rest of the twentieth century. More recent critics like Allan Sekula, Carl Chiarenza, Joel Snyder, and Neil

Alan have examined photography with tools borrowed from linguistics. Other scholars, such as William Stott and Carol Shloss, have shown how a photographic genre can become especially evocative in certain social climates, or how photography can provide a ready metaphor for enduring literary themes.<sup>1</sup>

The papers presented here are a part of this growing scholarly interest in photography. Yet these pieces are also somewhat out of the ordinary, for they are by historians, and as a group historians have been particularly disinclined to engage photography as a subject. (Indeed, it is indicative that one of the members of our panel, Melinda Parsons, received her training not in history *per se*, but in the separate field of art history.) To be sure, history books and articles are often chock-full of photographs. But usually these photos serve only as illustrations for the accompanying text, simple pictorial evidence of what things happened to look like at a given time and place—say Promontory Point, Utah, on May 10, 1869.

If historians in general have made sparing use of photography, it is particularly surprising that intellectual historians have given it so little attention. Like other sub-disciplines, such as military or legal history, intellectual history focuses upon a particular aspect of the past. As Perry Miller once put it, intellectual history concentrates upon the “life of the mind,” examining how intellectuals and other creative individuals have sought to interpret and order the world around them. The essays in this issue are within the tradition of intellectual history. They are concerned with the ideas and values that shaped the discourse of photography, with the imprint that this discourse left upon actual photographic images, and with photography’s connection to broader cultural traditions. Yet such concerns have been a rarity among intellectual historians. As Neal Harris said a decade ago, the relationship between intellectual history and the study of images “has been cold and distant.”<sup>2</sup>

Some of this oversight can be explained as simple habit. As Harris noted, intellectual historians traditionally have used words, not images, to define their subjects, and the evidence upon which they have relied has almost always been verbal. Visual artworks consequently get passed over as the raw material of history, and visual artists also seem to be dubious candidates for inclusion among *real* intellectuals. Indeed, there is a com-

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in Hanna Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 217–64. Allan Sekula, “The Invention of Photographic Meaning,” *Artforum*, 13 (January 1975), 36–45. Carl Chiarenza, “Notes Toward an Integrated History of Picture Making,” *Afterimage*, 7 (Summer 1979), 35–41. Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Alan, “Photography, Vision and Representation,” *Afterimage*, 3 (January 1976), 8–13. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973). Carol Shloss, *Invisible Light: Photography and the American Writer: 1840–1940* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).

2. Perry Miller’s posthumously published volume bears the phrase in its title, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965). Neal Harris, “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Half-Tone Effect,” John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), p. 196.

mon tendency to regard the enterprise of photography as *sui generis*, a unique field that is somehow insulated from contemporaneous intellectual concerns, a merely technical craft that is hardly involved with enduring questions or with pressing issues of the moment. But for serious, creative photographers and their critics, this most definitely was not the case. The men discussed here—George Bernard Shaw, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams—concerned themselves with large questions from the Western intellectual tradition and frequently wrestled with the same issues that vexed their contemporaries.

If photography has thus been overlooked, it also suffers because many people think there is no creativity at all behind its machine-produced images. More apparently than painting or poetry, photography's art is intertwined with mechanical concerns; the technical details of lens settings and darkroom chemistry have helped obscure the originality behind those details. Certainly the photographer is dependent upon technology, but this makes him no less creative than the painter who employs synthetic pigments or the writer who composes at a computer. Similarly, it is quite easy to fall into the common equation of photography with verisimilitude, to think that the photographer has not really *made* an image so much as he has merely *captured* the reality before him at a given instant. In this view, the photo becomes a product of simple-minded record-making, so boringly bereft of creativity that Rudolph Arnheim once likened making a photograph to taking a "vacation from artifice."<sup>3</sup>

But for all our desires to have visual records of events, for all the resemblance between photographs and the world, photographs are *not* the same thing as that world. Instead, these images are more akin to words than to the world—they are one of the many ways in which people have chosen to structure and think about the world. Rather than mere mimicry, the photograph can involve large amounts of design and ingenuity. Through framing, lighting, and darkroom techniques, a serious photographer can interpret a subject in any number of ways. Hardly a passive receptor of the outside world, he is instead an active agent working upon that world and developing a particular rendition of it. Like Norman Bryson and W. J. T. Mitchell, the authors of the essays in this issue believe it is impossible for any art to reduplicate the world, because, no matter what their medium, artists invariably add their two-cents' worth (and more) to the image.<sup>4</sup>

A word is in order about the type of photography discussed in these essays. We are not concerned with those images that arise from popular culture, and so we do not use amateur scrapbooks and snapshots like Marilyn Motz has employed.<sup>5</sup> Nor are we concerned with what has come

3. Rudolph Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography," *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (September 1974), 157.

4. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983).  
W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986).

5. Marilyn F. Motz, "Visual Autobiography: Photograph Albums of Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Women," *American Quarterly*, 41 (March 1989), 63-92.

to be known as “documentary photography.” As practiced by figures such as Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, and Arthur Rothstein, documentary photography has been openly political in its intentions, as photographers sought to improve the lot of urban immigrants, working children, or dispossessed farmers. Instead, our focus here is upon photographers and critics who were more intrigued by photography’s esthetic potential than by its political prowess; we concentrate on people working in the fine art tradition of the influential critic, photographer, and art advocate, Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946). Paul Strand and George Bernard Shaw published in Stieglitz’s prestigious journal, *Camera Work*, and although Edward Weston and Ansel Adams came of artistic age after the journal had ceased publication, they were inspired by visits to Stieglitz and knowingly worked within his conventions. In addition, all of these individuals were involved with modernism. They frequently shared modernism’s fascination with shape, form, and light, but as the accompanying articles illustrate, they were also quite interested in constructing a moral and ontological architecture that would stand alongside modernism’s formal concerns.

During the discussion that followed the presentation of these papers last December, many questions probed the relationship between photographs and language. Some audience members questioned the relative strength of words and images, and others even suggested that photographs have a certain ineffable quality which places them beyond language. As demonstrated by our methodologies, the authors of these three essays are not willing to abandon words altogether. Certainly photographs are essential primary sources in our research, for photographs were the artists’ first form of expression and Shaw’s critical topic. But by themselves photographs are not very articulate, and they cannot provide answers to important concrete questions. To help in documenting the artist’s thinking, his creative environment, and the cacophony of factors influencing that creativity, we have drawn upon our subjects’ words as well as their photographs, utilizing nonvisual sources such as correspondence, interviews, and published materials.

In closing, let me note some of the benefits that we hope may be derived from these essays. At a minimum, they should increase the pool of knowledge about four specific individuals who died earlier in this century. But there are also some wider contributions intended. One is a corrective to the common misconception that photography lacks the creativity involved in “real” art such as painting or fiction. Perhaps, too, these studies can lead us to refine our scholarly models. How often do scholars draw analogies between their explorations and photography, claiming to go to their material as value-free observers and then simply report back with “snapshots” of what they have seen? Yet such reporting is of course impossible. In writing about photography, Victor Burgin has argued against the existence of what might be called an “innocent eye” in photography;

every image inevitably reflects both personal biases and conventions of the medium.<sup>6</sup> Scholars carry similar bundles of presuppositions and biases, some inherited from their disciplines and others of more personal origin. But to realize this is no cause for us to bemoan an innocence we have supposedly lost. It is instead to recognize that in scholarship, as in photography, innocence is something we have never had. We come to our work laden with theories and premises, and the task is for us to be more fully aware of these theoretical assumptions that underlie our empirical practices.

DAVID P. PEELER  
*Guest Editor*

6. Victor Burgin, "Photographic Practice and Art Theory," *Studio International*, 190 (July–August 1975), 46.