

## NOSTALGIA FOR THE MODERN

Kevin Moore

Published as “La Nostalgie du moderne,” in *L’Art de la photographie: 1839 à nos jours*, eds. André Gunthert and Michel Poivert (Paris: Mazenod, 2007)

Why did Modernist theory dominate photography for most of the twentieth century, especially in America? Why, starting with Alfred Stieglitz, was it decided that photography must adhere to certain formal values supposedly inherent to the medium: abundant detail, lack of manipulation, and documentary intent? Although there was plenty of variety throughout the century, manifested in collage, Surrealist distortions, various forms of photographic abstraction, just to name the most obvious “deviant” applications, the “straight photograph” has long been held up as the beau ideal.

Photography, of course, is capable of so much more. A photograph can comprise abundant detail, a split second in time, real events in real time, but it can just as easily—more easily, it might be argued—produce blur, represent duration, put forth the staged and the faked. Often, these effects are deployed as legitimate strategies for photographic expression: rotate the lens, hold open the shutter, put on a play—in short, experiment with the reality between what the camera can do in one mode and can do in another, both done equally well. Indeed, photo-manipulation is one of the most obvious ways in which artists have countered the mechanical stigma of their medium, bending the properties of light and chemistry to a subjective, artistic end.

The critical preference in the US for photographic purity, manifested in the documentary photograph, encountered numerous theoretical contradictions, especially by mid century, as Formalism arose as a dominant critical mode and America waded deeper into political unrest. During the early decades of the century, photographic vision had become increasingly synonymous with modernism, proposing an aesthetic for the modern world that was hard-edged, mechanical, and objective. At the same time, in its treatment of the period’s social conflicts—the Depression, the Dust Bowl, World War II, McCarthyism, the Cold War, and Vietnam—the medium also revealed, often unwittingly, the deep

complexities of modernism itself: the dangers of rigid ideologies; the fragility and volatility of utopian schemes; the side effects, both social and environmental, of large-scale industrial growth; and the unavoidable disappointments associated with mass culture and mass consumption. In the struggles to manage these dual tendencies, carried out in attempts to define critical standards for art photography, there emerged what might be called a “nostalgia for the modern”: a longing for an imaginary moment in the medium’s history, defined in terms of its purest aesthetic values. Embodied here was the inherent conflict with actual historical events depicted; in that sense, discussions of photography ran a close parallel to political debates, which also strove for a vision of wholeness and historical continuity.

Writing on Abstract Expressionism in *Artforum* in 1974, critic Eva Cockcroft said: “To understand why a particular art movement becomes successful under a given set of historical circumstances requires an examination of the specifics of patronage and the ideological needs of the powerful.”<sup>1</sup> It is significant that Abstract Expressionist painting and straight photography, seemingly so opposed as modes of expression, should have risen to prominence and achieved critical clarity simultaneously, during the 1950s. This occurrence, it may be argued, was not merely coincidental. Indeed, the two movements might be seen in a Derridean sense, as opposing categories defined against one another yet sharing a similar criteria. Neither could have been defined as such, nor defined to such an extreme, without the contrasting values and intentions of the other.

Serge Guilbaut’s thesis regarding art of this period proposed that it was the depoliticization of American culture following the Second World War that made it possible for an art movement such as Abstract Expressionism to flourish. Abstraction, on the surface at least, contained no overt commentary on social or political issues and thus contained no incendiary political content. Of course, one line of rhetoric held that AbEx was an absolute expression of American freedom, pure democracy on canvas, in the sense that the variety of styles and approaches to abstraction in the paintings represented

perfectly the individualism America so proudly celebrated. Moreover, abstraction avoided the more unsavory aspects of American freedoms, namely the freedom to consume such large and varied quantities of consumer goods. These values appeared unavoidably political in the traveling shows of AbEx painting, exported to countries like the USSR during the 1950s—cold war politics waged through canvasses understood as explorations of individual human psychology. Abstraction, in all its glorious vagary, has always been a pliant style, open to multiple interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

But this has never really been true for photography. Due to the photograph's unavoidable specificity, even pictures devoid of people can hardly be seen without inferring some kind of social and/or political content. A cat sleeping on a chair (a neutral enough subject) will embody, on some level, the economic prowess of bourgeois mercantilism in developed Western countries. Photography, too, has its own "weak points" in terms of interpretive pliancy—propaganda in the media and as "hard" evidence in courts of law—but there is always, to varying degrees, certain unavoidable information in photographs that must be addressed. And this "content" is often unsettling to viewers. A sleeping cat is one thing; prostitutes, murder victims, war atrocities—these are other things altogether.

Importantly, in America, what was seen to be the fundamental documentary character of photography demanded a certain style, one defined most emphatically by Walker Evans. We are talking here, of course, about the famous "style-less style," which became the baseline for serious documentary photography attempting social change, but it also became an art-documentary style in its own right. Evans thought of himself as an artist, but his approach set expectations for judging the artistic merits of work with serious documentary intent: good documentary-based work had to be straightforward, taken head-on, without any sort of obvious visual inflection inserted by the photographer. It had to be, in a certain sense, a photograph *without* a photographer, a photograph in which all that mattered was what was seen in the picture. Even Dorothea Lange, so socially committed and personally involved in her approach, was careful to excise herself from the drama of the image. By doing so, she created an authorless, propagandistic document that could also be seen, in certain contexts, as a work of art in a documentary style. Her

large prints of the 1940s, in particular, have a dual aspect as both propaganda posters and art photographs, the large print—or exhibition print—being a common format for art photography of this period.

There were, of course, plenty of other photographs full of social and political content, yet also possessing an idiosyncratic style (a “stylish style,” if you will) associated with various individual photographers, which threw another wrench into discussions of photographic modernism in America—to the degree that another term for it had to be invented. Usually, in the United States, the term *reportage* referred to pictures by European photographers, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, who made images full of social and political content, yet these values were in a certain sense diminished by the prominence of style. By the standards just outlined, here was a blending of categories: evident documentary intent combined with personal expression, socio-political content couched in a radically subjective formalism. For proponents of American photographic Modernism, reliant on form as the distinction between an art photograph and a photograph produced for utility, such overlaps were challenging.

To take an important example, in the writings of John Szarkowski, former curator at the Museum of Modern Art and the twentieth century’s greatest spokesman for Modernist photography, there is an evident discomfort in the grinding tension between form and content. This tension is perhaps best summarized in his often-repeated statement that, in photography, “form and content are the same thing,” a sphinx of a phrase, revealing a dilemma critics of the various mediums were faced with at that time. One is reminded of remarks on literary criticism by Susan Sontag. In her essay “On Style,” published in 1965, three years after Szarkowski’s appointment at MoMA, she observes: “Everyone is quick to avow that style and content are indissoluble.” Yet, she goes on, “most of the same critics who disclaim...that style is an accessory to content maintain the duality when applying themselves to particular works of literature. It is not easy, after all, to get unstuck from a distinction that practically holds together the fabric of critical discourse...and would be difficult to surrender without a fully articulated working replacement at hand.”<sup>3</sup> It is hard now to comprehend why the distinction between form

and content would have been so widely discredited in 1965, except to understand that form, [particularly in relation to art photography], had achieved a newfound respect in the arts. Indeed, it is not the dialectic between form and content that is being discredited here; it is simply content, because content had always dominated form, distracting readers and viewers from considering the significance of form, and critics were trying to take content down a notch by demolishing the equation altogether.

But let's back up a minute and examine what the established mythologies of American Modernism really were, starting with the debates that surrounded painting, where such ideas were first formulated. The orthodox narrative of American art is that a flowering occurred after 1945 and that all previous art, realist painting in particular, was understood to be merely "folksy," "illustrational." Much of the rhetoric surrounding such claims was based on transcendental mythologies of art, descended from the nineteenth century: art was something personal, expressive, exalting; rather than having a purpose, art was created for its own sake and had nothing to do with politics or public life. Such definitions implied that art with some sort of overt purpose—art created to impact social behavior, for example—was not really art; it was something else, something small-minded and parochial. Writing in the City Art Museum of Saint Louis catalogue for *Trends in American Painting*, in 1942, P. T. Rathbone wrote: the artist "creates for his own sake and for those who follow him, but he does not paint for society's sake."<sup>4</sup>

Such attitudes were encouraged, no doubt, by the climate of economic and political triumphalism fostered in the United States after the Second World War. Clement Greenberg, the most potent advocate of Modernist thought in America, made explicit the connection between the rise of artistic abstraction and American power in 1948, when, in *Partisan Review*, he proclaimed: "The main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power."<sup>5</sup> However, the pressures and limits increasingly applied by McCarthyism and Cold War politics influenced which forms of art could be promoted and how those forms could be talked about. Significantly, by the time Greenberg published his best-known text, "Modernist Painting," in 1960, he had replaced all overt discussion of social politics

with an abstract vocabulary of “self-criticism,” “aesthetic consistency,” and “intelligible continuity,” illustrating that historical context of any kind had become increasingly difficult to address in relation to serious art. Painting was about painting, went his argument.<sup>6</sup> Of course, beyond art criticism, this rule governed what could be depicted in art itself. After the 1930s in the United States, even the progressive realism of Léger was seen as a return to Russia—viz., it conjured the specter of Communism.

Where did the preponderance of such ideas leave photography? While painters had the option of falling into an aesthetic “quietism,” taking a neutral path politically by embracing abstraction, the course for photographers wasn’t so clear. Indeed, the threat was real. Photographs with significant social content ran the risk of being denounced as subversive and “anti-American.” The Photo League, which promoted social-based photography, was closed down in 1951 amidst threats and rumors generated by the reactionary McCarthy administration.

There were, however, some photographers, such as Minor White and Aaron Siskind, who experimented in photographic abstraction, attempting in both cases to find a pure visual language for the expression of the self. Unlike their painter counterparts, for whom the individual gesture embodied the most profound evidence of this idea, the photographers “found themselves” in the visible world: in isolated views of rock formations and peeling walls and tide pools. Critics argued that such work violated the rule of media purity: such photographs, it was argued, were “not photographic” in the sense that they did not demonstrate what photography and photography alone could achieve as a medium. White and Siskind’s photographs were in fact purely photographic; they were unmanipulated and full of specific detail. Technically, they were straight photographs. The real criticism lay in the fact that they too obviously resembled works by Abstract painters. Siskind’s work, in particular, looked like small paintings by his close friend Franz Klein (whose paintings were, in truth, influenced by Siskind’s photographs<sup>7</sup>).

Usually, for art photographers at this time, the challenge was just the opposite: content was the harder part of the equation to contain, to explain away, *to not see*. This, no

doubt, was because of photography's reputation as a "transparent medium," an attitude fostered by decades of public control by the picture press, which had trained viewers to look into the picture, to see actions performed there "within the window," but not to see style. Of course, certain proponents of photography had been trying to make this point, or some version of it, for years, to varying degrees of success. Since the 1930s, with only a few notable exceptions—the Photo League, Helen Gee's Limelight gallery, Minor White's journal *Aperture*, a handful of minor critics, and the Art Institute of Chicago, perhaps—the most significant and continuous advocate of art photography was New York's Museum of Modern Art. Since the founding of the Department of Photography in 1940, the museum had attempted in various ways to define the medium as a modern art form. The first effort was launched by Beaumont Newhall, whose 1937 exhibition *Photography 1839-1937* established a technical history of the medium and presented a canon of European and American masters. Newhall's approach to photography was largely art historical in that, besides assembling work by the medium's greatest practitioners, he presented a fluid history of technological advancement from which he extrapolated a set of aesthetic conclusions. Newhall's approach was eventually usurped by Edward Steichen, whose governance of the department lasted throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Steichen's idea for art photography was based on his often-stated belief that art was something fundamentally apolitical, that it transcended the petty conflicts of a given time and place. Although his career was in some ways more nuanced, today Steichen is known for such large blockbuster exhibitions as *The Road to Victory* (1942) and *The Family of Man* (1955), shows that led with a premise of universal values but were, in fact, large-scale, politically-charged propaganda installations, walk-through versions of *Life* magazine.

When Szarkowski replaced Steichen in 1962, the "apolitical political" regime came to an end and a new era of legitimate investigation into photography as an artistic medium began. With it came the fullest flowering of Modernist photographic theory. In his role as curator, Szarkowski was more a critic than an art historian. His great service was to present new and exciting bodies of work, for he had exquisite (if sometimes narrow) taste, and to resurrect work from the past that had not been formerly recognized.

Together, these two programs constituted an effort to reorganize photography's history. But Szarkowski's history was mostly a visual history, one based on a set of aesthetic qualities which, he proposed, were inherent to the medium: "the thing itself," "the detail," "the frame," "time," and "vantage point," as he defined them in *The Photographer's Eye*, in 1964.<sup>8</sup> His investigation into photographic aesthetics shares much in common with the Modernist thought of Greenberg, who, in "Modernist Painting" (1960), had reduced all of painting to being about "the ineluctable flatness of the support." But Szarkowski's approach seems to have developed more out of the Zeitgeist of the period and through his thinking on the architecture of Louis Sullivan, the subject of Szarkowski's first book, published in 1956.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the quality of his judgments, one of Szarkowski's greatest (and most problematic) contributions to the history of photography was recognition for vernacular works, photographs by practitioners working outside the boundaries of art photography proper: Timothy O'Sullivan's US Geologic Survey photographs; recently-surfaced photographs by unknown amateur Jacques-Henri Lartigue; and countless photographs by unknown news photographers, exhibited in *From the Picture Press* in 1973. In theory, any photograph could be considered an art photograph. Essentially, it was the formal resolution of the picture that determined this to be the case or not.

Many photographers, such as O'Sullivan, Lartigue, and the anonymous press photographers just cited, not to mention Eugène Atget, E. J. Bellocq, and numerous others, were explicit "problem cases"; all were, in one way or another, dubious candidates for reclassification as art photographers. Less obvious but equally problematic was the assimilation of various European photographers who had worked in a lyrical documentary style since the 1930s. Cartier-Bresson, Brassai, and André Kertész, each of which had major retrospectives at MoMA during the 1960s, found in their exposure through MoMA a reordering of the values of their photographs as socio-aesthetic objects. As they passed from one context, most often from the printed page, to the walls of the museum, their significance as links in larger narratives—narratives entrenched in various, specific historical moments—transformed into something else



altogether. They became entrenched in a different narrative, one reflecting the interests of artists, critics, and the US public at a specific moment in America's discovery and formulation of its various artistic traditions.

What was to be made of photographs full of social and political content—"humanist photographs"—during a period of pronounced Formalism in art criticism? Recall as well, this was a time of intense political discomfort in the US, a time of radical social instability and Communist paranoia, resulting, paradoxically, in a climate of depoliticization, if we are to accept the term proposed by Guilbaut. Two responses tended to occur. First, photographs full of social meaning might be assessed according to their formal resolution; they become tableaux of fixed forms, "compositions," their content only nominal. Second, in instances when content cooperated, such photographs might become vessels for nostalgia, tourist-brochure illustrations for travel to another time and place. In the first instance, one observes photography garnering the power of a popular critical mode, one that could substantially elevate respect for the medium. In the second instance, there is the appropriation of a romantic European past, a prehistory to enhance America's own relatively short history; having recently achieved global significance as a world power, the US was eager to expand its own sense of cultural depth and sophistication. (Significantly, the field of American art history has its roots in this period as well.) And in both instances, there is an evasion of subject matter. Whether Americans were simply isolated politically, made docile by the non-confrontational photo-essay style of the picture magazines, or found physical comfort and consumerism more convenient than political engagement, they tended not to discuss—not in the art context anyway—what they were really looking at in photographs.

A telling exception to this formulation was Robert Frank's book *The Americans*, first published by Robert Delpire in France in 1958, and appearing amidst howls of scorn—as well as praise—in the US the following year. In France, the photographs were grounded in sociological intent, with texts by writers, such as William Faulkner and John Brown, accompanying the photographs. However, for the American version Frank stripped out the texts, allowing the photographs to form their own logic as narrative units. The

approach defied contemporary expectations: the gritty style of the photographs (a dark stylish style) and the unsentimental treatment of the Americans pictured were seen as an assault on both fine art photography and American culture. The pictures were neither formal masterpieces in the Weston vein nor were they examples of responsible photojournalism. They were a new kind of visual poetry, created by rejecting accepted categories.<sup>10</sup>

Others, who had engaged in other forms of photography for years, defied expectations less deliberately. Writing in *The New York Times* in 1970 on the occasion of a major retrospective at the Grand Palais, critic A. D. Coleman noted that Cartier-Bresson had done himself a disservice in *The Decisive Moment (Images à la sauvette)*, his landmark book of 1952. This book, Coleman argued, was “responsible for distorting our perception of Cartier-Bresson,” for it was full of “magnificent single images, a set of misleading masterpieces.” Coleman was elaborating comments by Cartier-Bresson himself, made in the book’s introduction, which discussed the picture story as a form comprising a series of images rather than single “decisive moments.” Cartier-Bresson, Coleman points out, always considered himself first and foremost a serious photojournalist; “that he also happens to be an artist,” Coleman concludes, “is secondary if not incidental.”<sup>11</sup> A patent contrarian, Coleman liked to contradict establishment judgments made by Szarkowski (Cartier-Bresson’s most recent exhibition at MoMA had been in 1968; he had been shown there once before, in 1947). The problem Coleman identifies here is one of the single journalistic image taken out of context and considered for its singular formal achievement. This approach not only muffled the content of the images through an overemphasis on form (Szarkowski liked to say that Cartier-Bresson’s photographs were full of “visual wit”<sup>12</sup>), it also pointed out the difficulties, more generally, of separating photojournalism from art photography. Coleman’s disdain for this is clear, but what were the available strategies for making this distinction during the 1960s?

In order to justify a journalism photograph as an art photograph, one had to dissociate the image from its function. The simplest approach was to lift a given image from a photo-

essay, mat it, frame it, and hang it in isolation on a gallery wall. Of course, there would be other similar images on the surrounding walls, but framed individual pictures did not relate as they did within the pages of a magazine. Such placement not only interrupted the narrative sequence, it served to “liberate” the image from all verbal context. Short titles were provided, but nothing resembling the extensive explanatory captions provided in the magazines. In other words, all attributes contributing to the idea of utility were to be stripped away. Only in its uselessness as an aesthetic object could the photograph be appreciated as art. By Modernist standards, a work of art existed primarily as an object of *vision*. Interestingly, Steichen’s large walk-through installations had been an attempt to win art status for journalism images as well; by blowing up the pictures, he created an optical circus, emphasizing the primacy of vision. Unfortunately, his exhibitions proved to be narrative as well, proffering epic commentary on universal human struggles, from childbirth to warfare, and it was this specific failure—to disconnect the pictures from their role as story-telling units—that hobbled the entire approach.

Related was the photographer’s role as a commercial being. This problematic had haunted photographers from the very beginning, forcing many to choose between their commercial and artistic identities, but at no time was the choice more critical than during the postwar period. In the 1947 MoMA catalogue of Cartier-Bresson’s work, Lincoln Kirstein speaks of “the promiscuous anonymity of journalism,” conjuring a labyrinth in which photographers had little choice over aesthetic judgments.<sup>13</sup> One approach that Cartier-Bresson discovered, as did others, was to develop a special style of exhibition print, one that was not only large but also showed the edges of the negative, proving that the image was created as a perfect object of vision at the moment of its inception. (Kirstein noted even in 1947 that Cartier-Bresson rarely cropped down his images during printing.)

Another approach to this dilemma was to characterize the photographer as an amateur, a large, unspecific category, with a nuance of “unaccomplished” in English, yet resonating with perfect opposition to the term “professional.” Interestingly, most photographers laboring under the specter of commercialism were quickly stamped with this label.

Writing in the 1964 exhibition catalogue of Kertész's work, Szarkowski emphasized the photographer's identity as an amateur, claiming that his career had been eclipsed due to his refusal to work commercially once in the US. In a line sounding very much like Szarkowski's assessment of Lartigue from the previous year, the curator wrote that Kertész worked as "a greatly gifted beginner discovering for the first time the beauty of photography."<sup>14</sup> Also similar to Lartigue, Kertész augmented this kind of mythification by adding his own supporting commentary. To a question posed in a 1963 interview, Kertész responded: "Amateur period? I regard myself as an amateur today, and I hope that's what I will stay until the end of my life. I'm forever a beginner who discovers the world again and again."<sup>15</sup>

A related point that was often emphasized was the idea of the photographer as nothing but an eye, a being with no interest in the technical aspects of photography—nor even the social machinations of the visible world—beyond its ability to enhance and capture vision as a set of abstracted forms. Lartigue and Kertész both invented "eye-trap" stories in the 1960s (who borrowed from whom is not clear), claiming that as children they photographed without cameras by simply opening and closing their eyes. The fashion for this idea is evident in the 1963 reedition of the earlier MoMA catalogue, into which Kirstein inserts the line: Cartier-Bresson is "always taking pictures, whether or not he has a camera in hand."

That Americans were uncomfortable by what were suspected to be Cartier-Bresson's Socialist leanings is made clear by the simple fact that these pictures of India, China, and various war-torn or impoverished regions of the world were discussed, both in and outside of the museum, as examples of perfect compositions and, if the human content was addressed at all, they were examples of the photographer's pronounced warmth for humanity. The specifics—political conflict, oppression, poverty, abuses of power, violence—were seldom noted. Moreover, even though the mixing of media has always been considered forbidden in Modernist art, exceptions for photographers, especially those needing help with the separation between their work and photojournalism, were often granted. Cartier-Bresson was praised for his skill at drawing and for his interest in

filmmaking. Contradicting modernist dictums, it wasn't the quality of the still image alone that elevated the work to art status; it achieved that level despite associations with other "impure" forms.

If direct address of photographic content posed such a problem, the threat could be reduced through an overlay of nostalgia. Although many photographers worked in this mode, Brassai was a leader of sorts, making use of the photo book as part of a flourishing cottage industry for the promotion of "Old Paris." The photo book itself may be seen as a "third way," between magazine photojournalism and the museum exhibition, for it offered photographers a means of control—of image selection, sequencing, and the use of language in the handling of captions. In his subject matter, Brassai, of course, was not alone. It is impressive to consider all of the books produced between the 1930s and the 1970s, somewhere between Paris and New York, on this particular subject. What interests us here are not so much the books produced in France, but those reeditioned or produced intentionally for an English-speaking audience. For example, three years after Atget's death in 1927, *Atget: photographe de Paris* was published; of more interest in this context is Berenice Abbott's *The World of Atget*, published in New York in 1964. Another example: Kertész produced *Paris vu par André Kertész* in 1934; Cartier-Bresson came out with *Vive la France* in 1970 (in French), issued as *Cartier-Bresson's France* via New York the following year.

Although Brassai's book *Paris de nuit* (1933) was not published in the US until 1987, a London edition had appeared, also in 1933; moreover, the book was accessible enough for foreign export as it was simply a book of "60 photos" with a brief introduction by Paul Morand. *Camera in Paris*, made explicitly for an Anglophone audience, was published in 1949 and contains many photographs first appearing in *Paris de nuit*. *Camera in Paris* clearly reflects its mid-century English-speaking audience—an audience searching for a preconceived idea of Paris as a city of art, monumental architecture, and social decadence—and is thus fundamentally conservative in outlook; such thematics are represented in the tamest selection of photographs, organized under headings, such as "The Grand Sights" and "Famous Shows." This was a far cry from the selection of

images appearing in 1976 in *The Secret Paris of the '30s*, which contained images of prostitutes and homosexuals, the full range of “social debris,” attractive to Americans by now fully engaged in their own sexual revolution. In between, *Graffiti* appeared in 1961, but only in a small edition and in French, and *Picasso and Company* in 1966, two years after the French version, *Conversations avec Picasso* (1964). Signifying the end of an epoch, *The Artists of My Life* appeared in 1982, two years before the photographer’s death; it was so popular, it was reeditioned in both London and New York the following year.

Brassaï had, of course, appeared in numerous legitimate art contexts during these years—notably, he was given solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1954 and at MoMA in 1968—and much of the same rhetoric of Formalism and “the amateur” was used. More relevant here is the way in which Brassaï’s publications managed to perpetuate a form of watered-down Surrealism, which quickly took root as part of the identity of the city of that movement’s origin. It is difficult to explain the mania for French culture manifested in the translations of novels, numerous popular films with French subjects, in addition to the multitude of photography books that swept the US during the postwar period. Nostalgia usually suggests a form of escapism, a longing for the past. In this case, nostalgia seemed to offer up a blunted memory of the entre-guerre period, depicted as an era of gaiety and mystery rather than one of hardship and suffering. Moreover, as suggested earlier in this essay, such consumerist manifestations of the past might be seen as a packaged cultural inheritance. The US, with its longstanding belief in the idea that “art comes from France,” was transferring the attitude to the larger arena of mass culture. Just as American AbEx painting was seen as a direct descendant of Cézanne and Picasso, American culture could garner the sophistication associated with French culture, if in no other way than having the good taste to consume French food, fashion, and books on photography.

To bring such considerations back to Modernist photography, one need only connect the dots, matching photographers from one context to the other: Brassaï as precursor to Diane Arbus; Kertész and Cartier-Bresson as precursors to Garry Winogrand and Lee

Friedlander. The first group provided a photographic tradition for the second; the second made the first seem fresh and contemporary. Of course, there were obvious discrepancies, the most palpable being the difference between the complex identities of the earlier French photographers vis-à-vis their American counterparts, who, for the first time in a long time in photography's history, were able to look at themselves simply as artists. At MoMA, where such ideas were encouraged, the argument was never too overt or didactic. Szarkowski, always subtle in his writing, might suggest several photographers in relation to the one at hand, yet he made no real commitments. The result was a broad, flexible notion of "the patterns of influence," to use one of the curator's own favorite phrases. For all the strength of his ideas, executed in both compelling prose and striking gallery installations, he left photography's history open, permeable, with lots of room to breathe. Indeed, pairings such as those just cited, some based more in historical reality than others (Arbus, for example, explicitly credited Brassai as an important influence on her work), offered food for thought more than a lapidary history. Such connections pointed to a very large notion of history indeed, one in an ongoing state of discovery, which operated according to the simple process of putting pictures together and seeing what happened. Moreover, it was a populist history, appropriate to American democracy. All one needed to participate was a pair of sharp eyes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41.

<sup>2</sup> Serge Guilbaut, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, "On Style" (1964), reproduced in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in Jonathan Harris, "Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960," in *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties*, eds. Paul Wood et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, "The Decline of Cubism" (1948), in *Art In Theory, 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 572.

<sup>6</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, 754-60.

<sup>7</sup> See "Aaron Siskind: The Bond and the Free," in Peter Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph: Writings on Twentieth-Century Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2006), 90-100.

---

<sup>8</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; exh. 1964; cat. 1966).

<sup>9</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Idea of Louis Sullivan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

<sup>10</sup> See David Levi Strauss in *The Book of 101 Books*, ed. Andrew Roth (New York: PPP Editions, 2001), 150.

<sup>11</sup> A. D. Coleman, "More Than the Decisive Moment," *The New York Times*, Sun., Mar. 29, 1970, section II, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> John Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 112.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln Kirstein, "Henri Cartier-Bresson: Documentary Humanist," in Lincoln Kirstein and Beaumont Newhall, *The Photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1947), 7.

<sup>14</sup> John Szarkowski, *A. Kertész, Photographer* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), unpaginated.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Robert Gurbo, "La Réunion, 1962-1985," in Sarah Greenough et al., *André Kertész* (Washington: National Gallery, 2005), 203.