

WALL LABEL - THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYE

May 27 - August 23, 1964

The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process-- and a new order of picture-making problems. The abilities and limitations of the technique meant that traditional pictorial solutions were often useless. In large degree, the photographer was disinherited of the old artistic traditions. He was forced to find new ways to make his meaning clear.

A few photographers tried to reconcile the conflict between the new technique and traditional artistic values, but for the most part photography grew by trial and error. Most photographers worked without the discipline of academy or guild, without a common training, without agreement on matters of craft or aesthetics, and often without knowledge of each others work.

Under such conditions photography produced a flood of images. From this massive, unsupervised, continuing experiment has come, by natural selection, a growing understanding of the unique characteristics of the medium--a growing understanding of what we mean when we say photographic.

The emergence of this special visual language has conditioned our sight, our language, and our imagery. This exhibition illustrates some of the qualities that seem basic to its way of seeing.

THE THING ITSELF

More convincingly than any other picture, a photograph evokes the tangible presence of reality. Its most fundamental use and its broadest acceptance has been as a substitute for the subject itself--a simpler, more permanent, more clearly visible version of the plain fact.

Our faith in the truth of a photograph rests on our belief that the lens is impartial, and will draw the subject as it is, neither nobler nor meaner. This faith may be naive and illusory (for though the lens draws the subject, the photographer defines it), but it persists. The photographer's vision convinces us to the degree that the photographer hides his hand.

"There is a terrible truthfulness about photography. The ordinary academician gets hold of a pretty model, paints her as well as he can, calls her Juliet, and puts a nice verse from Shakespeare underneath, and the picture is admired beyond measure.

"The photographer finds the same pretty girl, he dresses her up and photographs her, and calls her Juliet, but somehow it is no good--it is still Miss Wilkins, the model. It is too true to be Juliet."

George Bernard Shaw 1909

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THE DETAIL

Once he left his studio, it was impossible for the photographer to copy the painters' schemata. He could not stage-manage the battle, like Uccello or Velasquez, bringing together elements which had been separate in space and time, nor could he rearrange the parts of his picture to construct a design that pleased him better.

From the reality before him he could only choose that part that seemed relevant and consistent, and that would fill his plate. If he could not show the battle, explain its purpose and its strategy, or distinguish its heroes from its villains, he could show what was too ordinary to paint: the empty road scattered with cannon balls, the mud encrusted on the caisson's wheels, the anonymous faces, the single broken figure by the wall.

Intuitively, he sought and found the significant detail. His work, incapable of narrative, turned toward symbol.

"What is the picture of the drum, without the marks on its head where the beating of the sticks has darkened the parchment?"

Oliver Wendell Holmes 1857

"If your pictures aren't good, you aren't close enough."

Robert Capa 1947

THE FRAME

To quote out of context is the essence of the photographer's craft. His central problem is a simple one: what shall he include, what shall he reject? The line of decision between in and out is the picture's edge. While the draughtsman starts with the middle of the sheet, the photographer starts with the frame.

The photograph's edge defines content.

It isolates unexpected juxtapositions. By surrounding two facts, it creates a relationship.

It interrupts familiar forms, and shows their unfamiliar fragment.

It defines the shapes that surround objects.

The photographer edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame. This frame is the beginning of his picture's geometry. It is to the photograph as the cushion is to the billiard table.

"Putting one's head under the focusing cloth is a thrill...To pivot the camera slowly around watching the image change on the ground-glass is a revelation, one becomes a discoverer...and finally the complete idea is there..."

Edward Weston 1930

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TIME EXPOSURE

Photographs stand in special relation to time, for they describe only the present.

Exposures were long in early photography. If the subject moved, its multiple image described also a space-time dimension. Perhaps it was such accidents that suggested the photographic study of the process of movement, and later, of the virtual forms produced by the continuity of movement in time.

Photographers found an inexhaustible subject in the isolation of a single segment of time. They photographed the horse in midstride, the fugitive expressions of the human face, the gestures of hand and body, the bat meeting the ball, the milk drop splashing in the saucer of milk.

More subtle was the discovery of that segment of time that Cartier-Bresson called the decisive moment: decisive not because of the exterior event (the bat meeting the ball) but because in that moment the flux of changing forms and patterns were sensed to have achieved balance and clarity and order - because the image became, for an instant, a picture.

"A beautiful picture lies smiling before the lens, when a cow... gets up slowly and walks away deliberately, giving us a fine landscape with a continuous cow of many heads, much body, and centipedian legs."

Rev. H. J. Morton 1865

"We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory."

"Inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it."

Henri Cartier-Bresson 1952

VANTAGE POINT

If the photographer could not move his subject, he could move his camera. To see the subject clearly - often to see it at all - he had to abandon a normal vantage point, and shoot his picture from above, or below, or from too close, or too far away, or from the back side, inverting the order of things' importance, or with the nominal subject of his picture half hidden.

From his photographs, he learned that the appearance of the world was richer and less simple than his mind would have guessed.

He discovered that his pictures could reveal not only the clarity but the obscurity of things, and that these mysterious and evasive images could also, in their own terms, seem ordered and meaningful.

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VANTAGE POINT (cont'd)

"The photographer cannot, like Turner, whisk an invisible town around a hill, and bring it into view, and add a tower or two to a palatial building, or shave off a mountain's scalp...He must take what he sees, just as he sees it, and his only liberty is the selection of a point of view."

Rev. H. J. Morton 1865

"Why should not perspective be studied from angles hitherto neglected or unobserved? ...Think of the joy of doing something which it would be impossible to classify, or to tell which was the top and which the bottom!"

Alvin Langdon Coburn 1916

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Additional information and photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director,
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