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 under­
standing 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 ordi­
nary 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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