

Why Photography Matters



Jerry L. Thompson

When photography is at its best, I am suggesting—that is to say, when photography is exploiting the epistemological potential that it alone among all pictorial mediums has access to—there exists a balance between the *outside* (our visible world womb/home/tomb, which, like the song of Keats's nightingale, *is*, whether we are alive to hear it or not)⁷ and the *inside* (the perceiving, shaping intelligence of the photographer). When photography is at its best, these two elements cooperate as in a dialectic: one side presents a proposition, the other counters it; a new proposition emerges, one also countered in a similar fashion, and on and on as a progressively refined result appears, something neither partner in the dialectic could have produced alone.

The world presents a uniform array of undifferentiated presences, facts described by a limitless number of statements in the form of "This is a ____." There is no hierarchy, no cause and effect, no prior and latter, not even any number. Take a screen shot of any close view from Google Earth, and list every single thing you can recognize and name. This is like what the world presents.

7. The lines from John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) referred to are 55–60:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldest thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

The artist has a vision, a scheme of how things fit together. Isolated and turned inward upon himself—in the Bedlam cell imagined by Jonathan Swift in Section IX of *A Tale of a Tub*, to take an extreme example—the artist's teeming brain might come up with all sorts of ungrounded, fantastical heterocosms, unchecked personal fantasies: science fiction, metaphysical systems, thought experiments, undecipherable mutterings, modest proposals for solving the world's problems. The character in Swift's cell is so self-contained he reinfunds his own excrement.

But if that teeming brain be an alert sensibility, bring it into forceful contact with the world, and—if things go right—a dialectic-like interaction can begin. The photographer tries to make a first picture of some little piece of the world—it hardly matters what. Neither does it matter where the idea that that particular collection of things might make a picture came from. But the first picture gets made, and the photographer contemplates it.

The picture shows the first, provisional agreement between the multiplicity of the world and the narrow understanding of the artist. If all the right things are in place, the artist/photographer will think about this provisional agreement, and then look at the world again, this time with a perception altered by having thought about what the first picture shows. Some random thing that appeared of no importance in the first attempt may assume a new significance now, after the photographer has seen how it takes the light, say, or how it looks next

to some other thing, now that both are isolated in the frame of a view.

If this process continues without distraction, thousands of such back-and-forths are possible: a thousand paintings is an enormous *oeuvre*, but a thousand photographic pictures can be taken (and considered thoughtfully) within the span of months, a few years, and on a tiny budget, and even by a conscientious worker who also has a day job. The active working life of a photographer can last twenty-five years, or forty years, or even more.

If all the right things are in place; if this process continues without distraction: these clauses from preceding paragraphs are key. A dialectical interaction of tens of thousands of steps, tens of thousands of guess-and-checks, can unfold *if these conditions are met*. *All the right things in place* means that the artist diligently considers the pictures as she goes, and approaches the world each time with an altered understanding of what she sees. And that the seeing practiced must not be a seeing of shapes, tonalities, and colors only, but also of the meanings and significances of the things seen.

It is possible to construct a euphonic sentence by paying attention to the sounds and cadences of the words only. But serious writers play these qualities off the *meanings* of the words, choosing words for their histories and the associations they suggest, as well as for the way they sound when read together. When Walker Evans writes: "Suddenly there is a difference between a quaint evocation of the past and an open window looking straight down a

stack of decades,”⁸ the choice and sounds of the words forcefully propel, even in part create, their sense. *Nostalgia is different from critical regard*, the words of the sentence mean, but the force and urgency added by the choice, the sounds, and the rhythm of the words Evans elected are a part of the meaning of the sentence he chose to write.

Serious photographers, as they progress, will learn that pictures work the same way, by finding a sensible form and an intelligible understanding together, intertwined and inseparable. A photographer’s progress will be more slippery and indirect than a writer’s, because he is not working with words. And also because he can’t revise. Each new try must begin—not with the blank page: that is how studio artists begin. Each new try begins with the untidy chaos of the world, with taking a fresh look at the raw feast.

If all the right things are in place, a photographer will learn from the world as much as from her own growing skill at finding pictures. He or she will learn to prefer pictures that present the world on something like its own terms (what a fantastic thing to propose, a suggestion that flies in the face of hundreds of years of philosophical opinion: more on that soon enough), as much as those terms can be deciphered. And some will be more patient, more watchful, more able to decipher those terms than others—even than those *others* who may be more talented at recognizing or concocting arresting visual arrangements.

8. Evans, “The Reappearance of Photography,” 126.

Those who are most talented this way face a greater challenge, and greater temptations. Theodorus (in conversation with Socrates in the Platonic dialog *Theaetetus*) suggests that it is not the very brightest who are best at philosophy. The quickest rush ahead too fast (“led about like boats without ballast”).⁹ The title character in *Meno* relies too much on memory. Neither is good at starting fresh and going through arguments step by step. Like quiz kids or forceful debaters, they remember too quickly how a similar earlier argument went, and hurry ahead to the next step.

Photographers with the most fertile visual imaginations may have to learn to get out of their own way, to stop short-circuiting the dialectic by jumping ahead to a conclusion too easily won. They may arrive at the highest visual perfection of their art too quickly, without the learning that can take place during repeated attempts.

Since about 1975, a high-dollar market for photographs has existed. In it, the rules of the old market for works of art apply: color sells for more than black and white; larger costs more than smaller; rarer brings a better price. So talented photographers began to work in color, make large prints, and print in limited, numbered editions. And at precisely this point in its history, photography began to change from what most workers thought it had been into something else—a *something* which could still be called photography (because of the tools and

9. Plato, *Theaetetus* 144 A–B.

materials used), but a *something* which had lost interest in the unique connection between *inside* and *outside* so charming to Talbot. The door leading back to ancient epistemology closed. A thing new (and, to many, exciting) appeared. But another thing—a thing older, and thought by many to be worn out—was, if not lost altogether, then eclipsed as many of the most talented younger workers took up the newer, more fashionable, photographic practices.

Another rule of the market is that price at auction determines importance—what we see in museums and handsomely produced catalogs today, and what important critics will write about and students of art history will study tomorrow. Today, we believe that the best artists get the highest prices. If high prices happen early in a career, the artist gets rich. As a character invented by Scott Fitzgerald famously put it, the rich are different from you and me. Yes: like the very brightest, they are less likely to engage in lengthy, laborious, uncontrollable, and humbling dialectic. Fame and its advantages can distract from such unglamorous work. The dialectic-like relationship between photographer and subject-world is fragile, difficult to sustain.

If all the right things are in place. If this process continues without distraction. The dialectic-like process I have tried to describe briefly has in fact happened: the quarter-century investigation of old Paris by Eugène Atget comes to mind. He began by making documents for artists, photographing hundreds of door knockers, stair rails,

urns, and other architectural details. As the years passed he made streetscapes and explored the parks and palaces of the *ancien régime*, in many instances returning to the same locations again and again. The pictures do not change greatly in their visual appearance, but as the years pass they become deeper, richer, more charged with meaning, and more suggestive of strong emotion. Some of this suggested emotion must certainly come from increasing age—a contribution from *inside*—but as certainly his continued immersion in the *outside*—in the things and places he seems to have loved—must have led him to an increased understanding of their value, their quality, and their importance.

Many early pictures (his multiple views of individual urns at Versailles, usually dated 1905–1906, for example) present their subjects with great force: figures rendered in relief on the urns enact the myths they represent, frozen forever (like the figures on Keats's urn) in mid-stride and mid-swoon, oblivious both to the scrawled graffiti of a later age and to the close attention of an impolite stranger who thrusts his viewing lens so close to their revels, peering at them repeatedly, from several points of view. The views are too carefully made, too numerous: clearly, the photographer is finding some content, and getting some pleasure, apart from his success at piling up marketable documents.

By 1920, his camera is often much farther back. Trees appear not as compilations of individual leaves, but as great dark masses encroaching upon the bright sky in

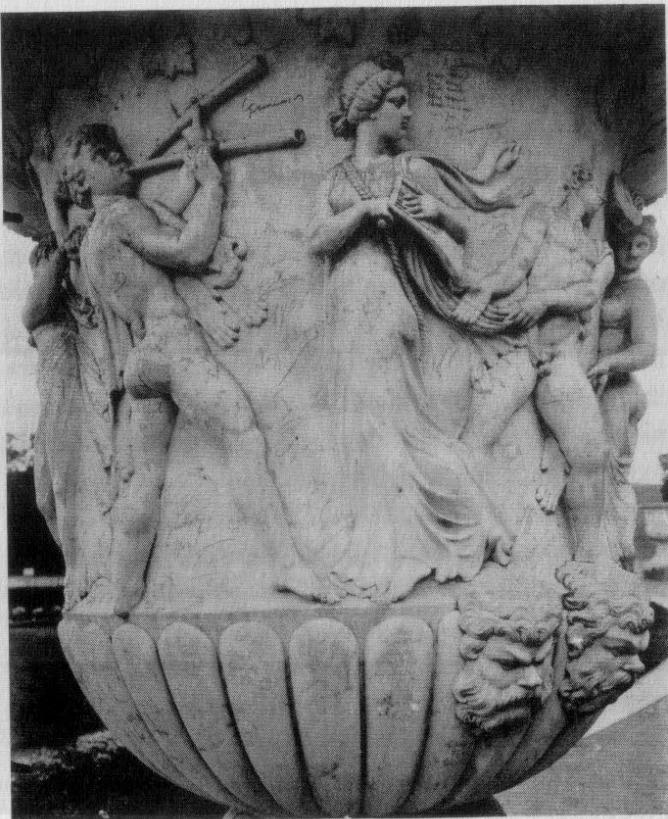


FIGURE 1.1
Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, *Versailles, Vase (Detail)*, 1906, albumen print, Gift of Mrs. Everett Kovler, 1963.1028. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. Used by permission.

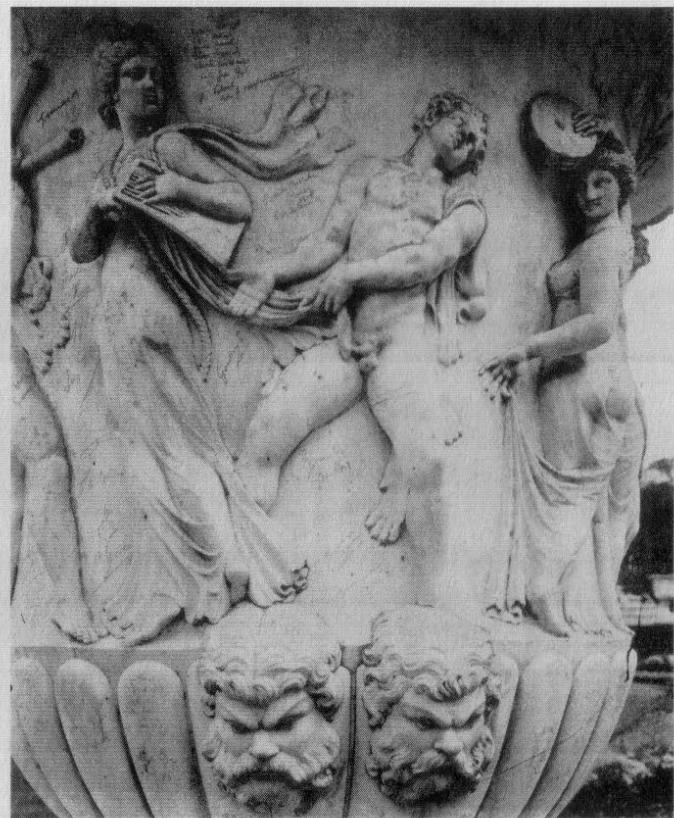


FIGURE 1.2
Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, *Versailles, Vase (Detail)*, 1901-1926, albumen print, Gift of Mrs. Everett Kovler, 1963.1050. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. Used by permission.

the upper parts of the pictures, almost like dark storm clouds. Below, a circumscribed pool—a kind of miniature inland sea, bright with reflected skylight—often contends with dark-toned grass or shadow, so that the little world in the bottom part of the pictures mirrors the tonal drama of the top. In between, architecture and sculpture occupy a middle band.

The photographer was especially drawn to the park of the Château de Saint-Cloud, a few miles west of Paris, and in particular to one of its landscaped pools. On opposite sides of a walk approaching this pool, two stone figures strike heroic poses: one, a noble male figure, pauses in mid-stride with head turned in expectation; the other, a tiny huntress, she and her hound locked forever in anticipation of approaching quarry, draws an arrow from her quiver. Other figures, progressively tinier as they recede into the distance along the approaching walk, stand with these two in arrested attitudes, fleeting gestures as fugitive as any caught by street photographers. This suspended tableau attracted Atget's notice more than once, and he photographed it from more than one angle.

It is as if the aging photographer, having studied texture and close detail for so long, is now consistently able to take in longer views with the same degree of mastery. And this mastery lies primarily not in control, though by the 1920s his understanding of how things and light would appear in a picture is very great. These things are by now second nature to him; it is in his *receptivity*, and



FIGURE 1.3
Eugène Atget, *Le parc de Saint-Cloud*, 1916–1919. © Bibliothèque nationale de France. Used by permission.

not in his willful ability to wrest an effective picture from a complicated or intractable scene, that his mastery lies. His great experience of looking at the same things for so long has combined in a deep way with the age he has attained, age resulting from a long life whose main energies were spent in this very looking. The contemplation of Old Paris has made him old in Paris, and his understandings of both these states of affairs—the rich, complex, splendid city, and what Wordsworth called *the unimaginable touch of time*—flow together, blending their multiple streams of force into the power of these late pictures.

Garry Winogrand comes to mind as well. If, as I have suggested, great visual talent can be a challenge for a photographer who would learn from his subject, no photographer of recent times was more challenged in this way than Winogrand, whose ability to recognize a provocative arrangement of shapes in a frame was matched in degree only by the brevity of the time it took him to do so. He walked the streets in his daily rounds accompanied not only by this awesome talent, but also by his personal entourage of manic demons. He had a lot going on *inside*, but no one who looks thoughtfully at a large number of the pictures he made on city streets will fail to recognize the deep human content he was able to see *outside*, on those streets. As a lecturer, he avoided that aspect of his work altogether, often saying he photographed in order to see what things look like in photographs. He pretended to be merely an expert technician at work on subject matter of use to him.

Winogrand (d. 1984) took nearly a million pictures, including thousands he never saw (his photographic estate included hundreds of rolls of exposed but undeveloped 35-millimeter film). Many of these pictures look like stunts, successful attempts to freeze a number of moving and shape-changing figures at the vanishingly brief instant when all these positions and shapes added up to a coherent visual pattern within his viewfinder's frame. Like the skill of circus jugglers who continue to add more balls, more rings, more daggers, more flaming batons, an increasing level of virtuosity eventually is of interest in itself. It is exhilarating to see someone do what no one else can do, however pointless the stunt.

But very many others of his pictures take this skill only as a means to look at something truly worth seeing, something only someone who had learned from the street (or at least from looking at people) might bother to try to see. With Winogrand, the actual time he accumulated over years of looking at the same or similar subjects may matter less than the uncanny degree of close attention he paid to what he saw, even the first time he saw it. As early as 1960 Winogrand was regularly photographing collections of people whose attitudes and connections to each other prompt thinking that goes way beyond admiration of his visual skills and hair-trigger timing.

Winogrand spent a lot of time in Central Park, and he often visited the zoo there, photographing not only the animals but also the people watching them. One of these pictures (from the early 1960s) has a joke on its

surface. It shows a random assortment of people lined up against the viewing rail surrounding the seal pool, but none of them is paying much attention to the seals. The picture is a vertical one (less common than horizontals, in Winogrand's work), and the bottom part of the frame shows a group of seals swimming energetically toward the people arranged along the rail. The animals are watching the people: that's the joke. My account so far of this picture might fit any of the scores of pictures published over the years on the last page of each issue of *Life* magazine. It's funny, and you get the joke at first glance.

But this picture offers an impressive level of detail, and the detail is spread all around the frame of the picture. Winogrand's framing is careful to acknowledge the importance of both groups: neither group is centered left to right at the expense of the other: the humans are a little off-center to the viewer's right in order to avoid forcing the pod of seals uncomfortably far to the left.

If, after getting the joke, a viewer lingers to focus on the upper group—the four anonymous visitors lined up at the rail—that viewer will find much to look at and think about. The clarity of description invites the viewer to study what might be attracting the attention of the seals.

The dress of these four suggests a middle position in society, neither put-upon outcasts nor upper-crust: these are ordinary folks at the zoo. The central couple seems to offer the most, at—not first, but *second* glance (first glance disclosed the joke). A girl endures the romantic attentions of her companion, but her thoughts seem elsewhere. She



FIGURE 1.4
Garry Winogrand, *Central Park Zoo, New York City, ca. 1963*. © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. Used by permission.

looks away, perhaps in distraction, perhaps in the general direction of the pool. Her cute pout, her carefully massed hair and makeup—one visible thumbnail flashes white out of the shadowed mass of her curled-up body—suggest that a Narcissus-like glance down at her own reflection would not be out of order. She is physically part of a circumstantial couple, but withdrawn, her body curled up like a fetus (or a brooding figure by Michelangelo), her facial expression distracted and distant.

Her escort stands in tense solicitousness, stiffly against her curled mass. His face registers concern, as if he wanted more from her than he was getting—a return of his kiss at least; his smooth grooming and pretty-boy face suggest he thinks he has reason to expect more. It would not be completely out of character for him to interrupt his amorous labors for a glance down at the pool. These two attractive young people are in close conjunction, but disconnected, a tight mass of low-key romantic tension in the picture's middle.

A sort of subplot, or overtone, flanks the couple on either side, each side character presenting an imperfect, incomplete reflection of some aspects of the central pair. The man is not a likely candidate for membership in a romantic couple; his heavy glasses, knee-length coat, and buttoned-up collar might be more stylish today than in 1960, when the nerd look was not thought to be cool. He stands awkwardly at the rail, and his face suggests an attitude not easily described by one or two words. He looks a little puzzled, a bit uncomfortable, possibly as a result of

his own inner thoughts as much as of what he sees with his corrected eyes. In a well-known picture by Henri Cartier-Bresson of the last British governor-general taken at the exact instant of Indian independence, Lord Mountbatten's open mouth and averted gaze read as an aberration, a change from a customary attitude of authority. This man's puzzled discomfiture reads as what Hawthorne termed *the settled temper of a life*.

The other flanking figure is a woman alone. She is weeping, and drying her face with the heel of her hand in a rough, indelicate gesture suggesting distraction, even desperation. One leg is bent at the knee, and one hand grasps the rail as if for support. She has come out into a place of public amusement and stands at the viewing rail, weeping out some private sorrow.

Winogrand could be said (as the young Stendhal aspired) to be "a student of the human heart." He is a psychologist, but one who (like Shakespeare and Molière, Stendhal's models) works from observation and instinct rather than theory and analysis. His photograph presents a three-ring circus, but with precise observation and exquisite timing that take it far beyond the "human interest" pictures of the picture magazines, and equally far beyond the stunt of organizing for organization's sake: the picture presents three variations on what writers since Balzac have called the human comedy. *Normal*, in this picture, is midlevel dysfunction, some missing of the boat, some falling off from the ideal standard. The dys-, the missing, the falling off are not exaggerated or hyped:

they are just *there*, as they are in the lives of most of the people we know. The picture shows neither freakishness nor operatic drama. It shows humanity, *comic* in the classic sense.¹⁰

The seals who swim up to watch not only make the joke, but also act as foils to play against this civilized human world, like the fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who has the great line: What fools these mortals be. They appear as natural intelligences who get it more nearly right than anyone else in the picture. Animals behaving as intelligently as (more intelligently than?) humans: that observation might prompt a whole separate line of thinking.

Organization of the frame, the visual equivalent of rhetoric, is here used to set the stage. The astonishing level of skill needed to see and arrest so many telling things at the same time almost hides its hand: it prepares the scene rather than becoming the main act. The scene prepared is not a hard surface, impervious to penetration, designed to invite admiration but discourage inquiry. The artist acts decisively to create a structure that invites the viewer in, and leaves room for thinking. The muscular frame, the skillful organization, the perfect timing are all preliminary, serving only to launch the inquiry, to propel thinking above the actual things shown and

10. That is, in the sense that the characters shown are superior to us neither in station nor in action. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), or one of his main sources, Aristotle, *Poetics*.

toward the insights prompted by a contemplation of these things, in the state we find them in at the instant we are shown them.

There are of course many other examples from the past of what I am calling a dialectic-like interaction between photographer and subject. I think it is happening still: this process, this way of working, has no more been somehow "used up" than the practice of representational drawing and painting was "used up" by the end of the nineteenth century.

Consider a relatively recent picture, one taken by Marcia Due (b. 1947) in the late 1990s. It is a landscape detail made in Dutchess County, New York. When she made this picture, Due had been photographing agricultural landscapes in this region regularly for more than twenty years. This view does not look much like the pictures she took at the outset, which tended to be from farther off and to show some more easily nameable aspect of agriculture's use of land. At first glance this picture shows a mass of detail gathered at the center, which becomes more airy and lighter in tone nearer its margins.

The actual things shown are not readily nameable, and the transition from *thing* (rising above the water's surface) to *reflection* (image on the water's surface) is not immediately apparent: the seeing of this view is a little playful, challenging the viewer (in a gentle way) to look more closely. Also challenging—engaging, actually—is the overall form of the picture, which suggests exuberant expansion, as if it were a picture of a bouquet rather than



FIGURE 1.5
Marcia Due, *untitled* (agricultural landscape, Dutchess County, New York), late 1990s. © Marcia L. Due. Used by permission.

a farm scene. This lively, unexpected form (like all the detail visible in the Winogrand picture) attracts the viewer's attention, and encourages him to look.

As he looks, the viewer will find more and more things that happen to sit in happy relationship to one another: the sticks in the left foreground, for example, attract our notice, but the visual emphasis they create is answered (or "balanced") by the farther off (and much smaller) sticks or poles on the right. The difference in their sizes emphasizes the physical dimension of the deep space this view comprehends.

But what else does the view comprehend, other than deep space, subtle visual organization, and a pleasing, unexpected overall form? Looking at the scene (which this picture articulates so nicely) will lead a thoughtful and patient viewer to wonder what this little body of water is, how it came to be. The general condition and topography of the visible landscape suggests the land has been *worked*: a pile of loose earth on the left side of the picture supports this hypothesis. Is the tiny (but in razor-sharp focus) vehicle just beyond that pile the earth-moving machinery responsible? A closer look shows it to be a school bus.

Is a school bus in a farm field like an umbrella or a sewing machine on a dissecting table? In fact, school buses are not so unusual to find in upstate New York farm fields. After their useful lives on the road they are still serviceable as enclosed shelters. They are cheap to acquire, require no time and effort to construct, and don't have to be trucked to the location where they are

needed. On a farm, incongruent appearance matters less than utility, cheapness, and ease of installation.

This stretch of land was certainly cleared, and probably plowed and harvested, its surface and water-shedding properties altered by its farm use. The occasional dip in the land's surface will collect water, just as a mature tree that has somehow survived in the middle of a field will alter that field's plowing and planting pattern (subject of several earlier pictures by Due).

The fact that the two poles in the left foreground are actually *fence* poles (the thin fence wire is in focus as clearly as the school bus in the far background) adds another layer. The fence suggests the presence of livestock: the land may have been grazed, as well, and the pond may have been excavated as a watering tank. Or the farmer may have enlisted an accidental depression for this use. The size of the saplings suggests how long such departures from ideal geometry, such improvisations, will survive, on a working farm, without willful remediation. Aesthetics—the creation and appreciation of beauty—is an interesting, provisional component of the garden-world of this picture, which is not the formal garden-world of Le Nôtre.¹¹ Here, no preconceived rules of design (or geometry) come into play in either subject or picture.

11. André Le Nôtre (1613–1700), the landscape architect and gardener responsible for the gardens at Louis XIV's Versailles (and also for the park at Château de Saint-Cloud).

These observations appear gradually to the viewer who continues to look at the picture and think about what she is seeing. The picture presents no strident, overriding message, no complaint or recommendation about agriculture, land conservation, or anything else. Its delicate form holds many things up—in balance, so to speak—for the viewer to consider for as long as the picture holds her interest, and as far as her understanding, general awareness, and associative ability can take her. Some viewers like to be told right away what to think, so they can turn the page and get on. Others like to linger. What this picture has to offer appeals to the latter group.

This picture would not likely have been the first picture the photographer made of this general subject. One of the causes leading to its making was sustained, thoughtful looking not only at the subject itself, the farm landscape of the eastern part of the mid-Hudson Valley, but also at the pictures she was getting from that subject. Through seeing how things look in pictures, a photographer comes to understand not only *how a thing means*, when its image becomes part of a picture, but also *what* that thing means, in the context of the world in which it is shown.

Photographers who care only about information might be called journalistic; their pictures need captions, and the captions often do the same work as the pictures, though with less visual impact, the way museum labels for “difficult” artworks do. Photographers who care only about how the picture looks might be called pictorialist;

their pictures need captions no more than a symphony needs a “program,” or story the music can be thought to tell (a storm, the Resurrection, etc.). The richest, most fully realized photography is made by those who work somewhere in the middle.

Working in the middle involves studying the subject matter (as I have suggested Atget studied Paris), but also studying, or at least respecting and valuing, the way things look in photographs. One of the things displayed by the landscape detail we are considering—one of the things it holds up in balance, for the viewer to consider—is a sophisticated understanding of how photographs work. Let me imagine, for a moment, some of the considerations that *might* have come into play as a sophisticated photographer came to make this picture. (*Might*: I am here only speculating on possible pathways, processes which, even if they occurred, were almost certainly not fully or even partially present in the consciousness of the actual photographer who took the picture.)

The recognition that a pond or pool might provide a suitable occasion for a picture could come from a number of sources. About the time this picture was made, a picture of a moonlit pool by Edward Steichen brought some then-incredible (but long since surpassed) record price for a photograph at auction: it was in the news. T. H. O’Sullivan (a nineteenth-century survey photographer) made a striking, memorable (and famous) stark picture of a lake in the desert, a picture known to most photographers who worked with large cameras about the time this

picture was made. Atget often included bodies of water in his pictures, and Walker Evans, after circling a house that interested him in 1973, photographing it repeatedly with a hand-held camera, returned to his car and announced in mock triumph to his assistant: “Well, I guess I got *that* one, including the obvious puddle shot.”

So, for a sophisticated photographer surveying a field of interest in the late 1990s, a body of water might have rung a bell of possibility. And, in approaching this body of water, a photographer *might* find that ideas about picture structure would come into play: *shoot it head-on* might be a first thought for some photographers.

But shooting it head-on suggests the obvious significance of some discrete thing to be shown, something that would be self-evident in a clear, straightforward rendering (as in an evidence photograph taken at a crime scene). What if the *subject* is not a single, obviously significant thing but rather (as in the picture we are considering) a nexus of delicate interrelationships and connections? Then maybe a more playful, less straightforward approach might yield richer results. *Tell the truth but tell it slant*, wrote Emily Dickinson. The astronomer husband of Emily’s brother’s mistress would have known that looking directly at a faint object is not the best way to see it, because the center of the retina is not the part most sensitive to light: a better technique is called *averted vision*, looking a little off to the side.

So a visual strategy involving indirection might come into play. Exaggerated perspective and the conflation of

things near and far might appear as fruitful possibilities, as might an openness to the slight difficulty of distinguishing object from reflection in black-and-white two-dimensional pictures. The former technique appears in photographs by Atget; both appear again and again in photographs by Lee Friedlander.

All these and many more possible pictorial strategies might present themselves to a sophisticated photographer as she carried her 40-pound camera through the fields where that pond had formed. But running beneath all this—and *coming before it*, in the photographer's attention—would be the physical experience of walking in that particular field, and of the specific light and weather; and also the memory and experience of walking this and similar fields many, many times before. Pictorial considerations, though likely in play, would be down deep, submerged beneath the immediate physical demands of the moment. Also down deep—but still available on some level of memory or association—would be the memory and experience of developing, printing, washing, flattening, spotting, filing—and *looking again and again* at—the hundreds of pictures of similar subjects she made during the preceding decades.

Our popular art criticism extols the *original*; our art markets place a higher price on the *unique*. At the moment this picture was made, the photographer was far, far into a long, continuous conversation with her subject, and also in touch with the memories and experiences of her own pictures, and of pictures made by others.

Drawing on these rich substrates, she would—if it was a good day—see possibilities leading to a successful picture no one else would likely have recognized. Working at this pitch involves drawing on everything she might know about how a subject of interest distills itself into a photograph that is neither *only a statement of simple fact* nor *only a well-formed picture*. The picture she got is both, with the qualification that the fact involved is not simple.

An attentive reader will have noticed that I have long ago abandoned my promise of abrupt brevity. But I have done so in the interest of truth, in the interest of fidelity to things as they are. And truth requires that I make one more point about the landscape detail we have been considering. In imagining the thinking that *might* have gone into the making of this picture I named a number of photographers whose examples may have suggested possible pictorial strategies to use in dealing with the complex subject matter this picture addresses. In fact my use of these names is a sort of shorthand strategy, like choosing a familiar brand when shopping in a hurry rather than taking the time to read every word of every label of every product of the kind offered for sale.

In fact it is *not* the personal example of any one famous photographer (*a strong brand*, as a marketer might say) which comes into play when a photographer is working at this level, at what I am arguing is her best. It is not the personal achievement of a single Great but rather the *analytical principles*, both intellectual and pictorial, contributed by many Greats to photographic discourse that

come into play for a serious photographer, one at least as aware and respectful of his subject as he is aware of his own performance as an artist.

Principles and personalities: what's the difference? the reader may be thinking. Aren't you just saying that the idea comes at least in part from other art? Brevity be damned. We may need another example, a contrasting one, to demonstrate the difference between the dancer and the dance.

In discussing the landscape detail I identified strategies and linked them to the names of well-known photographers. Due's picture does not quote, nor drop a hint about an obvious model. No single influence stands out above all others. The making of the picture enlists a number of strategies we might think of as having been recognized and melded into a sort of logic of picture-making. The photographer has *assimilated* these principles, and draws on that assimilated logic in making a work she needs to make *for other reasons*: not for reasons having to do with establishing her abilities and position as an artist, but for reasons having to do with understanding her subject.

Logic can be understood as different from style. Logic is *a priori*: fundamental and unchanging, having genuine being before (*prior* to) strategies having to do with making this picture arise. Style is contingent: shifting, dependent upon what might be useful right now, upon changing notions of taste, *of the moment*. The most substantial photographers draw upon (and assimilate) logic into their pictures when they are doing their most

solid work, the work that connects most effectively with an urgent subject. Lesser photographers, and great photographers when they are not at their best, or not in front of a subject that engages them deeply, play with style.

Consider one photograph by Robert Frank, whose body of work is firmly established as one of the great achievements of mid-twentieth-century photography. In his book *The Americans* (1958), Frank published a picture of a covered car parked in front of a bungalow framed by two palm trees (*Covered Car—Long Beach, California*, the 33rd plate in the 1969 expanded edition of that work). The picture makes its own statement, is about its own place and time. But in doing so, it plays off—it makes an obvious reference to—a specific photograph by another photographer. Frank's picture, taken in 1955, can be seen as an update of Walker Evans's photograph usually titled *Westchester, New York, Farmhouse, 1931*, published in his book *American Photographs* (1938) as Plate II, 8.

Frank's picture (like Evans's) shows a car, a house in a distinctive architectural style, and trees. What is at work in this picture is not some logic of combination taken not only from the Evans picture, but also from other, similar pictures. In fact the perspective of Frank's picture and the framing used to relate its principal elements to each other are quite different from what we see in Evans's view. Evans's picture (of which he printed more than one version, each version seen or cropped slightly differently) is taken from so great a distance that its perspective approaches the orthogonal perspective of architectural

This space was intended to present a photograph by Robert Frank showing a covered car parked in front of a southern California bungalow flanked by palm trees (*Covered Car—Long Beach, California*, the 33rd plate in the 1969 edition of *The Americans*).

A message delivered to the author by a representative of Mr. Frank reads as follows:

"After reviewing your request, I regret to inform you that Mr. Frank did not grant permission to use his work in your upcoming publication. It is the artist's preference that his works not be used as comparative images."

FIGURE 1.6



FIGURE 1.7
Walker Evans, *Westchester, New York, Farmhouse, 1931 (variant)*. From a trimmed, mounted print signed by Evans in 1971. © Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Used by permission.

elevations: lines parallel in the architect's plans (had there been any) are parallel in Evans's picture of the house. Frank's picture is snapped (though with great sureness) with a normal lens, as if from where he happened to be standing. The camera is pointed up slightly, to include more of the palm trees, so the lines defining the corners of the house façade (and the trunks of the palm trees) are not parallel, but convergent. The more recent picture does not distill the earlier picture's achievement into principles, and then apply those principles; rather, it references the earlier achievement itself as a personal event that happened once, at an earlier time. It *references this achievement*—and this is to be contrasted with *assimilates principles discernible in this and other sources*—as something Frank uses, perhaps needs. A good part of the picture's energy derives from Robert "talking" to Walker, echoing and updating the earlier picture, and raising the ante of the conversation by using a more fluid, flashier frame.

Like all serious works of art, this picture offers more than one aspect, and the attitude toward the earlier work (and worker) it suggests is not a single or simple one.¹² Respect may well be one component part of that attitude. But something else is at work as well: at least part of the picture's energy goes into a kind of one-upmanship. The covered car is slick, smooth; the California house is slick,

12. For a fuller discussion of the connection between these two artists, see Tod Papageorge, *Walker Evans and Robert Frank: An Essay on Influence*, first published 1981 and reprinted in *Core Curriculum* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2011).

smooth; the frame is gray, smooth; palm trees (warm climate, lots of sunshine, easy living) preside. Not like the clunky black car, all angles and stick-like lines under a stick-like wintry tree, hard black lines contrasting with the white of the foursquare frame house. Parson Weems's carriage in front of his Protestant parsonage. We see the cool fifties blowing off the earnest thirties. As one later critic would put it, it is one *moral universe* contemplating another: history's page has turned, man.

Frank addresses Evans the way a second jazz musician might give a clever answer to a first who has introduced an intricate riff. As Harold Bloom¹³ might have described it, Frank is a Strong Poet contending with a precursor Strong Poet. Such contention is personal: it takes us away from the realm of *logic*, the solid a priori upon which dialectic can build, and into the realm of *personality*, celebrity, fame: a house of cards built upon the sand.¹⁴ In this realm—to repeat, only one of the realms a picture like this takes us to—it is performance that matters, and not truth.

13. Author of *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), among many other works touching on the subject of poetic influence.

14. Though this essay does not deal with the notion, it is important to understand that an artist who is a genius may build a house of cards which will not only stand, but also affect the way other structures are built in the future. It is also important to understand, however, that there are many more famous personalities than there are geniuses.