### I Just Want to Take Pictures

by Agata Zuzanna Mancini

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in fulfillment of the
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Master of Architecture

### Author's declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

#### **Abstract**

Life is to be lived, savoured and engaged. Photography gives us permission to do that – to stop and simply look at something. As we hurry on with our day, it says, "Wait - over there! Look at that! Look how great that is!"

If we stop to consider what we see, the looking may help restore our appreciation for the world around us.

Photography, at its beginning, struggled with category; was it science or art, or was it something else? Once named photography – writing with light – we could place the craft among familiar practices of inscription such as writing and drawing. Unlike drawing and other forms of representation, however, as a trace photography constructs a direct and necessary relationship with its referent (its ostensible subject, if you will), creating a new set of questions and experiences. This condition is key to photography's power, and the reason photography is a principle tool in modern-day story telling, and the culture of information.

Why do we take pictures? What is it about photographs that intrigues and seduces us? What does photography have to offer architecture?

Each time we take a picture we create a duplicate of experience, a duplicate that will exist unchanged. We create a second stream of existence for ourselves and immortalize a part of us. By doing so, we also give ourselves the opportunity and permission to return to that moment, and all that we associate with it, and to experience it again.

The photographs we take and the photographs we see influence our experience. Photographic life is not found within the chaos of the world. It resides in fragments, millions of them, framed, cut off from any context. These pictures present us with evidence of moments, places and events. With them we can navigate the world in silence. And while the camera cannot be denied its objectivity, each photographer has a unique position, a developed opinion, and

a personal practice; each photographer chooses what to show, and what to deny. Photographers select evidence to share with the world; as viewers we find our own meanings to the photographs that we see. We see texture, pattern, and forms created in light and shadow. We see a rhythm and episode and form we previously overlooked. When a photograph is successful, when there is some coincidence in the common relationship between photographer and viewer, via the photograph, that photograph becomes a site of experience.

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For Tony Mancini Sr.

# **Table of Contents**

List of Plates				
A Question of Category				
Introduction	1			
Experience	11			
Interpretation	43			
Conclusion	67			
Photo Essay One: The Valley	99			
Photo Essay Two: The Village				
Photo Essay Three: Looking In				
Endnotes				
References	246			

_Prol	ogue	
#	fig.	
3	1.1	Hyeres, France, 1932
		Photograph: Henri Cartier-Bresson   Source: http://
		www.artnet.com/artwork/425520561/119642/henri-
		cartier-bresson-hyeres-france.html
4	1.2	Eurana Park, Weatherly Pennsylvania, 1982
		Photograph: Judth Joy Ross   Source: Why People
		Photograph. New York: Aperture, 1994.
9	1.3	Photographer Unknown, Krakow, 1989
_		
	erience	
13	1.4	Plate: Auschwitz I, November 2006
14	1.5	Birkenau, Digital Print, A. Mancini
19	1.7	Illustration
		Photograph: Unknown   Source: http://graphics8.
		nytimes.com/images/2009/06/30/agazine/30moral/
		neda.jpg
19	1.8	Protest
		Photograph: Unknown   Source: http://
		sergiopetronabaviera.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/
		neda_agha_soltan_03a.jpg
21	1.6	Napalm victim Kim Phúc, 8 June 1972, Nick Ut.
		Photograph: Nick Ut   Source: http://news.bbc.
		co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4517597.stm
25	1.9	Krakow, 1987
		Photograph: Magdalena Woszczyna
34	1.10	Seagram Building, Ezra Stoller
		Photograph: Ezra Stoller   Source: http://www.
		cdnarchitect.com/issues/ISarticle.asp?aid=1000115967
35	1.11	National Farmer's Bank, John Szarkowski

		rnotograph. John Szarkowski   Source. John
		Szarkowski: Photographs. New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005.
36	1.12	Whitney Museum,
		Photograph: Ezra Stoller   Source: http://www.artnet.
		com/artwork/425081236/117084/whitney-museum-
		new-york-city.html
37	1.13	Carson Pririe Scott
		Photograph: John Szarkowski   Source: John
		Szarkowski: Photographs. New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005.
38	1.14	6th Ave.
		Photograph: Ezra Stoller   Source: http://www.
		danzigerprojects.com/artists/ezra-stoller/
39	1.15	Le Salle Street
		Photograph: John Szarkowski   Source: John
		Szarkowski: Photographs. New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005.
40	1.16	Pantheon Oculus, Rome, Italy, September 2006
_Interp	oretatio	n
44	2.1	Rain, Steam, Speed,
		Artist: J.M.W. Turner   Source: http://ccsun.nchu.edu.
		tw/~intergrams/intergrams/001/001-lee.htm
51	2.2	Untitled from "Pittsburgh"
		Photo: W. Eugene Smith   Source: http://
		masters-of-photography.com/S/smith/smith_
		pittsburgh_goggles_full.html
51	2.3	Untitled from "Pittsburgh"
		Photo: W. Eugene Smith   Source: http://
		masters-of-photography.com/S/smith/smith_
		pittsburgh_steel_full.html
51	2.4	US Steel Pittsburgh, 1955
		Photo: W. Eugene Smith   Source: http://www.
		bbc.co.uk/photography/genius/gallery/smith.
		1 0 1 7 0 70
		shtml

Photograph: John Szarkowski | Source: John

49	2.5	Untitled from "Pittsburgh"
		Photo: W. Eugene Smith   Source: http://
		masters-of-photography.com/S/smith/smith_
		pittsburgh_factory_full.html
50	2.6	Grain Elevators and Freight Car, c. 1940
		Photograph: John Vachon   Source: The Photographer's
		Eye, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966
51	2.7	New York, 1917
		Photograph: Paul Strand   Source: http://graphia.files.
		wordpress.com/2008/02/paul-strand-new-
		york-1917-250184.jpg
54	2.8	Minehead
		Photograph: Bernd & Hilla Becher   Source: http://
		www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/
		tatepapers/04spring/images/ill_stimson/fig1.jpg
57	2.9	Minehead Series
		Photograph: Bernd & Hilla Becher   Source: http://
		www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/
		tatepapers/04spring/images/ill_stimson/fig1.jpg
61	2.10	New York, c. 1942
		Photograph: Helen Levitt   Source: http://masters-of-
		photography.com/L/levitt/levitt_concerned_full.html
61	2.11	New York, c. 1945
		Photograph: Helen Levitt   Source: http://masters-of-
		photography.com/L/levitt/levitt_new_york_full.html
61	2.12	New York, c. 1940
		Photograph: Helen Levitt   Source: http://masters-of-
		photography.com/L/levitt/levitt_4boys_full.html
61	2.13	Untitled, New York, 1942
		Photograph: Helen Levitt   Source: http://masters-of-
		photography.com/L/levitt/levitt_hydrant_full.html
62	2.14	Walker Evans

64	2.15	Marchand abat-jours, 1899-1900
		Photographer: Eugene Atget   Source: hhttp://www.
		masters-of-photography.com/A/atget/atget_
		lampshade_full.html
64	2.16	Prostitute, Paris, 1920s
		Photographer: Eugene Atget   Source: http://www.
		masters-of-photography.com/A/atget/atget_
		prostitute_full.html
64	2.17	Ragpicker, 1899-1900
		Photographer: Eugene Atget   Source: http://www.
		asters-of-photography.com/A/atget/atget_
		ragpicker_full.html
64	2.18	Untitled from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"
		Photographer: Walker Evans   Source: Let Us Now
		Praise Famous Men. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,
		1939.
64	2.19	Untitled from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"
		Photographer: Walker Evans   Source: Let Us Now
		Praise Famous Men. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,
		1939.
64	2.20	Untitled from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"
		Photographer: Walker Evans   Source: Let Us Now
		Praise Famous Men. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,
		1939.
0		
_	clusion	
69 <b>5</b> 0	3.1	Plate: Series 2, Untitled 3 (Detail)
78	3.2	Trial Composition
80	3.3	Darkroom Test 1

81

82

84

3.4

3.5

3.6

Darkroom Test 2

Darkroom Test 3

Darkroom Test 4

```
85
       3.7
               Darkroom Test 5
86
       3.8
               Darkroom Test 6
87
       3.9
               Darkroom Test 7
88
       3.10
               Darkroom Test 8
               Darkroom Test 9
91
       3.11
93
               Plate: Final Composition
       3.12
94
       3.13
               Plate: Untitled, 2002, Gregory Crewdson
```

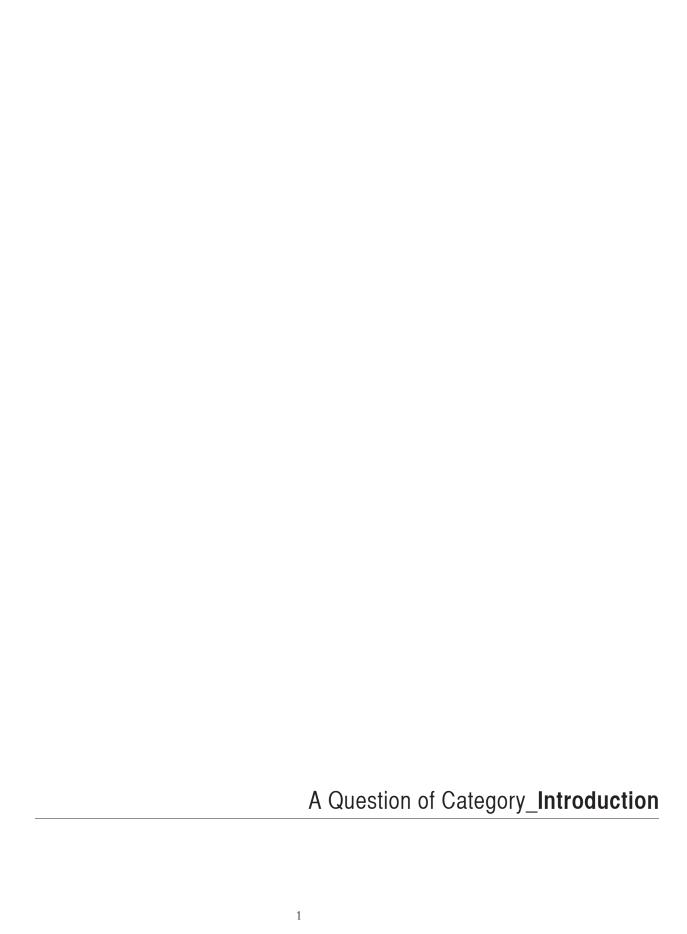
#### \_Photo Essay One | The Valley (Plates)

101	Series 1, Untitled 1   The Grand River, April 2009
103	Series 1, Untitled 2   The Grand River, April 2009
105	Series 1, Untitled 3   The Grand River, April 2009
107	Series 1, Untitled 4   The Grand River, April 2009
108 - 109	Series 1   The Grand River, April 2009
111	Series 2, Untitled 1   The Grand River, April 2009
113	Series 2, Untitled 1   The Grand River, April 2009
115	Series 2, Untitled 1   The Grand River, April 2009
117	Series 2   The Grand River, April 2009
119	Series 3, Untitled 1   Galt Train Bridge, April 2009
121	Series 3, Untitled 2   Galt Train Bridge, April 2009
123	Series 3, Untitled 3   Galt Train Bridge, April 2009
125	Series 3   Galt Train Bridge, April 2009
127	Series 4, Untitled 1   The Grand River, Dec. 2008
129	Series 4, Untitled 2   The Grand River, Dec. 2008
131	Series 4, Untitled 3   The Grand River, Dec. 2008
133	Series 4, Untitled 4   The Grand River, Dec. 2008
135	Series 4, Untitled 5   The Grand River, Dec. 2008
137	Series 4, Untitled 6   The Grand River, Dec. 2008
138 - 139	Series 4   The Grand River, Dec. 2008

141	Series 5, Untitled 1   The Grand River Dec. 2008
143	Series 5, Untitled 2   The Grand River Dec. 2008
145	Series 5   The Grand River Dec. 2008
	•
_Photo Essay	Two   The Village (Plates)
149	Untitled 1   George Street North, May 2009
151	Untitled 2   Lincoln Avenue, November 2008
153	Untitled 3   South Works, December 2009
155	Untitled 4   Grand Avenue North, April 2009
157	Untitled 5   Queen's Square, April 2009
169	Untitled 6   Blair Road, December 2008
161	Series 6, Untitled 1   West Galt, April 2009
163	Series 6, Untitled 2   Alley off Salisbury Avenue, May 2009
165	Series 6, Untitled 3   Wentworth Avenue, May 2009
167	Series 6, Untitled 4   Lincoln Park, November 2008
169	Series 6   West Galt, April-May 2009
171	Series 7, Untitled 1   Blair Road, April 2009
173	Series 7, Untitled 2   Blair Road, April 2009
175	Series 7, Untitled 3   Blair Road, April 2009
177	Series 7   Blair Road, April 2009
_Photo Essay	Three   Looking In (Plates)
181	Untitled 6   Main & Spruce Streets, April 2009
183	Untitled 7   Harris Street Rowhouses, April 2009
185	Untitled 8   Alley off Ainslie Street, April 2009
187	Untitled 9   Beverly Street, April 2009
189	Untitled 10   West Galt, March 2009
191	Untitled 11   West Galt, March 2009
193	Untitled 12   St Andrews St. December 2008

195	Untitled 13   Shade Street, March 2009
197	Untitled 14   Birch & Ainslie Streets, April 2009
199	Untitled 15   East Galt, November 2008
201	Untitled 16   Galt Train Station, January 2009
203	Series 8, Untitled 1   Warnock Street, February 2009
205	Series 8, Untitled 2   Warnock Street, February 2009
207	Series 8, Untitled 3   Warnock Street, February 2009
209	Series 8   Warnock Street, February 2009
211	Series 9, Untitled 1   East Galt, March 2009
213	Series 9, Untitled 2   East Galt, March 2009
215	Series 9, Untitled 3   East Galt, March 2009
217	Series 9   East Galt, March 2009
219	Series 10, Untitled 1   Kerr Street, March 2009
221	Series 10, Untitled 2   Kerr Street, March 2009
223	Series 10, Untitled 3   Wellington Street, June 2009
225	Series 10, Untitled 4   Roseview Avenue, June 2009
227	Series 10, Untitled 5   Cambridge Street, June 2009
229	Series 10, Untitled 6   Wellington Street, June 2009
230 -231	Series 10   East Galt, March & June 2009
233	Series 11, Untitled 1   Birch Street, May 2009
235	Series 11, Untitled 2   Glebe Street, December 2008
237	Series 11, Untitled 3   Water Street, December 2008
229	Series 11   Galt, 2008-2009
240 - 241	Series 12   Harris Street, April 2009

 $<sup>*\</sup> Photographs\ by\ author\ unless\ otherwise\ indicated.$ 



#### The first difficulty of photography is one of category.<sup>1</sup>

Is it art, in the tradition of two-dimensioned picturing of the world - like printing, painting, etching?<sup>2</sup> Or is it something else, - "magical emanations, not pictures at all but pieces of the world transferred by light to a plate – like shadows or footprints?"<sup>3</sup>

Depending on the type of chemical process that fixed the image on the glass plate, photography was initially called by many names: *Ambrotype, Panotype, Hyalotype*, as well as *Daguerrotype* and *Talbotype* after its two inventors.<sup>4</sup> It wasn't until James E. McClees, frustrated with the endless Babel of names, settled on *photography* that it developed an enduring name; it is, after all, just a way of writing with light.<sup>5</sup>



1.1

<sup>1.1</sup> Hyeres, France, 1932, Henri Cartier-Bresson



1.2

1.2

... a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a deathmask. While painting... is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation... a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.<sup>6</sup>

Susan Sontag

On Photography

1973

#### TRACE

Every time we take a picture, we capture emanations of light – reflections, emissions – and trap them in a box, our camera. This direct, physical relationship with the referent creates a condition unique to photography and is a key to its power.

Because of this relationship, ownership is still a point of contention. It may not be much of a concern when photographing the inanimate world, but it is an important matter when we photograph people. *The photograph as trace* plays a significant role in this discussion.

Other hand-made representations - paintings, drawings, prints - can never achieve the level of detail, objectivity and authority inherent in a photograph. For one thing, the creation of such approximations is dependent on the subjectivity of the artist, limited to what the artist can see, whereas the photograph has the benefit of two vantage points – that of the photographer and that of the camera.<sup>7</sup> The camera will trace all details of what is in front of it, whether the photographer is aware of them during that instant, or not.

When we take a photo, we freeze a moment in time that would have otherwise gone unrecorded, lost in the stream of real events and real experiences. The 'real' or existential subject of the photograph changes: the landscape evolves, buildings are torn down and people pass away. However, the trace of those things, fixed in the photograph, will remain unchanged forever. We have created a second stream of existence for everything within that image, and for ourselves, the viewers, who return to this place and moment by looking at the photograph.

Each photograph represents a non-repeatable event. Unlike a painting or drawing, which conflates the duration of its making with the inner subjective time of the maker's memory and mental processes, the making of the photographic image occurs at once... Each photograph bears a distinct and unique message.<sup>8</sup>

Alan Trachtenberg Reading American Photographs 1989

#### **EVENT**

Photographs not only record events outside of ourselves, photography is an event in itself. Each time we take a photo, we experience something non-repeatable. It is this moment and the recognition of it - the ability to see a photograph in the chaos of the world - that is the event.

With the advent of the photograph we are given permission to interfere, invade or ignore whatever is happening.<sup>9</sup> The photographer takes peremptory right to get in close and ask people to look a certain way or do certain things. He or she is the only one at a wedding that has permission to stand in the aisle as the bride is walking in, or to come in close on the dance floor while the newly weds enjoy their first dance. This permission is granted because of what the photographer will produce: a record, an aid to memory, freezing this perfect moment in time so that it can be remembered forever.

Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events.<sup>10</sup>

Susan Sontag

On Photography

1973

The above quote refers to the physical outcome of a photograph. Sontag is saying that since the ultimate result of a photograph is a piece of paper, one that can be held, collected, preserved or destroyed, any event that is photographed assumes the same value as any other. However, we can reinstate a hierarchy of status and importance for the photographed events by choosing what



1.3

size to print the photos, whether to frame them or not, and how to display them. Status is also established by our emotional connection to photographs, such as pictures of our kids we carry in our wallets. Although the pictures are small and worn, their importance is fixed by our desire to always carry them with us.

Adversely, any event that is not photographed is devalued. It is our way of refusing the memory of it. When we do not take photos of something, we are saying that the event is either not worth remembering, or if it is painful, we are choosing to forget it.

	_Experience
11	

1.4 Auschwitz I, November 2006.





1.5

1.5 Auschwitz-Birkenau, November 2006.

# MEDIA I

Our perception of spaces is influenced not only by our direct experience with them, but also through their depiction in the media – whether graphic, literary or photographic. Our combined experience of a place is based on the relationship between these perceptions and the space itself. Consider the Nazi concentration camps located in Oswiecim, Poland. Someone who visits Auschwitz and does not know its history through photographs, stories or reports will experience something very different, than someone who is aware of the historically significant events which occurred there.

Developed on the site of an abandoned Polish artillery barracks<sup>12</sup>, Auschwitz remains an organized encampment of two-storey, brick buildings and tall cottonwoods. With stories, pictures and movies about the history of the camps ordinary elements take on new meaning. The Italian cottonwoods, for example, mimic soldiers standing side-by-side at attention, paying tribute to the fallen. The railway tracks to Auschwitz-Birkenau now represent a death sentence; ending in front of the burned down gas chambers, they provide a new and morbid meaning to the phrase, 'the end of the line.' Our experience is constructed with the knowledge of the evidence.

...events only exist socially or informatively if they are communicated through or by means of the vehicle, the technology that causes them to be passed on, to be put across; in short, to exist socially and culturally.<sup>17</sup>

Ignasi de Sola-Morales

Mediations in Architecture and in the Urban Landscape

2001.

### MEDIA II

Ignasi de Sola-Morales refers to a media advertisement, which states, in Catalan, "What happens in Barcelona, happens on BTV." The ambiguity of the statement is lost in the English translation. In Catalan and Spanish the statement has a sense of necessity; the event cannot exist unless it is communicated through a medium. If It is not only about the process of passing on "but the condition necessary for the event to be produced in full." 20

For thousands of years, the proof of an event's existence depended solely on stories. Events not passed down through word of mouth were eventually forgotten.

Today, storytelling takes on many forms. Consisting of more than just oral or written reports, we often communicate important events through photographs and videos shared on the internet. These images, along with their stories, help us identify and understand events we are not directly affected by. This year, an allegedly fraudulent presidential election sparked violent protests across Iran. Despite the government's use of threat and violence to silence protestors and critics of the election, millions of people are making their stories heard worldwide.

One of these stories is of Neda, whose name "means 'voice' in Farsi, and her death has become the central rallying cry of the Iranian rebellion." A non-participant in the protest, Neda was walking nearby when she was murdered by "what appears to be a single sniper shot." The desperate attempt at resuscitation followed by her death was captured in grainy images on a cell-phone camera. In a matter of days the gruesome video of her bloody and lifeless body lying in the hands of her howling father spread throughout the world. Her image, her deathmask, became a symbol for the cause.





1.7

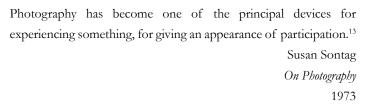
The necessity for storytelling is apparent; events such as this must be communicated for them to exist to the rest of the world. Without this communication, Neda's death, would have become lost in the stream of violence, like the deaths of many others who gave their lives, yet whose names and faces we do not know.

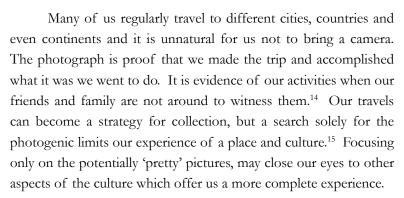
1.6 Protestors, Iran, 2009

1.7 'Free Iran' Poster, 2009

# LIVED VERSUS PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

Our initial experience of a space or building is often through a visual medium, a photograph. The first time I saw the Pantheon was not in Rome, but probably somewhere in South-Western Ontario. The image did not diminish the beauty or affect of the architecture. If anything, it stirred in me a need to see it. I visited the building for the first time in the fall of 2006 and over the course of the next four months would return many times. The beauty of the structure and how I felt under that almost perfect dome amazed me each time.





By placing the camera between ourselves and what we are experiencing we distance ourselves.<sup>16</sup> It is hard for the photographer to be an active participant; taking a picture can be a conscious decision to step back from the event. Every time we put our eye behind the viewfinder, we pause, at least long enough to steady the camera. We absorb what we are doing, and put our emotions aside in order to capture the image.

Photojournalism faces this dilemma constantly. In order to capture the injustice, grief, agony, or abuse of others in a picture, we



1.8

suspend our participation, if only momentarily. If we help, we won't take the photo. If we take the photo, we cannot participate until after the image is captured. To photograph is to consent to what is happening, at least until we get the picture.

What we make of each experience also depends on our ability to recognize the benefit of gazing through the camera. The camera allows us to isolate specific moments, details of our experiences, and examine them closely. It teaches us to see by pushing away the context and forcing us to look at what is in the frame. This act of selecting specific scenes of our experience may stop us from being an active participant in the event, but because it helps organize the surrounding chaos, photographing also allows us to see the event in a way others are not privy to.



...Photographs don't reproduce the past; they block it. Or more accurately, they can fill up the space of memory, becoming the official record... "The photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed..."<sup>24</sup>

Helen Liggett *Urban Encounters*1993.

# **MEMORIES**

1.9

Memories of events, especially from our childhood, are subject to change when we see a photograph of that event. To look at the image and see something which differs from how we remember the event, can cause the image to force itself upon us, changing our recollection of that moment. Over time, as we continue to look at photographs of these events, the images can slowly take over the space in our sub-consciousness where we kept the memory of our experience.

Such confusions also arise in more recent memories. When photographing during a vacation or simply during our day-to-day lives, we likely take photos only of the positive experiences. We

Krakow, Poland, 1987

do not take photos when we are fighting with a spouse, or when a loved one passes away. We do not take photos of ourselves or each other when we are sad, or angry: these are not moments we want to remember.

This brings into question the truthfulness of the photographic documentaries we constantly make of our lives.

Recently, I experienced my own inaccurate documentary. I took a trip abroad for several months at a trying time in my life. My memories of the trip include intense feelings of sadness lasting for days; I often felt alone and incredibly homesick. These feelings lasted the duration of the trip and only eased when I returned home. When I look back at the photographs taken during those four months, I feel like I am looking at the images of a different experience. It is as though what I remember did not happen, simply because it was not documented. In every photograph I am smiling, spending time with friends and visiting beautiful and exotic locations.

I know the feelings I experienced during the trip were real, but the photographs make me question the sadness. I *look* like I am enjoying myself. I *look* happy. It is enough to convince myself that I was happy. Did I invent this loneliness or were my feelings reasonable? As the years go on and my memory of the trip fades, will the photographs usurp what I remember or is the emotional memory enough to sustain the truth of the experience? And, if I had a choice, would I choose to keep my memory, however painful it may have been, or opt for the, not-so-accurate, but much happier photographic replacement?

## PHOTOGRAPHING ARCHITECTURE

Architectural photographs found in publications often depict empty spaces; the spaces are framed and lighted, photogenic, scenic, dramatic or sombre. Buildings pictured like this seem more beautiful; they are controlled environments, without unexpected actors. The light shines through the glass, reflects off the floor, draws beautiful shadows. There are no poorly-dressed or unattractive people to steal your attention, to ruin the photograph. But these empty, dramatic depictions of buildings too often give us the wrong impression of the life of architecture.

As architectural photographers, Ezra Stoller and John Szarkowski take very different pictures. Stoller manifests the cool sensibility we imagine characterized Manhattan at its most sophisticated, and Szarkowski, the traditional of a more populist American. The differences in their work are not based on their subjects, but on how they interpreted them and on how they chose to depict them.

Stoller and Szarkowski both died in the last decade: Stoller in 2004 and Szarkowski in 2007. *The New York Times* gives us a very effective comparison of the photographers – their goals and their accomplishments and the impression they left on others. On Stoller and his work:

Famous for his ability to capture a building from just the right angle and in just the right light, he was often commissioned by the world's leading architects, who spoke, in hopeful tones, of having their creations 'Stollerized.'25

Margalit Fox Ezra Stoller, Who Captured Modern Buildings, Dies at 89 New York Times 2004.

He had a pretty deep appreciation of the kinds of strengths of modern architecture: simplicity, proportion, balance... He was dedicated to showing buildings in the best possible way. <sup>26</sup>

William S. Saunders
Ezra Stoller, Who Captured Modern Buildings, Dies at 89 by
Margalit Fox
New York Times
2004

I see my work in a way that is analogous to a musician given a score to play who must bring it to life and make the piece as good as it can be...While I cannot make a bad building good, I can draw out the strengths in a work that has strength.<sup>27</sup>

Ezra Stoller
Ezra Stoller, Who Captured Modern Buildings, Dies at 89 by
Margalit Fox
New York Times
2004

Most people have seen an Ezra Stoller photograph, even if they don't know it. What is noticeable in the descriptions of his work, offered by himself and others, is the search for the 'right' vantage point and the 'right' light and the 'right' conditions to take his photographs. His pictures were "praised for their crispness, sharp tonal contrast and cool, controlled stance." Apart from a few irregularities, his photographs are dramatically lit, often empty or with one lone figure, making the space look incredible in scale and even more dramatic than it does in reality. The pictures often remind us of scenes from a movie.

The article on Szarkowski focuses primarily on his incredible influence as MoMA New York's Director of Photography for almost three decades. In contrast to Stoller, his work is said to "possess the straightforward descriptive clarity he so often championed in the work of others, and, in their simplicity, a purity that borders on the poetic."<sup>29</sup>

In his early years of photography, he was influenced by two photographers, Walker Evans and Edward Weston: "Walker for the intelligence and Weston for the pleasure." <sup>30</sup>

[He was] a curator who almost single-handedly elevated photography's status in the last half-century to that of a fine art, making his case in seminal writings and landmark exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York...<sup>31</sup>

Philip Gefter John Szarkowski, Curator of Photography, Dies at 81 NY Times 2007.

As an artist, 'you look at other people's work and figure out how it can be useful to you,' [Szarkowski] said. T'm content that a lot of these pictures are going to be interesting for other photographers of talent and ambition... and that's all you want.'32

Philip Gefter, John Szarkowski, Curator of Photography, Dies at 81 NY Times 2007.

In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends... Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it.<sup>33</sup>

John Szarkowski John Szarkowski, Curator of Photography, Dies at 81 by Philip Gefter NY Times 2007.

Szarkowski, it seems, is more intent on understanding a space and experiencing it for what it is. He never mentions the idea of getting a photograph 'right', he is instead, both earnest and poetic. He speaks a lot about the photographic community as a whole and the influence photographers have on one another.



The severe contrast and strong lines in Stoller's interior photograph of the Seagram Building render the building intense and dramatic. Stoller ensured absolute symmetry in the image, creating a direct relationship between the details of the mullions, doors & walls in the Seagram building and the architectural details of the building across the plaza. The picture gives the impression of obsessive planning and careful decision-making. The image is so perfectly arranged, it is unlikely the person in the photograph is simply a random presence; his position and movement have also most likely been orchestrated. The photograph is beautiful and dramatic – a prime example of photography as high art.

1.10 Seagrams interior (Mies van der Rohe), 1958, by Ezra Stoller



Szarkowski's image of the National Farmer's Bank could not be a further departure from Stoller's work. Besides the obvious difference of lighting and contrast, Szarkowski helps us believe that the image is a random event – a spontaneous one. Perhaps, he went to the bank, got to the front of the line and turned around just in time to witness and photograph this scene. The picture is asymmetrical, slightly blurred, and the top of the carved doorway comes so close to the edge of the frame, it borders on cramped. It is a frozen moment in time – a non-repeatable event – one for which Szarkowski was present and ready.

<sup>1.11</sup> The National Farmers' Bank, Owatonna, Minnesota, 1954-1956, by John Szarkowski



In his picture of the Whitney Museum, Stoller capitalizes on the intense light and the scale to make the image dramatic. Surrounded by deserted New York streets on a clear, sunny day, we witness an all-American, father-son moment; an image which makes us ask if we have seen it before in a film. The picture is a great example of the 'crispness' and 'sharp tonal contrast' Gefter describes as typical of Stoller's photographs and the figures are key in creating dramatic scale.

1.12 Whitney Museum, New York City, 1966, by Ezra Stoller



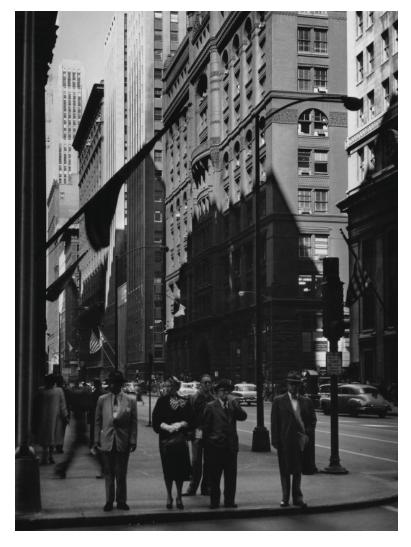
Though the potential for a similar mother-daughter sentimentality exists in his photograph, Szarkowski does not try to capture it. Like his previous image, Szarkowski's picture of the Carson Pirie Scott building in Chicago feels like a one-time experience. He pushes the image all the way to the edges, so that the little girl appears to almost step out of the frame. Nothing has been taken out of the scene. He includes the dumpster and road sign – details we would be hard-pressed to see in an Ezra Stoller photograph. The compacted feeling of the image suggests Szarkowski used a telephoto lens; this could indicate an intent to get in close to his subjects, or the desire to distance himself while capturing the image.

1.13 Carson Pirie Scott, Chicago 1954, by John Szrkowski



Typical of his other photographs, Stoller expresses the grandeur and scale of New York's 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. An organized and tidy view of the city, it shows people as small, almost identical, figures on street level. The geometry of the towers is rhythmic, but the image as a whole, has a miniature, model-like stillness.

1.14 6th Avenue, New York, by Ezra Stoller



In Szarkowski's LaSalle Street, we have become pedestrians ourselves. On a sunny day wandering the streets of the city, between deep shadows and bright sunlight our eyes take time to focus. The photo depicts the life and unpredictability of the city; each person goes about their business and we manage to make eye contact with one man. His gaze is forever frozen in our direction.

1.15 La Salle Street, 1954, by John Szarkowski



# SILENCE

We often arrive in a building, longing to experience the same beautiful space we witnessed in a photograph, only to be confronted with throngs of tourists, flashing lights and constant, loud chatter. We may long for the silence of the photograph that filled us with wonder and made us long to experience that space - empty and quiet - in person.

The silence of the photograph. One of its most precious qualities, unlike cinema and television, which always have to have silence imposed on them - though no-one ever succeeds in this. The silence of the image, which requires (or should require!) no commentary. But the silence, too, of the object, which it wrests from the deafening hurly-burly of the real world. Whatever the noise and the violence around them, photographs return objects to a state of stillness and silence. In the midst of urban hustle and bustle, they recreate the equivalent of the desert, a phenomenal isolation. They are the only way of passing through cities in silence, of moving through the world in silence.<sup>34</sup>

Jean Baudrillard *Photographies*1999





Photographers... are so often asked to spell out the significance of their pictures, something they resist trying to do. Yes, they can say a little about what brought them to begin, though this is not to discuss what resulted, and they can describe the equipment they used and the processes they followed in the darkroom, but they know that if these are the secrets then the pictures are not very important.<sup>35</sup>

Robert Adams
Why People Photograph, 1994.

### WORDS I

The apparent straightforwardness of the art - photographers simply record what they are faced with - may be related to the frequency with which they are asked to explain their work.<sup>36</sup> Painting is regarded as more subjective; each brush stroke is a conscious decision made by the artist, assuring us of the artist's intentions. As a result, painters can often get away with saying very little, or even nothing at all, regarding their work.<sup>37</sup>

Such details as Adams describes – like a photographer's decisions in the darkroom, for instance – are part of the craft of photography, but do little to explain why a photographer took a certain picture and what his or her intention was. The secrets of a photograph are not in those technical decisions a photographer makes. Rather, they are found in the recognition of that fleeting instant in time and in the ability to capture it to share with the world. The secrets of photography are found in the meaning we, as viewers, find in those images of captured moments.

Henri Cartier-Bresson did not print his own photographs, nor did he care to be involved in the process.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, it wasn't the photograph that intrigued him, but what it empowered him to do: to capture that fleeting moment of reality when everything falls into place. This 'decisive moment' refers not to the instant when the external event comes to climax, but to that moment when we sense that the forms and patterns have found a balance, clarity and order; what we see becomes, for an instant, a picture.<sup>39</sup>

For me the camera is a sketch book, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously.<sup>40</sup>

Henri Cartier-Bresson

Cartier-Bresson, first began painting, then he was a photographer, and finally he turned to drawing in his later years.<sup>41</sup> In the different stages of his life, each medium served as a way for him to express himself; photography allowed him to capture, spontaneously, rare moments in Parisian street life, while drawing allowed him to meditate on a subject and describe it in a sketch. Photographers choose their medium, because it allows them the "most fully truthful expression of their vision."<sup>42</sup> To many photographers, talking about their pictures is a sign that their vision has not been fully realized in the work.<sup>43</sup> Since art is by nature self-explanatory, called art precisely because of its sufficiency, appending words to a photograph is an acknowledgement that it is unclear – that it is not art.<sup>44</sup>

- 2.2 Untitled from "Pittsburgh," W. Eugene Smith
- 2.3 Untitled from "Pittsburgh," W. Eugene Smith
- 2.4 US Steel Pittsburgh, W. Eugene Smith
- 2.5 Untitled from "Pittsburgh," W. Eugene Smith

There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described. I photograph to see what something will look like photographed...<sup>45</sup>

Garry Winogrand

## WORDS II

A photograph is a glimpse into a moment, and without accompanying text that moment is not any clearer to us once we have seen the image. 46 At its most basic, the photograph is evidence that what we see, existed. Consider the top image; it serves as proof that a man was in front of W. Eugene Smith's camera when the picture was taken. In that factory in Pittsburgh, at that moment, he was there, but who he is or was is a mystery to us. The photograph does not need a caption to be effective. The image created is what the photographer intended us to see; it is the art.

The meaning of any photograph can be interpreted in various ways, and newspapers and other sources of media are able to exploit this 'weakness'; they can add a caption to alter the apparent meaning of the photo to manipulate our interpretation of the image. Captions hold power and photographers can be very critical of the words that accompany their images. Abused, captions have the ability to change the meaning of a photograph.

In her book, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Post Modernist Myths*, Rosalind E. Krauss writes, "[a] meaninglessness surrounds [the photograph] which can only be filled in by the addition of text."<sup>47</sup> Perhaps what she is referring to is the mutability of the photograph subjected to captions; its meaning becomes the caption's dictate, along the way usurping the photographer's initial intention. The original meaning may still exist, but it is reminiscent of a tree falling in the forest. If there is a meaning, but no one knows what it is, does it matter?

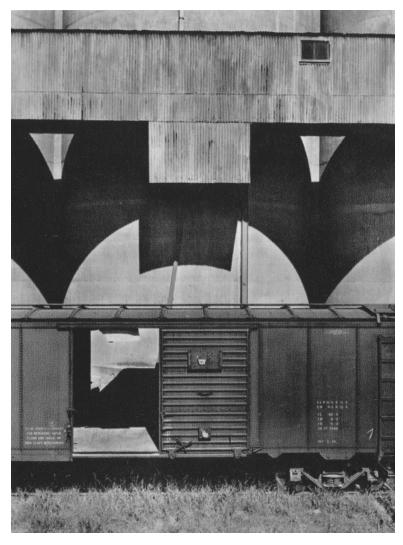
Enter the photograph as 'shifter.' Originally, Roman Jakobson used the term for "that category of linguistic sign which is 'filled with signification' only because it is 'empty." Krauss uses the example of the word 'this,' a sign which attains a new meaning each time a referent is supplied: 'this chair' 'this desk.' Each photograph is a shifter. A caption supplies a meaning as well as each viewer can supply his or her own meaning; as an 'empty' sign, the photograph assumes each meaning, shifting from one to the next.











2.6

Photography is about finding out what can happen in the frame. When you put four edges around some facts, you change those facts.<sup>50</sup>

Garry Winogrand

#### THE FRAME

Photographers, unlike draftsmen or artists, do not begin work in the middle of a blank sheet.<sup>51</sup> Rather, they are given a frame and the chaos of the world, and they use their cameras to bring an order to what they confront.<sup>52</sup> That order may define what is occurring, or may simply be an interpretation of it. Either way, framing becomes crucial in that interpretation; it isolates and juxtaposes components, creates relationships (which may not actually exist) and it can affect the 'trueness' of a photograph.<sup>53</sup> By surrounding facts with a frame, by using perspective and parallax, we change the relationship of the facts to the surrounding context.

Constructing its own geometry around forms, the frame dissects familiar objects to create unfamiliar ones; it becomes a new way to see, fragmenting the content of the scene in order to examine it more purely. This isolation allows us to separate that unfamiliar fragment from the rest of the world and consider it for what it is, unaffected by its relationship to its context.

"Both [the historian and photographer] seek a balance between 'reproduction and construction,' between passive surrender to the facts and active reshaping of them into a coherent picture or story."<sup>54</sup>

Alan Trachtenberg Reading American Photographs 1989



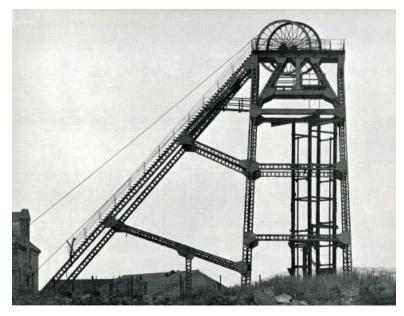
2.7

### VANTAGE POINT

If it is not possible for us, as photographers, to move our subject, we can always move the camera to see the subject in better circumstances, or sometimes to see it at all. Abandoning normal vantage points, we can move in close, or retreat, photograph from behind or above. Changing the view, we can change the subject's significance within the picture, or hide it behind something else. Photography is a way of seeing the world from angles otherwise unexplored. <sup>55</sup> Photographs show us architecture and the urban landscape from inaccessible vantage points. We may discover pattern in streets photographed from above or find beauty in places – under the surface of the oceans or atop mountains – where we never venture ourselves.

From his photographs, [the photographer] learned that the appearance of the world was richer and less simple than his mind would have guessed.<sup>56</sup>

John Szarkowski The Photographer's Eye 1966.



My purpose is... to ask what the pictures presented in sequences say about their subjects...<sup>57</sup>

Alan Trachtenberg Reading American Photographs 1989

#### **SERIES**

When confronted with one image, like a face, we are likely to pay attention to its features and details – a slightly crooked smile, unkept hair or freckles. When looking at several images of different faces, we no longer look for these specific details within each face. We are more likely to spot patterns or conditions within the entire group, like skin tones or the shapes of faces. By presenting the images as a cohesive group it becomes a single work, seen as a sum of its parts, something greater than each individual image.

Bernd and Hilla Becher became famous for their photographs of water towers, blast furnaces, mine heads and other industrial structures. Their specific approach to lighting conditions, vantage point and style created sequences with consistent tonal and compositional qualities. What we notice are not the details of each photograph, or the variety of backgrounds, because each image is now a small part of the whole.

Repetition helps fix ideas into our memories. One photograph of a rather uninteresting mineshaft is boring, compared to nine versions of similar structures. In various locations and surrounded by different environments, the mineshafts have one thing in common: their asymmetrical A-frame structure, the diagonal lines of which stretch from one corner of the image to the other. With that rhythm, it was vital for the Bechers to maintain consistency from one photo to the next.

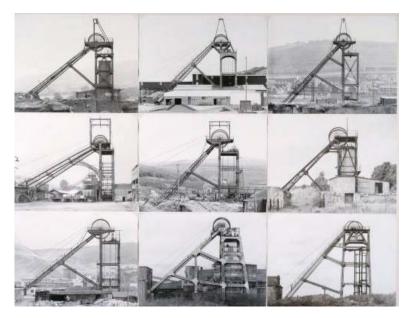
On its own, a photograph may be banal, but when paired with another or placed in a group of photographs a new composition is created. Not only does the pair or grouping make each individual picture more effective, it calls our attention to elements that may have gone unnoticed. These elements only become important once the photograph becomes a part of a larger group.

In the single image, the theme is the subject of composition

or the dominant idea. A motif, or a recurring theme or idea, is created through contrast and comparison and through the repetition of that theme in multiple photographs. As in the example of the series of faces, the pictures below call our attention not to minute details of the individual images, but to larger elements, like geometry and subject matter. Among the individual images, and between the work and our experience, a discourse is created.

 $\dots$  [the meaning] seems to arise from the images themselves, from the dialogue among them, and between them and the viewer's own experience.<sup>58</sup>

Alan Trachtenberg Reading American Photographs 1989



2.9

Series: Mineheads, Bernd & Hilla Becher

2.9

## TRUTH

People believe that the camera does not lie.

The photographer was thought to be an acute but non-interfering observer--a scribe, not a poet. But as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world.<sup>59</sup>

Susan Sontag

On Photography

1973

Photographs transcribe, not 'reality', but the world as it was seen and recorded... in the picture we see the world from the angle of the camera's partial vision, from the position it had at the moment of the release of the shutter.<sup>60</sup>

Alan Trachtenberg
As quoted in "Eyewitnessing: Uses of Images as Historical Evidence"
by Peter Burke
1989

Our faith in the truth of a photograph rests in our belief that the lens is impartial, and will draw the subject as it is, neither nobler nor meaner. This faith may be naïve 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.<sup>61</sup>

John Szarkowski The Photographer's Eye 1966

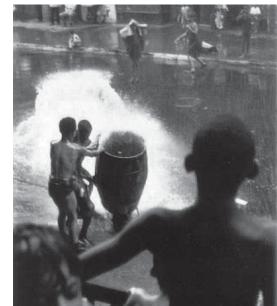
Nevertheless, we still believe that the camera does not lie; the camera takes on a dual function: it objectifies reality, while making it subject to the view of the photographer.<sup>62</sup> We may not agree with the photographer's (subjective) evaluation, but because of the objective nature of photographs we cannot deny their truthfulness.<sup>63</sup>

Helen Levitt photographed New York's neighbourhoods in the 1940s, a communal way of life, in a way that seems objective. But, perhaps the world she created with these photographs never actually existed except in her own private vision. <sup>64</sup> It is possible that she discovered these moments, these 'thin slices of fact', and by laying them together, created a fantasy: a quality of common life that never existed except for her account of it. <sup>65</sup>

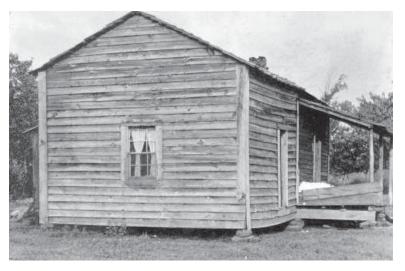








- 2.10 New York, c. 1942, Helen Levitt.
- 2.11 New York, c. 1945, Helen Levitt.
- 2.12 New York, c. 1940, Helen Levitt.
- 2.13 Untitled, New York, c. 1940, Helen Levitt.



#### LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

In 1936, Walker Evans and James Agee collaborated on a book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Originally intended as a short article<sup>66</sup>, the book describes, in text and photographs, the lives of sharecroppers in the American south. It is two very distinct works.

Agee is invested in the report of the lives of these families, perhaps even obsessed. He stays up nights to listen to the silence of the world and the breathing of the individuals he is writing about.<sup>67</sup> He describes every aspect of their physical appearances, their homes and their lives, determined not to leave out any detail, no matter how trivial.<sup>68</sup> Agee reminds the reader that the people in the book are not characters created in the writer's imagination.<sup>69</sup> Rather, they are real human beings, and Agee, describing himself as a "monstrously alien human being,"<sup>70</sup> lived and spied on them, revered and loved them. His empathy for these people is palpable.

Evans' images are located even before the fly-leaf or title page. They are displayed individually, one after another, with no captions or descriptions – no text whatsoever. Perhaps, like many photographers, Evans believed his photographs were self-explanatory; and that the presence of words implied that the image was somehow deficient.<sup>71</sup> Agee reminds us in the preface that the photographs are not to be seen as illustrative. "They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent and fully collaborative."<sup>72</sup>

In contrast to Agee's more personal and emotional descriptions of the families and their circumstances, through the formal, almost antique quality of the images, Evans gives a dignity to the photographed individuals. He becomes the visual translator of these families to the rest of America.<sup>73</sup> He revolutionizes the concept of documentary photography by removing himself from the equation, producing photographs that are objective, with no hint of subjective authoritarian influence.<sup>74</sup>

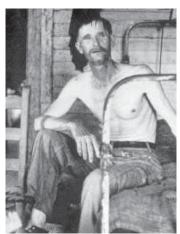
Evans' pictures are not candid shots of everyday activities of the families. Rather, they are formal, posed pictures of the family members and their homes. Instead of photographing his subjects 'at













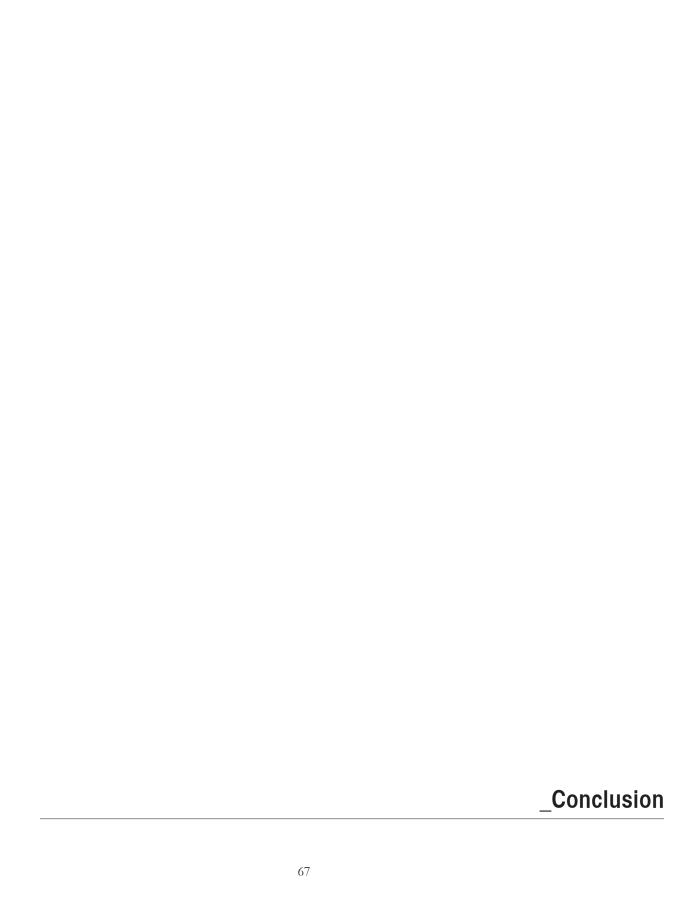
2.15 2.16 2.172.18 2.19 2.20

- 2.15 Marchand abat-jours, 1899-1900, Eugene Atget.
- 2.16 Prostitute, Paris, 1920s, Eugene Atget.
- 2.17 Ragpicker, 1899-1900, Eugene Atget.
- 2.18 Untitled from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," Walker Evans.
- 2.19 Untitled from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," Walker Evans.
- 2.20 Untitled from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," Walker Evans.

play' or 'at work,' he sets up the pictures almost as if he were in his studio; full framed, close-up portraits, as well as family group shots, reminiscent of Atget's photographs of Parisians.

In Atget, it seemed, all of his latent instincts were combined: a straight cataloguing method imbued with inscrutable melancholy, a long look at neglected objects, and an unerring eye for the signs of popular culture in transition. Atget's methodical, all-embracing approach to his surroundings confirmed and enlarged Evans' sense of photographic subject matter. Whereas modernist photography had shown him how to see form, Atget vastly enriched his sense of content.<sup>75</sup>

Belinda Rathbone Walker Evans: A Biography 2004



3.1 Series 2, Untitled 3 (Detail)



A lot of my work deals with myself, especially my films. It's very hard [for me] to get away from myself. It seems, almost, that's all I have.<sup>76</sup>

Robert Frank

#### WHY I PHOTOGRAPH

The vision of our lives is made up of countless images; it is impossible to take in and appreciate them all, let alone remember everything years later. Every day I experience moments and spaces that move me. Sometimes they make me think, they confuse or anger me, they make me laugh. Taking pictures allows me to capture these moments and all that I associate with them.

Making me notice things I normally would pass by, photography has opened my eyes and taught me to discover. By placing the camera between whatever I encounter and myself, it is a form of escape; I become a tourist. I see well-travelled places in new light, searching and discovering, and even after I take a picture, examining it to print or enlarge it brings to light nuances that were not apparent before.

When I look at a photograph I have taken, I am reminded of the circumstances that surrounded it: the sounds, the smells and the company. I create a duplicate of that moment and experience it again and again through its frozen image. I am living two lives, simultaneously; I can leave my reality to return to these experiences at any time, to enlarge them and show them in more detail or to reframe them and change their meaning or effect. I own my experiences because I have lived them, but I also own them physically, in the form of these photographs.

I can divide the world into pieces and collect it. I can fill boxes with fragments of the world, reproduced so accurately, that I feel I possess them.

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched by pathos.<sup>77</sup>

Susan Sontag

On Photography

1973

Escape is possible not only by taking photos, but by viewing them. Looking at Atget's pictures let's us escape into the silent Paris streets of the early 20th century. It is an experience we can only gain from viewing these photographs; we pass through them, through the 'evidence' Atget recorded, and feel nostalgia for a time we have never experienced. To read history is one thing, but to see these photographs, hard-edged evidence of buildings, people, and events from over one hundred years ago, allows for a completely different understanding of that time. An aspect of my fascination with photography has always been its historical significance and the privilege we enjoy, looking directly into the past, as if through a window.

I have always felt an emotional connection to historical photographs; there is something mysterious and telling about them. Though they never speak, they permit me to glimpse into a single moment of someone's life, someone I never met. Sometimes I find myself staring into the eyes of the subject, into their fixed image. In photographs of the inanimate world, I look *through* the eyes of the photographer at a single instant in the life of an object, space or city. I see what he or she saw in that moment, because it remains long after he or she has died and will continue to exist after I, too, am gone.

But, apart from all these things – the chance to observe, to escape and to experience – photography allows me to surround myself with beauty. I can visit places I have never been to, see people I have never met and be taken away by fascinating sights. It makes me feel small and humble, constantly driving me to try and capture at least a fraction of that beauty and immortalize it.

#### **CRAFT**

Why did I not choose digital photography as a medium for my work? Why are the people I have turned to those who influenced photographers a generation before me, and not current, contemporary photographers like Gregory Crewdson, Ferit Kuyas and Jeff Wall? Couldn't they shed some light on the topic of photography and its relation to how we experience the world? Is their work irrelevant? My decisions are based on *boundary* and *definition*.

The number of contemporary photographers working professionally today is in the hundreds of thousands. Those are just the professionals. In the digital age, anyone with a Flickr account can have his or her images viewed by millions of people. There are countless photographs, influences, ideas, and opinions to consider. Not to mention there exists an incredibly wide-ranging spectrum of what defines a photograph. Digital manipulation has a sweeping range, and images at each end of this spectrum are still considered photographs. For me, contemporary photography is an entirely different animal than the photography I set out to study, to pursue, to immerse myself in, and so my choice was clear.

Photographers who worked from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century all the way through the 1980s seem, to me at least, to be on the same team. Definitely their subject matter, methodology and ideals varied from one to the next, but they pushed the envelope of what photography can be and do, and aspired to find new ways of depicting the world, while maintaining that subject matter should not determine photography's status as an art. How can we compare the images of Atget to those of Diane Arbus? We cannot. Everything about their work is different, but as Szarkowski justified the collection of images found in *The Photographer's Eye*,

[The photographs] were made for various reasons, by men [and women] of different concerns and varying talent. They have in fact little in common except their success, and a shared vocabulary: these pictures are unmistakably photographs. The vision they share belongs to no school or aesthetic theory, but to photography itself.<sup>78</sup>

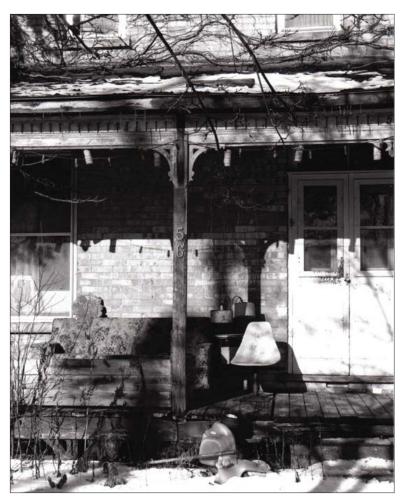
John Szarkowski The Photographer's Eye 1966

Being 'unmistakably photographs' is what drew me to predigital photographs. My desire to experience all aspects of the craft of photography compelled me to use black and white film; it only became appropriate as I began to photograph my hometown, Galt, Ontario, an historically significant part of Canada's manufacturing history. I did question this decision shortly after having digitally touched up about thirty photographs in a matter of hours. Having edited, changed contrast and fixed scratches it really made me look closely at my decision to develop my pictures.

I have always been fascinated with the darkroom and enjoy the connection I develop with each individual image: examining it, pulling it apart and building it back up. The experience of touching up, perfecting a print and making it one's own is now also possible through the advances in digital technology. But, there is something to be said for physically working with a photograph and having direct contact between the 'thing' and our hands, without the mediation of a computer screen, mouse and keyboard. For me, it is about watching, under hypnotizing red lights, as an image is born out of nothing.

As I spend more time in the darkroom, I learn to read the negatives, to make more skilled decisions and, ultimately, to be patient. Patience is not an option in the darkroom. Often, when I assumed that I knew all I needed to know and printed a full image, I only cost myself time and paper; after printing I would find that there were complex areas that needed much more attention. This approach does not help determine how to make difficult areas work and is frustrating and wasteful. Instead, after many mistakes, I have learned to consider every part of the photograph, never too confident in what I think I know. Still, there always seems to be a touch of luck involved in that final print.

With all the skill I've gained, I find that my time in the darkroom had not lessened by much. Rather, I am now able to print images, which before confounded and frustrated me. Unexpectedly, what the time spent in the darkroom has taught me is how to be a better photographer; hours spent dodging and burning helped me understand the abilities as well as the limitations of the camera.



Initial 7"x9"print.

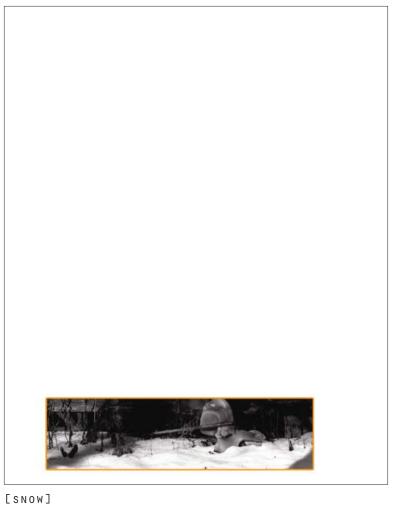
f8, filter #1, 35 sec., 10 sec. burn below porch shadow

## [NOTES]

- A. second level bricks too light, B. porch roof shadow too dark,
- C. front door lacks information, D. left side near sofa too light?
- E. snow washed out... needs more time

## 3.2 Trial Composition

For anyone without experience in the darkroom, it is a mystery. To achieve a final print, I often create over twenty test sheets – puzzle pieces that make up the complex areas of the picture. With every photo that is printed, each dominant area of shadow or light has to be tested, compared, altered – discovered. To make the final composition work, that is to say, to look as coherent and beautiful as it possibly can, many different components have to be finalized first.



3.3

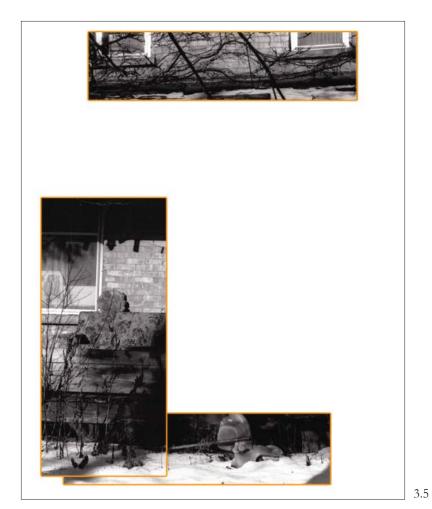
f8, filter #1

60 seconds.... slight too dark? does snow look grey? 55sec will work better.

- 3.2 Darkroom Test 1
- 3.3 Darkroom Test 2



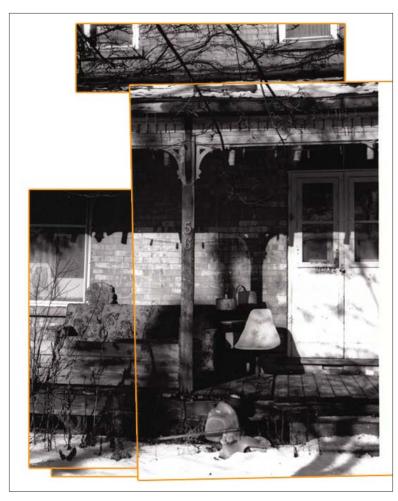
[TOP STOREY]
f8, filter #1
60 sec. (perfect)



[COUCH]
f8, filter #1, 60 seconds
good detail, but looks cold... lost sunny and warm feeling

3.5 Darkroom Test 3

As I work to perfect each component, I have to keep in mind how it will compare with the rest of the image. I may discover that an area seems too light, that it is missing information, that it is slightly under exposed. After having exposed that small piece of the picture longer, I find that the whole image has changed because of it. I discover that, even though, on its own, the small area seems much too bright, within the entirety of the picture it actually provides a ray of sunlight, of warmth; it is a destination for the viewer, where he or she can imagine him or herself sitting on a tattered sofa on a porch, basking in the afternoon sun. By taking away that warmth, I change the atmosphere of the photograph and its connection to the viewer.



## [SHADOW & DOOR]

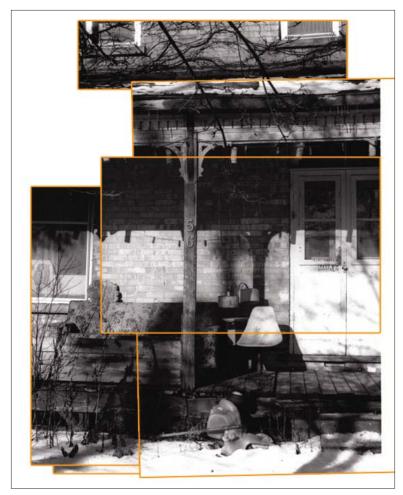
f8, filter #1

30 sec. entire picture

- +10 sec. burn, lower portion below porch shadow (shadow still too dark)
- $\pm 10$  second burn on door and snow on ground (snow slightly too light now, door still definitely too washed out)

3.6 Darkroom Test 4

3.7 Darkroom Test 5



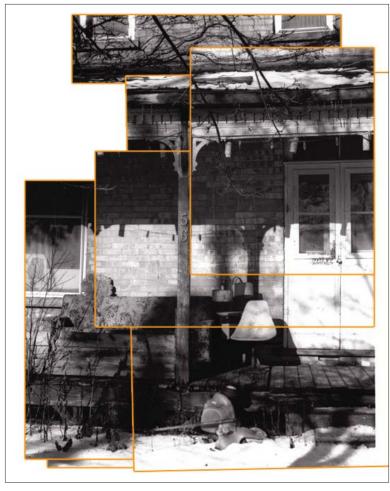
# [SHADOW]

f8, filter #1

25 sec. entire picture

 $\pm 5$  sec. dodge of shadow (sort of missed the darkest part I wanted to test...

try again)



3.8

# [SHADOW]

f8, filter #1

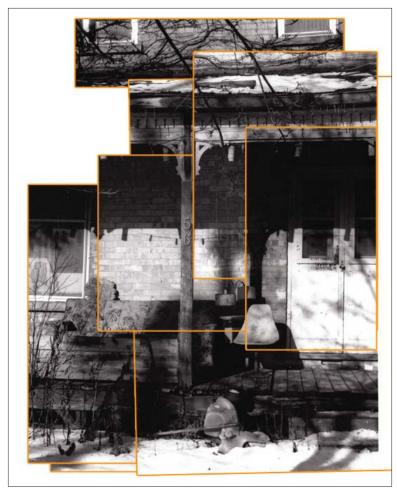
23 sec. entire picture

+7 sec. dodge of shadow - good amount of detail. area above door is not brick, something else - will have to remain dark, I think that will be okay in the composition

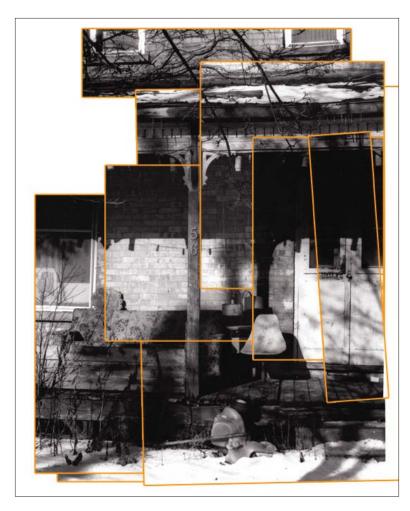
3.8 Darkroom Test 6

3.9 Darkroom Test 7

86



[DOOR]
f8, filter #1
60 sec. - MORE. not enough information



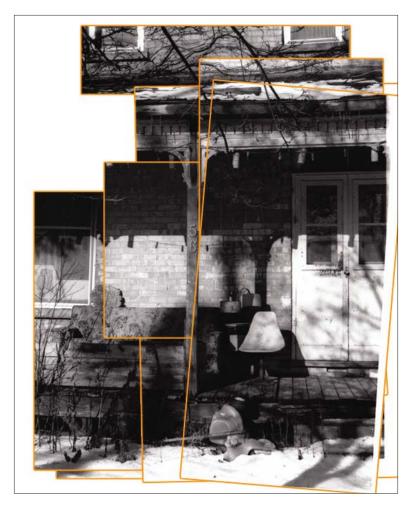
3.10

[DOOR]
f8, filter #1
90 sec. - shadows! could be slightly lighter - but great detail.

3.10 Darkroom Test 8

I had an incredible day when I was working on my first print – exploring the shadows and trying to find information in areas of intense light. I decided, upon the advice of my mentor, to risk it – to risk exposing the lighted area too much, rather than not enough. Often when you put something under immense pressure, much more than you think it can handle, you discover how strong or resilient it actually is. And, amazingly enough, I discovered shadows where previously I thought there were none. Though it is only a small part of the image, it brings that portion of the picture alive – dancing tree branches on an old and rusty front door; one more piece of the puzzle was complete.

3.11 Darkroom Test 9



[DOOR, SHADOW, SNOW]

- f8, filter #1
- 30 seconds entire image
- $\pm 10$  second burn below porch
- +15 seconds on snow (great!)
- +50 second on door (almost... looks a bit dirty, so perhaps lighter by  $10\,$  sec.).

## [FINAL]

f8, filter #1

30 sec. total during which....

- \* 13 sec. expose entire image
- \* 7 sec. dodge porch shadow (left side of post)
- \* 7 sec. dodge porch shadow (right side of post)
- \* 3 sec. dodge snow on roof to whiten slightly

## then...

10 sec. burn entire lower portion below porch shadow

20 sec. burn top portion (brick and windows)

15 sec. burn snow

40 sec. burn door.

\*\*\*

It really is about the privilege of being so closely involved with the images - of spending hours in a dark room perfecting each corner of a photo until it all comes together to form the final print. The exhalation of relief, and often exhaustion, and the incredible accomplishment I feel after that final print makes its way out of the dryer, is nothing that I experience when working with photographs digitally.





3.12

## A QUESTION OF CATEGORY

There is a point when photography changed, physically and completely. The digital age changed our workstations from lonely darkrooms to large offices, shared with others and filled with light. It opened the doors to the type of manipulation that Evans couldn't have imagined. It even dissolved the need for the physical photograph, something we could hold in our hands. The 'truth' of photography is not dependent anymore on only the subjectivity of the photographer, his/her selection of vantage point and framing. What sort of truth in photography can we expect if an artist is capable of altering, down to each pixel, an image that contains 1200 pixels per square inch? And, if there is still a truth, how can we ever be sure of it?

The lonely darkroom experience did not pertain to all photographers. For instance, Henri Cartier-Bresson did not print his own images. He simply saw and pressed the shutter. His photographs were printed by others, but they were still his images. But, what if he hadn't pressed the shutter, nor had he printed the image? Would he still be called a photographer?

Consider the following list of job titles: *Director of Photography, Camera Operator, Producer, Location Manager, Snowmaker, Tree Surgeon, Asst. to the Artist, Actress,* and *Casting.*<sup>79</sup> What comes to mind, a photograph or a movie? Is it an image that will hang on a wall, or a three-dimensional production of incredible proportions? These job titles (among others) belong to people involved in the work of Gregory Crewdson, a contemporary photographer. He is not the one who presses the button on the camera nor does he work personally on the digital manipulation and editing of the image. Interviews with Crewdson show he considers himself more of a director than a photographer, and rightfully so, but his final products are still 'photographs.' Photography now is not photography then.

I chose manual photography for the craft. I chose it for the personal relationship with each photograph and for the experience of the photography I grew up admiring. I did not choose colour photography for the simple reason that I do not have access to a colour darkroom. I also chose manual photography because I am sure of it. I am not sure of contemporary photography. That is not to say I am not sure if it is art, or if it is beautiful. It is, most certainly,

both of those things. What I am not sure of is if I can use the term photography in its purest form. Contemporary photography has joined with graphic design, cinematography, digital art, set-design and countless other forms of art to create this new iteration of photography. I heard someone say once that as soon as photography was invented, it was invented in full. There was no more inventing to do, only discovering. The digital age has, I believe, caused the very first re-invention of photography. The first time photography has changed so drastically that its very definition is challenged.

I began here by discussing photography's first difficulty, which was of category. Contemporary photography has forced me to come full circle to this statement. It is innovative. It is beautiful. It is art. But is it still photography? Is it still writing with light, only in a different language, where chemical reactions are replaced by ones and zeros? And where is the line we draw when it comes to image manipulation and truth? It is not for me to discern if this new art form should still be called photography, and I have no desire to try and find a finite definition of what a photograph is in light of all its new conditions. I am not sure there is one. What I am sure of is the photography of Evans, Szarkowski, Cartier-Bresson and countless others, and what it has done for how I see and experience the world.





















Series 1 | The Grand River, April 2009















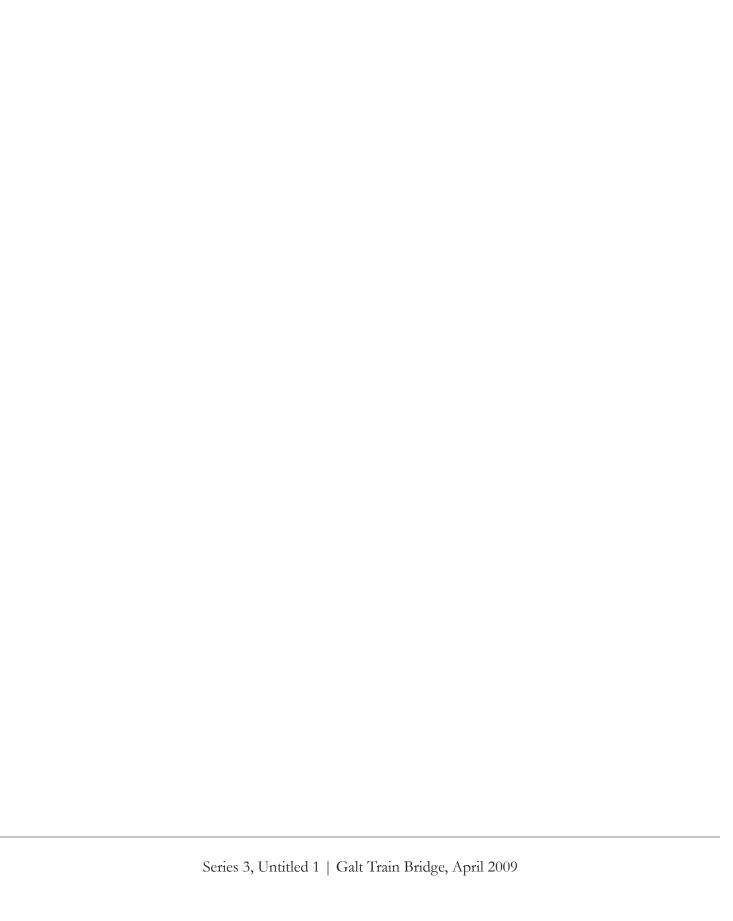


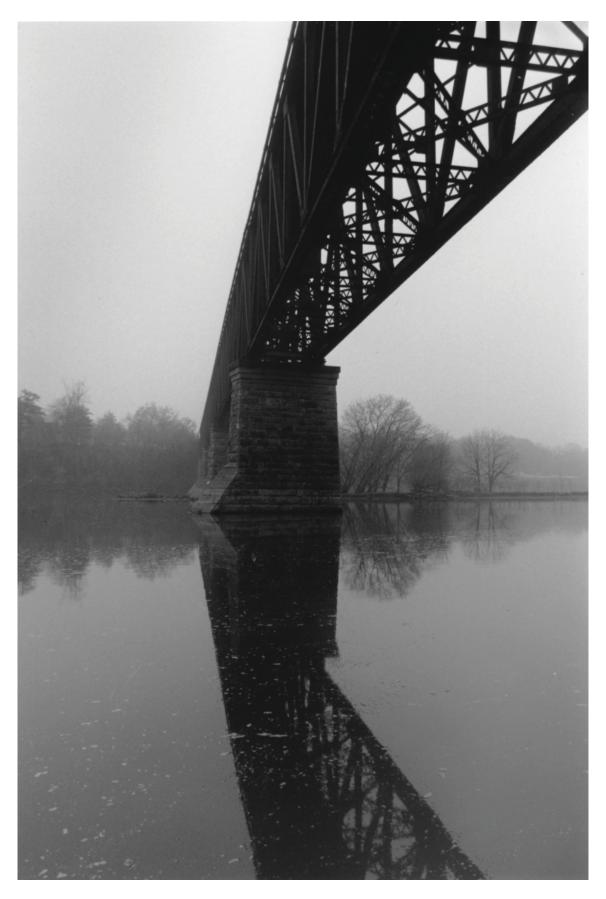








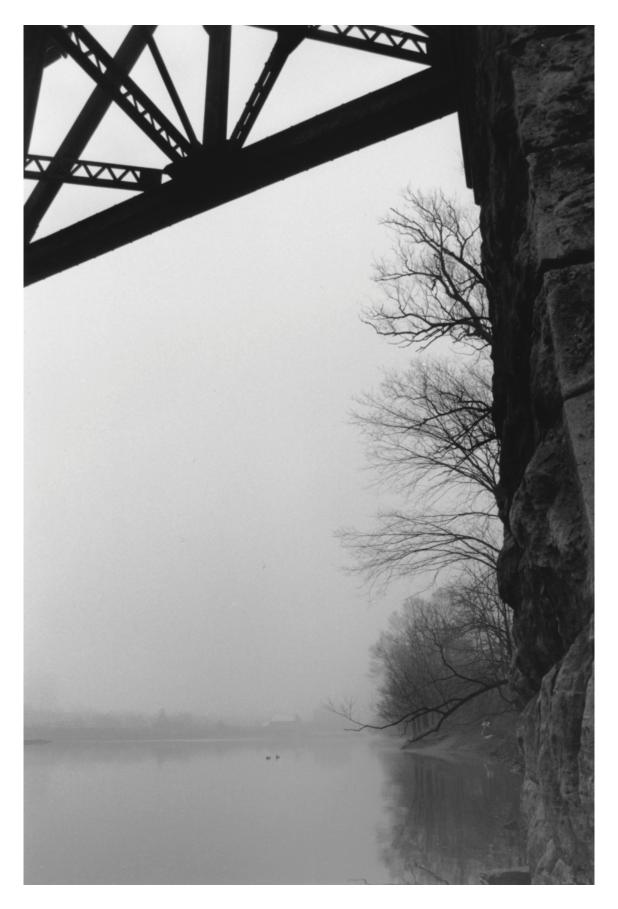
















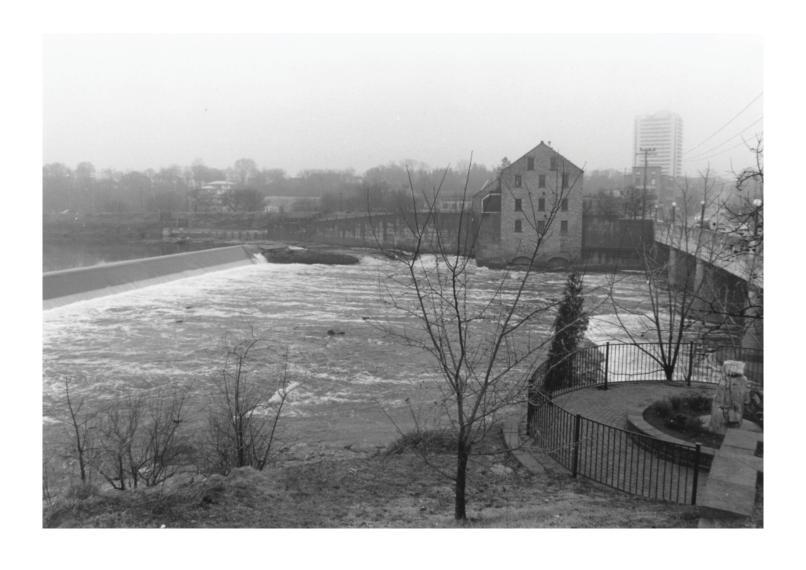




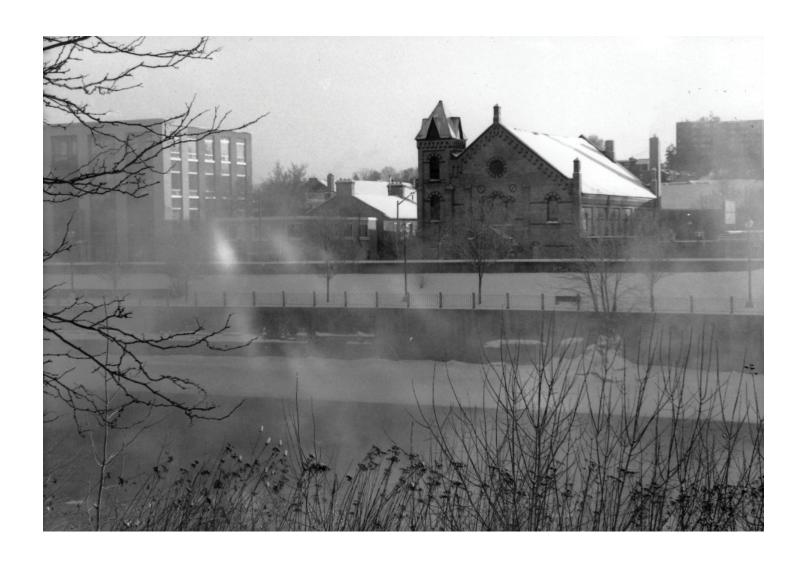


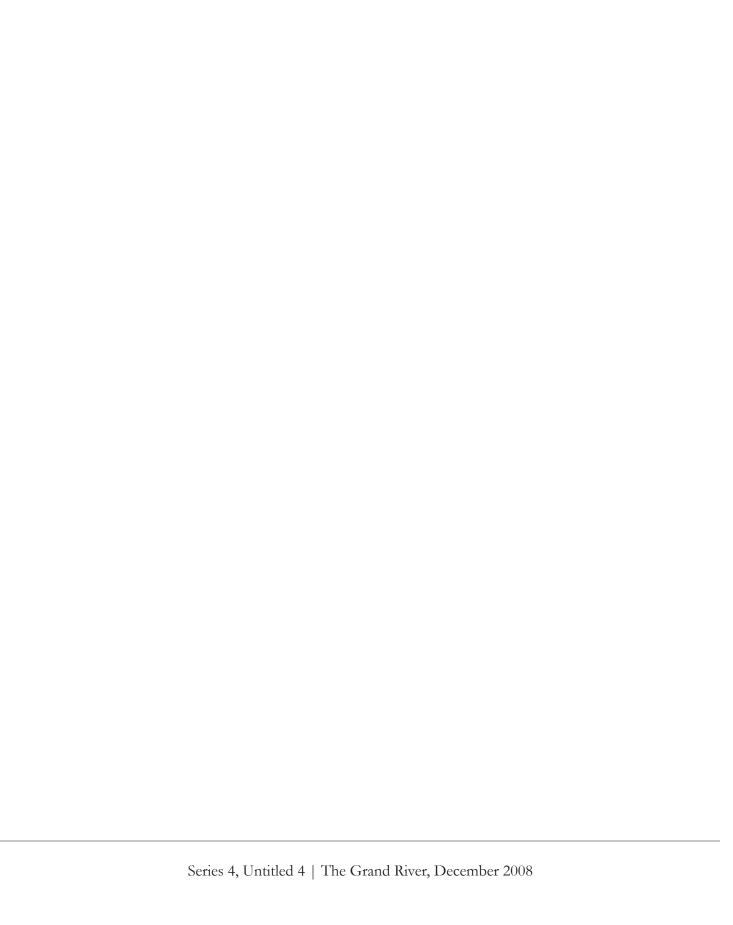


























Series 4 | The Grand River, December 2008















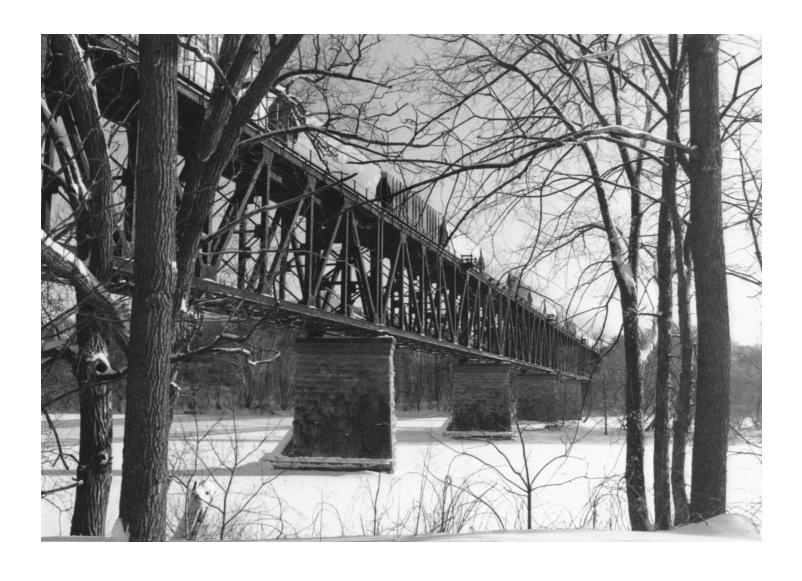








Photo Essa	ay Two:	The	Village





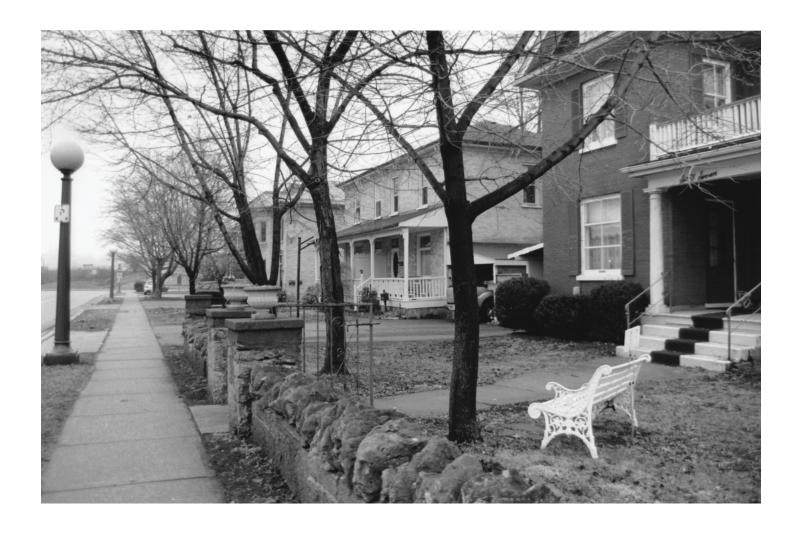








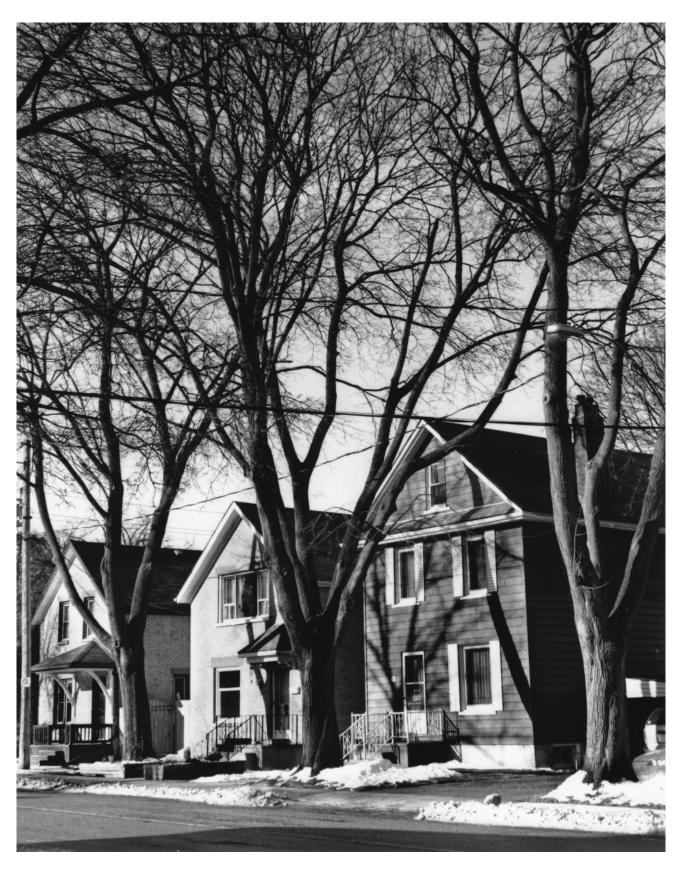








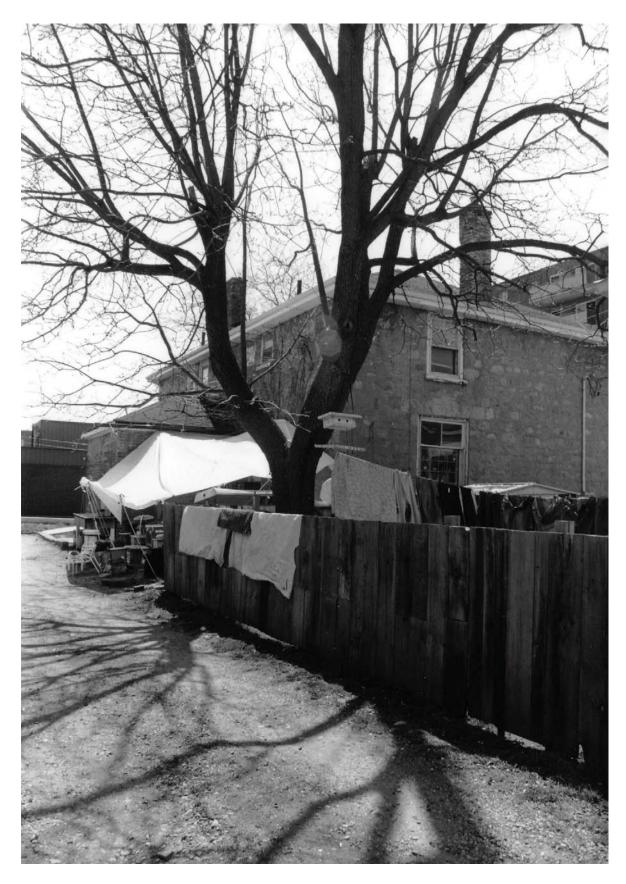


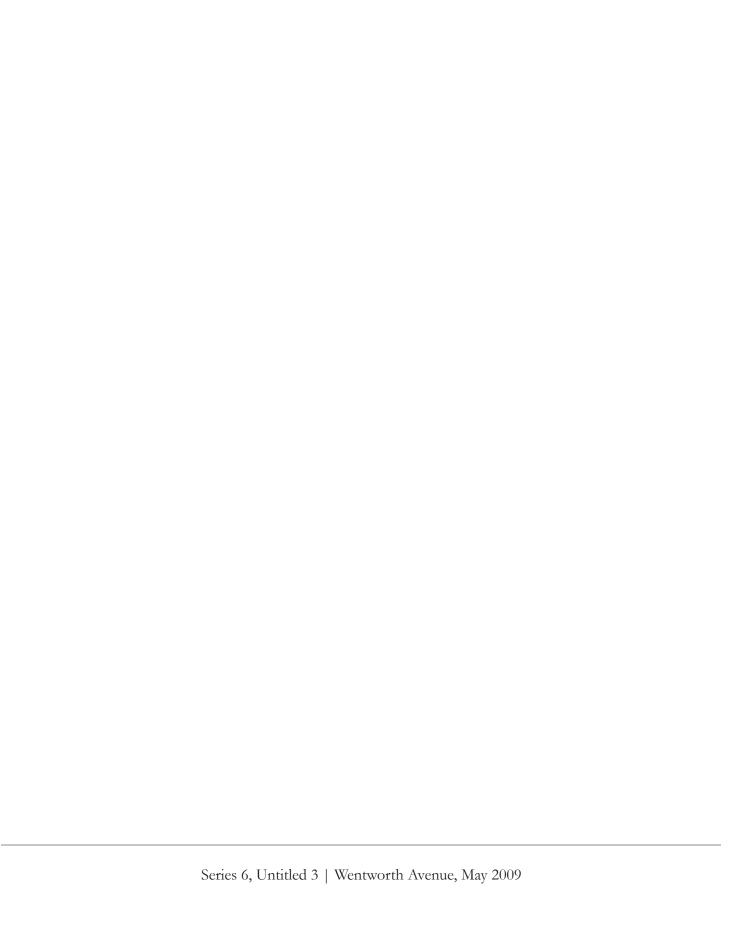






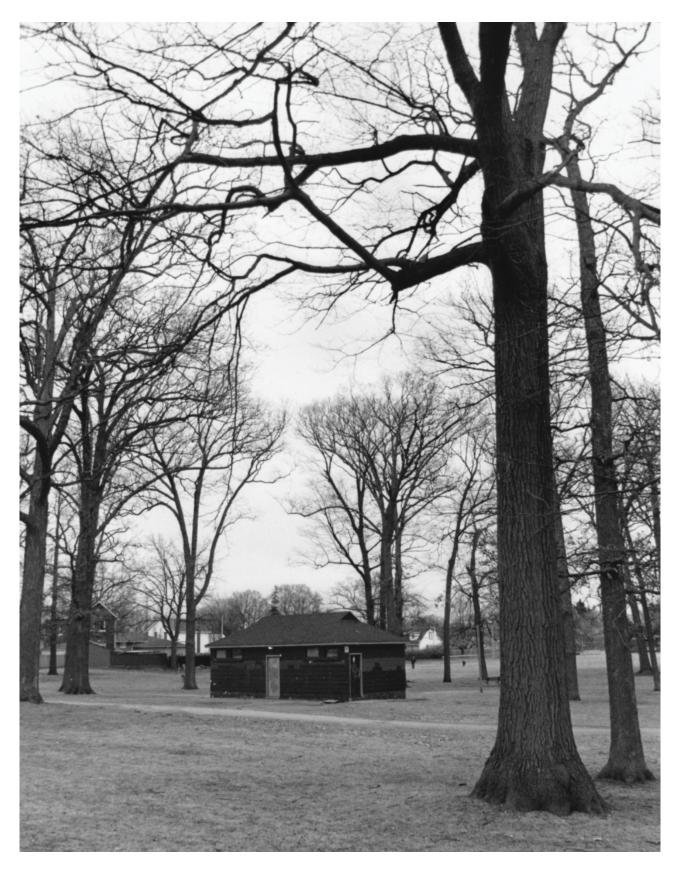
















































































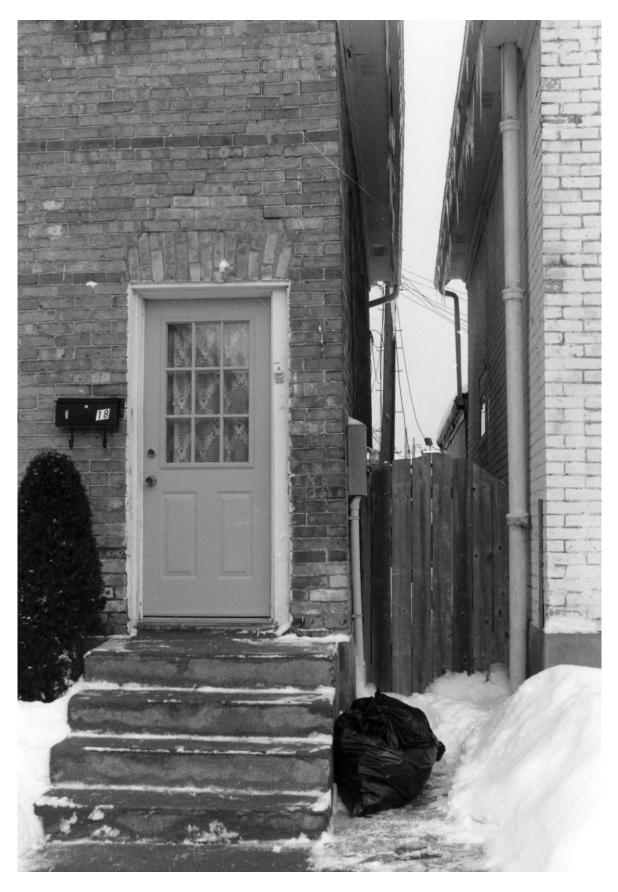








































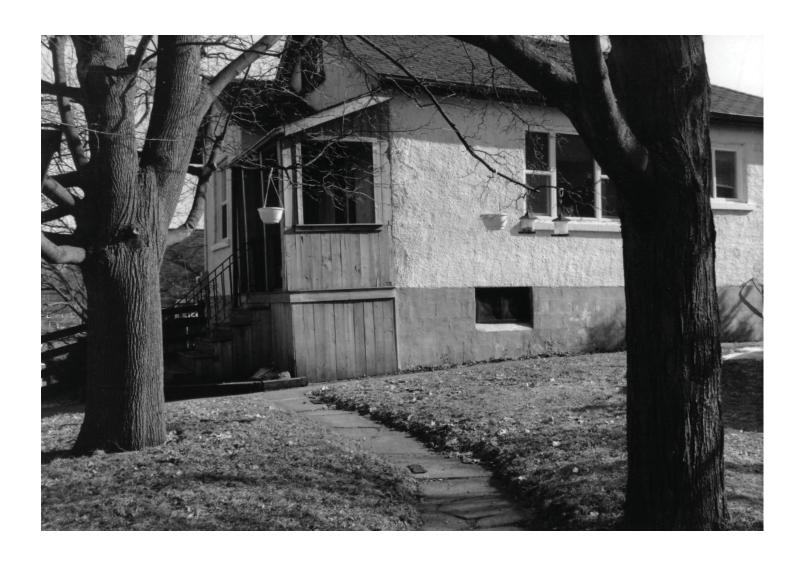






















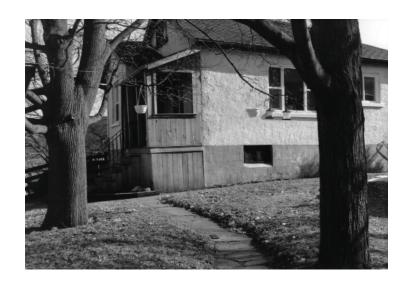














































Series 12 | Harris Street, April 2009



# **Endnotes**

### A Question of Category\_Introduction

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- 37 Ibid.
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